



Women's Resilience Center International Rescue Committee in San Diego

BACKGROUND

Starting a new life in the U.S. as a refugee comes with many challenges from learning English and securing employment to keeping up with the cost of living in San Diego. For women and girls in particular, the challenge can be even greater as they face additional barriers to adjusting to life in America. Client feedback surveys have shown that many of IRC's female clients report facing social isolation upon moving to San Diego.



Refugee women are less likely than men to work outside the home, limiting their opportunities to build social networks, learn English, and feel like they are contributing to the family budget. In fact, in 2016, Iraqi and Syrian women completing IRC's Vocational English as a Second Language program were only a quarter as likely to find employment as men who completed the same course. The reasons for lower employment among refugee women vary but include responsibilities as primary caregiver for children, cultural norms around women working outside the home, and/or fewer educational opportunities for women in their countries of origin. In addition, cultural norms prevent some women from leaving home unaccompanied so for many going to the IRC office is the only time they leave home alone.

The unfortunate reality is there are clear barriers faced by women and girls specifically, on top of the barriers already present for all refugees.

IRC RESPONSE

For decades, the IRC in San Diego has been aware of the need to address the unique needs of refugee women and girls and has prioritized breaking down the barriers specifically faced by this population in our strategic action plan.

This has included:

- Gender analysis of all programs to identify inequities in outcomes among women and girls and men and boys
- Refugee Girls Academy to support refugee girls at three local high schools to develop leadership skills, set and achieve goals, and strengthen social emotional skills.
- Employment focused programs for women: In 2016, IRC San Diego established a series of Women in Action (WiA) groups to address the barriers to employment. WiA has become a place for women to not only plan toward career goals, but it has also given women, especially those who have minimal access to public space per cultural restrictions, a safe space to break social isolation and build support networks with other women from the community. In fact, women who participate in WiA have shown progress towards economic self-sufficiency and overall wellbeing.



CURRENT NEED

Current efforts to address gender inequity such as WiA group cohorts are only one day per week over the course of ten weeks, and take place in a classroom that has other functions. Past WiA participants have requested time and again to hold additional cohorts for graduates, as they want a safe space in the community to gather with other women and engage in learning opportunities. Unfortunately, IRC does not have the regular space or staffing to fulfill this request. To address these issues and continue to improve the efficacy of interventions aimed at supporting women and girls, the IRC will open full-time Women's Resilience Center in our El Cajon office.

The Center will be staffed by a full time coordinator, supported by Master in Social Work interns and volunteers, who will set the agenda of the Center in collaboration with refugee women from the community so that it best addresses their needs. The Women's Resilience Center will be open during regular business hours and will be both a space for women to make friendships day-to-day, as well as to engage in emotional support groups and learning opportunities. IRC will continue the WiA groups through the center and support past participants to become facilitators. IRC staff will hold financial education seminars, health workshops, and educational opportunities to help women learn more about their community and new culture. Community partners will also support women through the center by offering free services such as lactation consultation, support groups for new mothers, and free legal seminars to learn about laws and services related to issues such as domestic violence. The center coordinator will support clients who disclose domestic violence to access the services they need to be safe and well. Women who engage with the Center will ultimately be able to develop more positive coping strategies, progress on their path to self-sufficiency, access support if their safety is threatened, and break the confines of social isolation while building friendships in San Diego.

The IRC received a challenge grant of \$60,000 per year for two years from The San Diego Foundation to launch the Women's Resilience Center. This funding is contingent upon the IRC raising \$60,000 in matching funds each year to make the Center's annual \$120,000 budget, which includes rent for the Center, personnel, furniture and equipment, transportation support for clients, and materials for activities and seminars. The first year match has been raised, and we are currently fundraising to meet the year two (2021) \$60,000 match.