



## **Promoting Life Skills Training for Boys and Youth to Prevent Gender-Based Violence in Refugee Settings**

Cristóbal Madero SJ, Jill Drzewiecki, Giacomo Concina  
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## Executive Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) affects individuals of all genders. To prevent GBV, it is crucial to prioritize the education of both girls and boys. In a refugee context, this involves not only educating girls about their rights but also educating boys about the rights that girls are entitled to.

This study aims to explore the subjects that should be included in a curriculum designed to equip boys with life skills to decrease and prevent GBV while enhancing their overall well-being in refugee contexts.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first section provides an in-depth examination of the concept and definition of GBV, highlighting the importance of educating boys on this topic. The second part outlines the study's design, including details about the participants, data collection methods, and analysis techniques used. The third section presents the primary findings, which have emerged as key themes for a potential life skills education program tailored to boys. The last section outlines the structure of a prospective curriculum intended for a youth club that specifically focuses on boys and their development.

Our study provided compelling evidence supporting the implementation of after-school clubs to equip boys and youth with life skills, aligning with the perspective of JRS. Furthermore, our research has revealed new insights into the essential topics deemed significant by boys and youth residing in refugee camps. Importantly, in existing manuals and tutorials for life skills courses we discovered a lack of focus on areas such as critical thinking, substance abuse prevention, and cultivating healthy friendships. This revelation underscores the need to incorporate these crucial subjects into boys and male youth clubs.

Drawing inspiration from the INEE (Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies) guidelines and considering the feedback received from the participants of this study in refugee camps, which stresses the importance of not exclusively targeting girls in GBV response efforts, we propose the creation of separate boys and youth clubs. This idea has garnered considerable support.

Lastly, like the planned implementation of an Ignatian Pedagogy approach in girls' clubs, we anticipate that the boys and youth clubs will also benefit from a similar approach, enhancing their overall development.

## Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive phenomenon in society. Both men and women can be subject to that type of violence. However, educating youth on preventing GBV involves educating girls on their rights as much as educating boys on the rights entitled to girls is a priority in a refugee context. Beyond an intellectual understanding of such rights, boys (and men) must be skilled in facing life from a non-violent approach, especially regarding violence against women.

Changing how different cultures gendered roles should be a matter of concern for both men and women. This transformational work will be more impactful if conducted early in life, especially in childhood or youth. That is the role of a Gender Responsive Education (GRE) approach aligned with the following Sustainable Development Goals:

- SDG4: *inclusive and equitable quality education for all (SDG4)* and
- SDG5: *achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.*

Educating and building a new culture of girls' and women's rights is even more challenging in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts. Schools are protective spaces to learn and enact these goals. Unfortunately, only 68% of refugee girls and boys have access to primary education (67% and 68%, respectively), and 37% of the same group (34% and 36% respectively) have access to secondary education. In the targeted refugee camp for this study, access follows the general trends concerning the balance between boys and girls, but it is much lower: around 50% at the primary level and 15% at the secondary level<sup>1</sup>. In addition to this, as one refugee from Rwanda interviewed for this project puts it: "Acknowledging women's rights and changing a culture of disrespect is difficult anywhere in the world; imagine it here (in the camp) where seven countries, seven languages, seven cultures have to live!"

This paper studies what topics should be addressed in a curriculum to equip boys with life skills to reduce and prevent GBV and improve their well-being in refugee contexts.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the concept and definition of GBV and the importance of boys' education around that theme. The second part presents the design of the study,

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<sup>1</sup> These percentages are an estimate based on internal statistics from the JRS-Malawi country office from December 2022.

including participants, data collection techniques, and analysis. The third part presents the main findings as emerging themes for a possible boys' life skills education program. The final section presents the structure of a possible curriculum for a youth club that focuses on boys.

## Theoretical Framework

### Gender-based violence

According to UNHCR, GBV “refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. GBV is a serious violation of human rights and a life-threatening health and protection issue. It is estimated that one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime.” (2020, p.1) The consequences of GBV are not distributed evenly, neither in terms of the proportion of women and men that are victims of GBV nor in terms of the contexts where GBV happens. “Adolescent girls face increased risks; an extensive literature base attests to the heterogeneous perpetrators and pathways of GBV they face due to intersecting vulnerabilities related to age, gender, and additional risk factors associated with emergencies or displacement.” (Koris et al., 2022, p.2)

GBV against girls and women includes “sexual assault, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), sex trafficking, child labour, domestic servitude, female genital mutilation” and in the case of refugee girls, “PTSD, stress, interrupted school attendance, and school drop-out” (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2023, pp. 22–23)

The factors influencing GBV against adolescent girls work at the societal, community, relational, and individual levels, becoming even more damaging in humanitarian crisis contexts. Figure 1 shows the complexity of those factors.

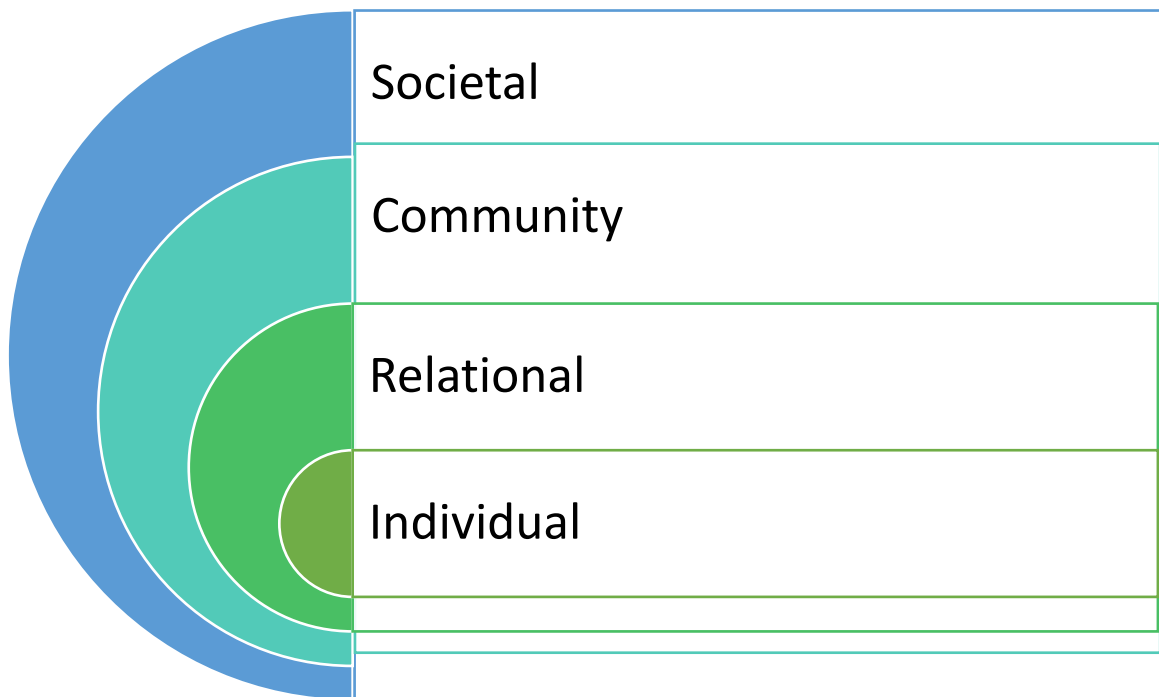


Figure 1. Sociological determinants of GBV in humanitarian settings. Stark et. Al. (2022)

GBV is, fortunately, preventable. Providing information and formation are critical activities for mitigating and, ideally, eliminating GBV. Despite the lack of sufficient research, studies assessing the impact of the formation of life skills that prevent GBV have shown improvements in girls' psychosocial well-being and social support (Stark et al., 2022). Society in general but particularly the education system and, more concretely, schools, must provide a GRE approach where new generations can learn how to coexist in equal and just conditions (Parkes et al., 2020).

JRS encourages using a GRE approach in their programs to increase girls' enrollment and retention rates in secondary school programs. The broader goal of such programs is to achieve gender equity between girls and boys in JRS-run and JRS-supported schools and education centers (JRS, GRE framework). The Naweza program<sup>2</sup> and the girls' club are inserted in this logic. However, forming girls is not enough. There is an increasing need for forming boys in skills that may prevent GBV.

<sup>2</sup> Naweza is a Jesuit Refugee Service initiative, which aims to equip refugee girls with the capacity to increase their access and improve the quality of their education, security, and overall well-being.

## Educating boys to challenge gender-based violence.

There is a consensus and evidence around the idea that to decrease GBV against women, it is necessary to educate boys (Flood, 2019; REPSI, 2009). Moreover, “there are growing efforts to involve boys and men in various capacities associated with preventing violence against women: as participants in education programs, as targets of social marketing campaigns, as policymakers and gatekeepers, and as activists and advocates. A steadily increasing body of experience and knowledge regarding effective violence prevention is practiced among boys and young men, often grounded in broader efforts to involve men in building gender equality” (Flood, 2019, p.87).

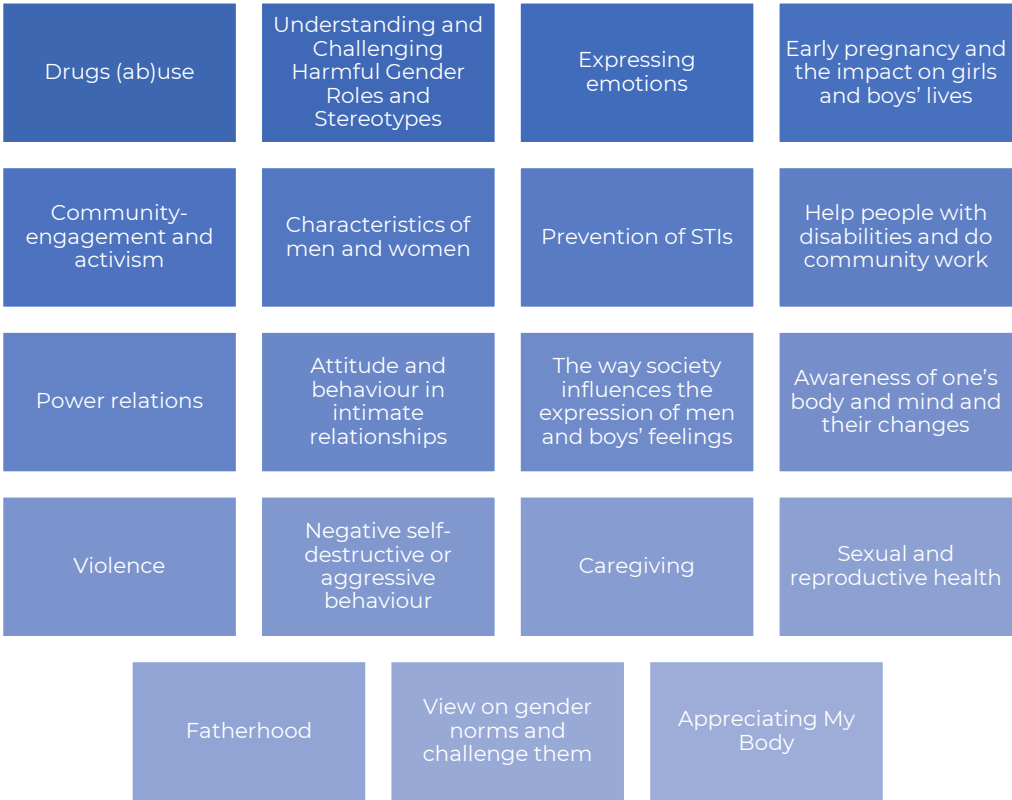
In addition, our experience working initially with girls-only programs has shown us that this practice can exacerbate GBV and create a backlash from boys and men.

One way of educating boys in life skills is to provide them with spaces or platforms where the conversation around GBV and its effects is explicit. In a study done in a humanitarian setting in South Africa, Isike found that “men don’t have networking platforms where they can engage gender relations challenges and learn from each other...(this is necessary for) boys and men to change the thought patterns that stereotype women in oppositional and essentialist terms.” (2022, p.283)

Such platforms or spaces for gathering and being trained in essential life skills have been provided by different organizations (Anderson-Butcher & Cash, 2010), although not with a focus on the humanitarian crisis. Promundo, an NGO that originated in Brazil and whose resources are used in more than 20 countries, has been the leading organization in preventing GBV in boys and youth. Very Young Adolescence is a curriculum to promote gender equality and sexual and reproductive health (Kato-Wallace & Levtov, 2018). Promundo has also been responsible for adapting its Programa-H to Lebanon (Program RA) and the United States (Manhood 2.0). USAID has also funded the development of curricula for boys in topics related to GBV.

The ACQUIRE Project is the name of the umbrella under which the Engaging Boys and Men in GBV Prevention and Reproductive Health in Conflict and Emergency-Response Settings was developed. This program is different to the Promundo portfolio in its attention to the emergency context.

Upon examination of these manuals and tutorials, we organize a list of themes. These themes are essential life skills, with a GBV prevention perspective at their core. These themes were:



Understanding, therefore, the importance of forming boys in GBV prevention, we ask in this study what topics should be addressed in a curriculum for equipping boys with life skills that aim to prevent and reduce GBV in a refugee context.

## Methods

To address the research question, we use a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods and techniques have proven effective in capturing actors' perceptions about education and other social activities. In addition, a qualitative approach allows participants to expand their responses, enriching their narratives.

### Data Collection Techniques

For this study, we use Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) as a data collection technique. Focus groups are a qualitative technique that allows us to



capture the subjectivity of individual discourses, expressed within the framework of a collective scenario of enunciation and reciprocity between peers (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2000). We conducted a total of twelve FGDs with different types of participants during January and February of 2023. Apart from open questions, we provided participants with a list of topics. These topics referred to life skills highlighted in different youth club manuals from around the globe and that we prepared for this research. We asked participants to take a look at the list and mark, in some cases, those that were the three most important topics, and, in other cases, the single most important one.

## Participants

We selected different types of participants to collect evidence on the most pressing issues around the topic. We invited refugee boys and girls from primary schools and youth (male and female) from secondary schools and college living in a Refugee Camp in a country in the south of Africa. College students were living outside the camp. We also invited social workers, teachers, activists, and administrators working with youth (12 years and up) in refugee and non-refugee contexts. Finally, we invited a group of parents of refugee youth and children living in the camp. The total number of participants was 50, most of them refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. Table 1 shows the type and number of participants per focus group.

**Table 1. List of participants in the study and their main characteristics.**

Focus group	Participants	Refugee (R) or non-refugee (NR)	Number
1	Boys 16 -18; Secondary school students	R	6
2	Girls 15-16; Secondary school students	R	3
3	Girls 12 -13; Primary school students	R	3
4	Boys 12-14; Primary school students	R	5
5	Social workers	R	5
6	School leaders; Primary school	NR & R	3
7	Leaders at organizations working with youth	NR & R	5
8	Leaders at district education office	NR	3
9	Parents	R	4
10	College students	R	4
11	Teachers at secondary school	NR	3
12	Secondary school students	NR	5

## Analysis

We analyzed the focus group recordings in two ways. First, using a narrative approach, we extracted the main themes and examined them in the context provided by the participants. Second, using the list of themes

the participants had to select, we aggregated their preferences, building a ranking of themes.

## Findings

We present our findings in two parts. In the first part, we present the emerging themes from the different participants. We separate the opinions of the different types of participants to acknowledge their differences (in some cases, obvious ones). In the second part, we present how the participants assessed a fixed proposal of themes for a youth club curriculum meant for boys.

### Emerging themes

The focus groups with girls, boys, and youth from the primary and secondary school in the camp referred to a broad panoply of themes. As an umbrella, the themes of “understanding the value of education deeply” and “acknowledging that, without education, nothing else is possible” were the most common. The participants are girls, boys, and youth who know by experience, personally or as witnesses, the benefits of having and the risks of not having an education. Therefore, life skill training must highlight this fact.

In terms of more concrete themes, this first group highlights the following topics:



How they discussed these topics shows a clear need for them to ensure that a boy can grow as an independent, self-reliable person who knows how to decide essential things, like how to choose a friend. One boy comments: “If you choose good friends, it will always be better, but sometimes boys do not choose the right friends.” This opinion is connected to learning how to be assertive because “If you are assertive,

you are more able not to be influenced by other people.” Choosing friends is not only a matter of boys’ concern, but also one important protective factor for preventing violence against children (European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture., 2023).

The participants seem to understand that there is a virtuous cycle between acquiring good self-esteem (“You need to have a good image of yourself, know that you’re good at some things. That gives you power.”), be self-aware (“So understand what things you have to face, so you have the power to really face them”) and managing peer pressure (“If you don’t learn to do this, your life would be full of problems in the future. If you learn it, your life would be easier.”) Mastering these skills will allow them to make good decisions (“make space for boy to find their passion”), and to avoid bad paths, like saying no to drugs.

For the adults who participated in the focus groups (social workers, school leaders, school district leaders), one theme stands out from the others: **Decision making**. As one social worker who facilitates youth clubs mentions, “(decision making) It is the base of everything. If we can teach them that, it will be the foundation of everything.” Again, forming an independent person, capable of making good decisions resonates with what the same girls, boys, and youth think is vital for youth to know these days.

The participants from outside the camp context (teachers and secondary students) mentioned **Entrepreneurship** as a skill boys need to succeed. College students who are refugees from the camp (now living outside the camp) also point to entrepreneurship as an important skill: “In the camp there is a lot of talent that is lost. The youth need to know the tools to orient that talent.”

## Validating themes

After collecting emerging themes to be part of a youth club to eliminate GBV, we wanted to validate themes that other organizations working with youth—although not in a refugee context—have selected for their curricula and training. In that way, we listed topics, typically session themes coming from the four different organizations previously described in the first part of this article.

Table 2 shows (using a heatmap) the topics presented to the participants according to their aggregated preferences. Drugs (ab)use, understanding and challenging harmful gender roles and stereotypes, expressing emotions, early pregnancy and its impact on girls’ and boys’ lives,

community-engagement and activism, characteristics of men and women, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) rank in the first seven positions. There are no themes that would not have interested at least one of the participants.

**Drug abuse** is by far the theme with the most votes. There is a concern that society in general, and the camp, has become a space where drugs can be easily found. The camp is a place where different types of abuse occur (UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021), providing and scenario for drug trafficking. Boys and youth point to alcohol (“Drug abuse is a problem in the comp, especially the alcohol”) and marijuana, while adults mention that much harder drugs are used in the camp. Drugs are understood as evils in themselves, but also the cause of other evils. Secondary school girls from the camp mention: “In this camp, many of the boys are affected by drug abuse. Parents are worried every day. Many engage in bad behavior and that is because of drugs. When a boy gets into that, is very difficult to come back from that.”

Table 2. Aggregated preferences of themes for a boys’ club

#	Theme	Mentions
1	Drugs (ab)use	17
2	Understanding and Challenging Harmful Gender Roles and Stereotypes	14
3	Expressing emotions	14
4	Early pregnancy and the impact on girls’ and boys’ lives	14
5	Community-engagement and activism	11
6	Characteristics of men and women	8
7	Prevention of STIs	7
8	Help people with disabilities and do community work	6
9	Power relations	5
10	Attitude and behaviour in intimate relationships	5
11	The way society influences the expression of men and boys’ feelings	5
12	Awareness of one’s body and mind and their changes	4
13	Violence	3
14	Negative self-destructive or aggressive behaviour	3
15	Caregiving	3
16	Sexual and reproductive health	2
17	Fatherhood	2
18	View on gender norms and challenging them	2
19	Appreciating My Body	1

**Understanding and Challenging Harmful Gender Roles and Stereotypes** is also a crucial topic to address. A boy from the camp is very open about sharing that “Some boys we do not know the characteristics

of us.” (This theme is related to the Characteristics of men and women). This theme is an even more critical topic when the context is a refugee camp. A youth participant shares: “In some communities and cultures there are some taboos about practices for example that only boys can go to school, that girls can only be at home and be married by man. That is pretty bad. There is a lot of suffering in the world because of that. We need to overcome those taboos. And here it is not easy.” A youth puts it in very simple terms: “You can always change. It is about training. There are girls who can play football, and others who don’t. There are boys in both situations too.”

All the participants corroborated that there is generally something true, particularly in Africa, about men’s difficulties in expressing their emotions. This in comparison to women and men in other cultures: “We have to be mindful that in Africa there are cultural things like for instance, men don’t cry in funerals, that’s a woman thing to do. No man can do that.” For some youths, “Expressing emotions is the big challenge. We often hear about someone who committed suicide because that person hides their emotions. People who didn’t understand themselves.” Aggressive behavior towards others and oneself could also be a result of not expressing emotions: “Boys in the camp are exposed to negative, self-destructive or aggressive behavior. They accumulated this sentiment, and they commit actions based on this sentiment.”

Expressing emotions, in spite of the local, dominant views, is something to be educated in because it is a primary need. As a school leader in the camp assesses: “Boys do not know how to express their emotions. But they have a lot of emotions, of course.” Although necessary, some voices claim the impossibility of changing a culture like that: “Even if you do some training, that is not going to happen even if you do many sessions.” That is why this theme posits an important challenge to face: educate in expressing emotions. As one 12-year-old boy mentioned: “If you know how to express your emotions, others can help you. If you don’t, you are left alone.”

**Early pregnancy** is also highlighted as a crucial theme for boys and youth to analyze in a youth club. One teacher shared in the focus group an experience: “Recently, I was talking to a girl who got pregnant at 14. She said to me, ‘Do you know how much it is to take care of a baby. I needed money so I left school. I need money to buy pampers for my kid.’ Therefore, I think it is important for the boys to know the consequences of early pregnancy.” This same sentiment was shared, more dramatically, by a male youth from the camp: “When a boy impregnates a girl, he and she definitely destroy their life. They can longer continue thinking on their own

future.” The importance of the topic for the future of girls and boys also connects with the theme of **Prevention of STIs**. Although the country’s statistics on STIs have improved (HIV decreased by half from 14, 2% to 7,7% from 2002 to 2022), STIs continue to be part of the refugee camp daily life, as it is said by the participants in the study.

Finally, **Community Engagement** is a very relevant topic for the participants. Teaching to and practicing with the youth how to engage with the community has several positive outcomes. One of them is the opportunity window or the hope that engagement with the community brings. One school district leader comments, “This is men’s problem (community engagement). For boys to be aggressive with others is sometimes because they do not positively relate to others. Engaging with the community gives a vision to the boys.” A youth group leader emphasizes: “Boys need to realize that they are the hope of the community. They can bring change to the community.” One boy says that “We need our community to develop, and it is important that we are exposed to helping others.”

## Proposal for a boys’ club curriculum

From the exercises described in the previous section and the already developed curriculum for a girls’ club (see Table 3), we propose combining both themes into a boys’ club curriculum.

Table 3. Themes for a boys’ club and its sources.

Emerging themes	Themes in Youth Club manuals	Themes in JRS’s Girls Club
Self-esteem	Drugs (ab)use	Goal Setting
Self-awareness	Understanding and Challenging Harmful Gender Roles and Stereotypes	Communication
Critical thinking	Expressing emotions	Self-Confidence
Good decision making	Early pregnancy and then impact on girls’ and boys’ lives	Decision Making
Assertiveness	Community-engagement and activism	Assertiveness
Saying no to drugs	Characteristics of men and women	Power
Managing peer-pressure	Prevention of STIs	Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
Choosing your friends		Sexually Transmitted Infections
Decision Making		Saying No to Sex

Entrepreneurship		Early Pregnancy
		Rights and Responsibilities
		Child Protection
		Reporting Abuse

## Themes for a Boys' Club Curriculum



## Conclusion

The study demonstrated that providing boys and youth with life skills through an after-school club made sense for all participants, confirming JRS's thinking on the matter.

This research has also uncovered new evidence regarding the topics boys and youth consider essential while living in a refugee camp. In revising manuals and tutorials on life skills courses, we did not find topics such as Critical thinking, Saying No to drugs, or choosing your friends. This revelation is essential to include these critical topics in boys and male youth clubs.

Consistently with the INEE guidelines and JRS thinking and reflection on voices from the field in refugee camps claiming for not limiting GRE responses just to girls, the idea of creating boys and youth clubs separated from girls gained forces.

Finally, in a similar way to the development of a girls' club, where an Ignatian Pedagogy approach is about to be implemented, we believe that the boys and youth club would also benefit from this.



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