

How to research sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment safely (SEAH)

For CSOs in humanitarian or development settings

What is safe research and why is it so important for SEAH research?

- Safe research means ensuring that any research that is conducted adheres to principles of Do No Harm, and that both research participants and researchers are protected from risks, distress, trauma, exploitation or violence as a result of their participation in the research activities. The dignity, health and well-being of individuals and groups must take priority.
- Ensuring safe, ethical research is essential in all research activities that are planned. However there are some additional ethical considerations when seeking to conduct research around sensitive and potentially triggering or re-traumatising topics such as sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment and gender based violence.
- There has been much documented about safely researching and asking questions about women's and girls', men's and boys' and gender diverse people's experiences of GBV but less that relates specifically to SEAH.



Ethical considerations for conducting research into SEAH

- ✓ Acknowledge the power dynamics that exist within the research process.
- ✓ Adapt methodology and specific questions for different groups, including different ages and contexts.
- ✓ Ensure participants consent to their involvement (see box 1).
- ✓ Explain the purpose of the research and how information will be used.
- ✓ Keep questions simple and relevant.
- ✓ Ensure issues of data protection, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity are understood and explained to participants.

Box 1 Definition of informed consent adapted from Inter Agency Standing Committee GBV Guidelines¹:

- Informed consent is voluntarily and freely given when people understand the facts, implications and future consequences of an action.
- They also must be aware of and have the power to exercise their right to refuse and/or to not be coerced (i.e. being persuaded based on force or threats).
- Children are generally considered unable to provide informed consent because they do not have the ability and/or experience to anticipate the implications of an action, and they may not understand or be empowered to exercise their right to refuse.
- There are also instances where consent might not be possible due to cognitive impairments and/or physical, sensory, or developmental disabilities.

What do you need to do to research SEAH safely?

1. Understanding the risks versus the benefits of conducting the research

It is important to be able to collect data concerning SEAH to enable a more reliable and contextual understanding of the scale, risk and types of SEAH that are perpetrated and against whom. However, these benefits need to be weighed against the potential harm and risks that might occur through the process of interviewing and collecting data. Harm that might occur includes risk of re-traumatising participants through the questioning, potential backlash or risk of exposure due to their participation, participants disclosing something that cannot be adequately supported.

2. Consider partnering with women's rights organisations of civil society groups locally

Key to understanding the complexities of any given context is to involve and work together with local women's organisations, and locally based researchers, from the start. This will ensure that the voices of women and girls from the communities are represented, and that power imbalances are proactively addressed through the research process. It is important for building community ownership and meaningful engagement. Working with the community to understand and contextualise the findings will also ensure the process is not extractive.

This is especially important when researching SEAH so as to ensure there is community support in place to follow-up with any issues that might arise, as well as to ensure the questions and methodology are appropriate and safe in the context.

3. Being clear on the methodology you intend to use and why you have selected it

When conducting research into SEAH, GBV or other sensitive topics the design of the research needs to be carefully considered, to ensure it is best suited to the individuals and groups you intend to speak with. It is important to consider how issues of power play out in the research process along with having an understanding of how different identities and vulnerabilities overlap

to increase risk. Ethics and safety are considered as the foundation of feminist research on GBV², and SEAH. Participatory research is another methodology that seeks to proactively address power imbalances through acknowledging these power dynamics and engaging research participants in the research process as partners and contributors rather than passive subjects.

Other things to consider:

- ✓ Not asking specifically about individuals' experience of violence.
- ✓ Qualitative, narrative-based and participatory approaches may be better suited to this type of research.
- ✓ The risks and benefits of group interviews or focus group vs. one-to-one interviews.
- ✓ The language and terminology that you use see [RSH how-to note on language when researching SEAH](#).
- ✓ How to refer to individuals who may have experienced SEAH: people may prefer to be described as survivors rather than victims.

Box. 2 Trauma informed interviewing

- Build rapport through your introductions and questioning technique
- Give interviewee a sense of control - allow them to select the pace of the interview, don't interrupt
- Choose questions carefully – use open ended questions, and keep them simple
- Be sensitive to differences – understand how gender and cultural issues may impact the situation
- Be aware of any signs of distress - your role is not as a counsellor but to ensure sensitivity
- Be aware of your own issues, biases, and experiences that you bring to the interview
- Be sensitive to your own reactions to what you are hearing as they may influence the interview process

4. Recruiting and training the team

The importance of the skills and training of the research team should not be underestimated. This is critical to ensure they are able to carry out the research in a sensitive and safe manner.

- ✓ Female researchers should be trained to speak with women and girls in their diversity.
- ✓ Consider the age, gender and ethnicity of your research team.
- ✓ Researchers should understand key elements of trauma informed interviewing (see box 3).
- ✓ All researchers should understand and agree to a Code of Conduct that outlines the expected behaviour and attitudes of all researchers.
- ✓ Researchers need to be survivor led and require specialist skills in communication and listening sensitively (see box 4).

Box. 3 The interviewer needs to ensure:

- Empathy and a non-judgemental attitude
- Deep understanding of the issues
- Confidentiality and safety
- Information is provided about support services available
- Time is taken and effort is made to find those that are hardest to find
- They take care of their own well-being

Adapted from UNFPA, 2017. kNOwVAWdata: Six golden principles for interviewing women who may have experienced violence

- Exploitation of participants by researchers, security staff etc.
- Harassment of participants and researchers during the research process.
- Increased stigma of participants if they are known to have participated.
- Other SEAH, safeguarding and protection risks may be identified through the process of the research, unrelated to the research.

See accompanying [RSH resource on how to design and deliver safe and ethical monitoring, evaluation and research.](#)

6. Mapping referral services and pathways

Research around SEAH may trigger issues and concerns for participants that require specialist support and services and it is imperative that this support is available and researchers are aware of how and when to make these referrals.

Researchers are not counsellors but they will need specialist skills to support participants. Links with existing social services, psychosocial, emotional, medical or judicial support services are particularly crucial in this area of research. The research team must make sure the services are accessible and appropriate for any potential needs identified and that they provide a good standard of quality of care.

7. Survivor-centred approach

Taking a survivor-centred approach to research includes many of the steps identified above, such as ensuring benefits outweigh risks, a Do No Harm approach is central to all that you do. Other aspects of this might include:

- ✓ Considering the time, location and method for research and ensuring it is safe and private for participants.
- ✓ Consider developing culturally appropriate code words, or hand signals that participants can use to indicate if they are at risk or have concerns.
- ✓ It is also important to consider issues around mandatory reporting laws that might impact on your research and how far you can ensure confidentiality (see box).

5. Developing a risk assessment

Developing a risk assessment is a critical step in any research activity. However, when researching sensitive issues such as SEAH, it is even more crucial that this is done considering both the risks to the research participants as well as the researchers themselves, and the wider community. Involving local researchers in developing the risk assessment will help you capture risks of which you may not be aware.

The risk assessment should be regularly reviewed throughout the research process.

Types of risks that might arise for participants and researchers of SEAH include:

- Renewed trauma of participants through sharing experiences with the researchers.
- Psychosocial, and other, support needs being unmet due to lack of referral pathways.

Box. 4 Mandatory reporting

Researchers may find themselves in a situation where their ethical obligation to protect participants' confidentiality comes into conflict with their legal obligation to report incidents of harm, violence and abuse. You need to prepare for these situations:

- Make sure you know the local reporting laws and procedures, and what the likely process and outcomes may be.
- Be aware of the referral pathways that have been identified.
- Develop a plan from the outset on how the research team will handle cases requiring mandatory reporting.
- Explain clearly to participants when seeking their informed consent under which circumstances you may be obliged to report incidents (i.e. regarding child protection issues)

It is important to be aware and that in some cases reporting could lead to increased risk of violence or abuse and make women and children more vulnerable. This needs to be carefully considered and all actions should be in the best interest of the individual concerned.

(adapted from WHO, 2016)

participants voices are accurately and respectfully reflected.

Resources

Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), [Feminist approaches to building knowledge and evidence on GBV, Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 5, 2018.](#)

[Ellsberg M, and Heise L. Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists. Washington DC, United States: World Health Organization, PATH; 2005.](#)

[Ethical and safety recommendations for intervention research on violence against women. Building on lessons from the WHO publication Putting women first: ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women. Geneva: World health Organisation. February, 2016](#)

[Putting Women First Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women. WHO \(2001\)](#)

Ward, J, [Ethics in Researching Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: Reflections from the Field, \(2020\)](#)

The Global Women's Institute, 2017. [Gender-Based Violence Research, Monitoring and Evaluation with Refugee and Conflict-Affected Populations: A Manual and Toolkit for Researchers and Practitioners](#)

[The Global Women's Institute \(GWI\). \(2020\) Empowered Aid: Participatory Action Research Workshop Facilitation Guide. Washington DC: The Global Women's institute at The George Washington University](#)

[knowledge and evidence on GBV, Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet 5, 2018.](#)

³ Ellsberg, Mary and Alina Potts, 2018. [Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.](#)

8. Debriefing each day

This is an important part of the research process not least as it allows the researchers to off load and share any experiences that may have been difficult for them during the process. Looking after your research team, and ensuring they have time to reflect on their own well-being and self care is really important when researching these sensitive and traumatic topics.

Researcher burnout is something that needs to be considered carefully when planning and designing any research process.

Debriefing at the end of each day also aids the analysis and ensures research findings are properly interpreted³. This is a critical part of conducting ethical research, and ensuring

¹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee. 2015. [Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery.](#)

² Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), [Feminist approaches to building](#)