GBV AoR HELPDESK

Gender-Based
Violence AoR

Learning Brief

Title: Ethics in Researching Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings: Reflections from the Field

Author: Jeanne Ward

Introduction

Research on gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian settings remains relatively limited in both scale and scope. However, there is growing investment by donors, academics and practitioners to improve the evidence base on GBV in emergencies—from understanding the nature and extent of the problem, to measuring the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving the safety, health and well-being of survivors and those most at risk. These investments include the development and dissemination of tools and guidelines about the research process itself—covering topics such as safety and ethics, research design, data collection and dissemination, among others.

However, despite the availability of tools and guidelines, it is often the case that GBV research in emergency contexts is carried out without mechanisms to monitor compliance with best practice and global guidance. Or, where mechanisms are instituted, learning is often not shared externally, including details of the the ethical challenges that reseachers, practitioners and communities face in relation to the research. More often, presentations and published research reports focus on dissemination of key findings rather than research processes.

This learning brief seeks to summarize some of the common challenges related to researching GBV in humanitarian settings, particularly in terms of core ethical issues. As the basis of this learning, the GBV AoR Helpdesk interviewed nine GBV colleagues with

experience in research.[1] They were each asked what concerns they have about practices related to researching GBV, as well as what recommendations they have to address them.

The number of interviews was purposefully small: the goal was not to conduct a comprehensive review, but rather to gather preliminary insights relating to research processes from a select sample of individuals with experience undertaking GBV research in humanitarian contexts. As such, the findings presented below are meant to be introductory and thought-provoking rather than conclusive. They are also used as a springboard to present learning from other sources about the issues raised by interviewees. Hence, this learning brief serves not only to raise awareness of research concerns, but also to reinforce guidance around good practice.

While many interviewees shared similar concerns and recommendations, several also had specific relfections based on their individual experiences that touch on many aspects of research on GBV in humanitarian settings. In order to organize interviewees' insights in a way that is digestible for the reader, information below is presented loosely in terms of the research cycle:

> **Section 1: Reseach Planning**, looks at a few fundamental issues to be considerd even before seeking funding or designing a research protocol.
> **Section 2: Research Funding,** highlights a few of the important activities that should be funded—in advance—when undertaking GBV research in humanitarian settings.
> **Section 3: Research Design**, covers concerns from interviewees about responsibilities that researchers sometimes overlook when developing the research protocol.
> **Section 4: Data Collection** emphasizes several on-going safety issues in researching GBV.
> **Section 5: Data Analysis and Data Sharing** offers interviewees' various reflections about ethical and procedural concerns in this phase of the reserach.

It is important to bear in mind that this framing is somewhat artificial, insofar as many of the issues discussed in one section are relevant across the entire research cycle.

Additional tools, guidelines and resources are noted at the end of the learning brief.

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[1] The names of the researchers will remain anonymous so as not to risk linking the concerns they share to any specific research studies. The purpose of this learning brief is to advance general knowledge, not to stigmatize any particular research activity or initiative.

Section 1. Research Planning

One of the most overarching and important points raised repeatedly by interviewees was that an explicit theoretical framework is often lacking in research on GBV in humanitarian settings. The absence of an explicit framework can lead to research processes, instruments and analyses that not only produce misleading or bad data, but fail to deliver outcomes that change the lives of women and girls. Key concerns related to the research design process are summarized below:

A. **Too often, research on GBV in humanitarian settings does not have an explicitly feminist framework, grounded in theories of gender and power, and/or researchers are not sufficiently trained in feminist principles for researching GBV.** Gender-neutral research may fail to acknowledge the power inequalities that drive the violence being studied. This type of framing also tends to focus on simply describing women's and girls' lives--recording their place in society rather than seeking to change it, and tends to reinforce victim-discourse about women and girls, rather than their agency (Podems, 2010; Podems and Negroustoueva, 2016).

Almost all interviewees for this learning brief noted that the absence of training for investigators in feminist-informed research should be taken seriously as an ethical lapse because of its negative implications for women and girls. Without an understanding of the importance of a feminist framework for researching GBV, for example, investigators may not hold themselves accountable to reseach processes and outcomes that support transformation of patriarchal systems that oppress women and girls. A gender-neutral approach also does not require researchers to consider or reveal their own biases about gender-based power and privilege.

Some interviewees noted that research on GBV in humanitarian (and other) contexts that is not explicit about its theoretical framework can also make the mistake of investigating and presenting violence that men experience as equivalent to violence against women and girls. Research may focus on specific incidents of violence, without analysis of the larger context in which violence occurs and the different dynamics between them. So, for example, questions about exposure to incidents of intimate partner violence (IPV) may not consider who initiated the violence, the nature and expression of power in the violent act(s), or the protection rights and recourse for those involved (Kimmel, 2002). Or in another example, research on sexual violence in conflict may frame women who are forced

to perform sex acts as forced or coerced 'perpetrators' of violence, rather than recognise that the actual perpetrators are those forcing the violence.[2]

Such gender-neutral framings can produce unreliable data, that then informs policies and programmes related to violence. According to Read-Hamilton (2014, np online),

> '...lumping all forms of gendered and sexualised violence together under a violence against women and girls framework without a sound understanding and explanation of the causes, drivers and impacts of such violence on individuals, families and communities is potentially harmful. [...] To prevent this, humanitarian actors need first to be clear about which types and manifestations of violence their interventions are aimed at addressing. They then must use or develop definitions, conceptual frameworks and programmes based on theories underpinning the particular types of violence they are seeking to address.'

Feminist research– quantitative or otherwise – "*deliberately* and *purposefully* challenges existing power structures, and actively embeds feminism into every element and phase of the research process (Leung et al, 2019, p 433)." More specifically, feminist approaches to research:

1. **Seek structural change:** the purpose of the research is to bring about structural changes that women identify as critical to their enjoyment of human rights.
2. **Amplify women's voice:** the research contributes to removing barriers of hearinig women as the experts and authors of their own lives and policy decisions. It strategically places them as researchers and experts and promotes them into policy dialogue.
3. **Support ownership by the community:** research decisions are made by the community of women who are the stakeholders of the research project.
4. **Take an intersectional approach to identity and experiences of discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation:** recognising the diversity of women's experiences, identities and power (see point B, below).
5. **Aim to shift power:** the research seeks to reconstruct traditional power imbalances such as researcher / subject and also aims to challenge and shift gendered sources of personal, political and structural power.

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[2] Noted by an Interviewee.

6. **Foster movement building / collective action:** the research process itself should be seen as a collective process that strengthens solidarity but in addition the research aims to empower women to work collectively for long-term structural change.

7. **Build capacity of all:** the research process involves capacity building but also recognises that capacity building and learning is a collective, political action of all the players involved.[3]

Putting these feminist principles into practice has implications throughout the entire research process (see Box 1).

Box 1: What does feminist research look like in practice?

1. **Define the research question:** When we research issues related to inequality, it is not possible to design a 'neutral' research study. Rather, the research project is shaped inherently by our commitment to transform gender inequality and we want to frame our research questions in ways that support this goal.
2. **Partner with local women's organisations and civil society groups:** Feminist approaches to research consider power dynamics among researchers and other people involved in the study and support strategies to ensure both the research and study population can benefit. When local women's rights activists are involved directly from the start, the research team benefits from the activists' extensive knowledge of gender discrimination and GBV in the local context. Partnering with local women's organisations ensures that the voices of local women are represented in the research process.
3. **Prioritise women's safety:** Ethics and safety are both the foundation and centre of feminist-oriented research on GBV. This includes ensuring to the greatest extent possible the safety and security of researchers and research participants (and other women in the community), as well as adhering to principles of confidentiality, informed voluntary participation, transparency and accountability.
4. **Evaluate and re-evaluate the study's progress:** Feminist research evaluates constantly the research process in relation to the broader context. Through this vigilance, feminist research intentionally looks for issues or unintended consequences that might arise from the process of data collection, including any signs of potential backlash.
5. **Consider multiple ways to collect data:** Although public-health approaches tend to prioritise quantitative or statistically-oriented research, qualitative methods can be particularly valuable to gather rich data about women's lived experiences. Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) are often considered the 'gold standard' of evaluation research. However, alternative M&E methods might sometimes be better suited to local capacity and resources.
6. **Consider what change we want to see:** Feminist M&E is clear about the types of change that the research aims to achieve. We ask: What is the main purpose of our evaluation? How will we use the findings and how will they be used by donors and policy-makers? These questions will guide the research process and all decision-making.

COFEM, 2018. Feminist Pocketbook Tipsheet #5: Feminist Approaches to Building Knowledge and Evidence on GBV. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TS5-Feminist-approaches-to-building-knowledge-and-evidence-on-GBV.pdf

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[3] Adapted from APWLD, 2018. Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR).
https://apwld.org/feminist-participatory-action-research-fpar/

B. **Intersecting issues of oppression are not always taken into account when researching GBV in humanitarian and other contexts, as the focus is primarily—even exclusively--gender discrimination as it relates to violence against women and girls.** This means that the full story of women and girls is not often recognized or recorded in the research process. In order to better understand the complex lives of women and girls, and to support recommendations and actions that recognize the many different oppressions they may experience, several intereviewees emphasized that it is important for researchers to take an 'intersectional' approach. An intersectional approach to GBV:

> 'includes a consideration of where gender intersects with other inequalities/oppressions (sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, indigeneity, immigration status, disability) to produce unique experiences of violence. By understanding the different ways in which violence is perpetrated and experienced, an intersectional praxis can design and develop appropriate context-specific responses when addressing Violence against Women and Girls (hereafter VAWG). It is important to note that within an intersectional framework of analysis there is no hierarchy of inequality and oppression for women i.e. women cannot be made to choose which oppression comes first or is 'higher up in the hierarchy' when they approach support services for VAWG' (Imkaan, 2019, p.3).

Interviewees noted the importance of ensuring that researchers understand and consider how GBV risk and impact can be compounded by intersecting inequalities based on other identity characteristics, such as race, color, ethnicity, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, marital status, sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS status, migrant or refugee status, age, or disability.[4] As such, the problem of GBV must be understood and addressed alongside and in relation to issues such as poverty, housing status, access to education, employment and healthcare, etc.

C. **Researchers, particularly those from the Global North who work with researchers in the Global South, do not often fully respect or embody principles or understanding of race and diversity in their processes and partnerships.** This issue is closely entwined with concerns about promoting an intersectional feminist framework

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[4] UN Women's Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence Against Women, 2012, cited in Imkaan, UN Women, 2019. The Value of Intersectionality in Understanding Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), p 3. https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2019/10/the%20value%20of%20intersectionality%20in%20understanding%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20girls.pdf?la=en&vs=3339

for research noted above, but is important enough that several interviewees emphasized it specifically.   Despite how well-meaning researchers from the Global North (as well as privileged researchers from the Global South engaging in South-South partnerships) may be in terms of advancing participatory approaches, few have received training in diversity as a foundational approach to engaging in research processes with partners from the Global South. Or, if they have, trainings or other learning about diversity may focus relatively superficially on differences in socio-cultural norms, rather than interrogating power and how it manifests not only in gendered ways, but also in terms of race, ethnicity, etc.

This issue may require extra vigilance in humanitarian settings, where disparities in privilege and power are often acute:

> 'Within a humanitarian refugee response, many agencies include activities that aim to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. But although these activities focus on addressing the power hierarchies affecting women's lives, international humanitarian agencies have reflected less than they need to on the power relations they themselves perpetuate through their research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices with refugee populations'(Lokot, 2019, p.468).

An understanding of diversity also requires an understanding of the broader global contexts that typically privilege white, western theories, ways of learning, and notions of expertise.   It means reflecting on one's own unconscious biases, as well as biases embedded in society, and developing strategies for personal and organizational accountability (see Box 2).

Box 2: Checklist for Promoting an Intersectional Approach in Researching VAWG

1. **At the individual level:**
    a. examine your own power, privilege and positionality within society and in relation to the populations you are working with
    b. examine beliefs and biases that you hold about the populations you are working with
    c. leverage your privilege and resources to work in collaboration and solidarity with marginalized groups
    d. are you committed to being an ally, are you willing to engage in the work that it takes to be an ally? i.e. 'an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalised group of people'

2. **At the planning, design and reporting stages:**
    a. ensure that marginalized women's voices and needs determine priorities
    b. engage with marginalized women as experts and knowledge holders
    c. action-planning related to research findings should be rooted in the social, cultural, political and economic reality of the marginalized women
    d. ensure that your language does not reproduce or hide inequalities [eg. do you use the term 'uneducated' to describe certain groups of women who have historically been denied access to education?]

3. **Within the research team:**
    a. employ marginalized women at all levels within the research team, not just as 'enumerators'
    b. ensure that marginalized women hold salaried positions within the research team; there should be a proportionate/fair allocation of salaries
    c. ensure that research teams also partner with locally-based marginalized women and their organisations.
    d. create 'space at the table' for marginalized women in multiple ways.

Adapted from Imkaan, UN Women (2019). The Value of Intersectionality in Understanding Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2019/10/the%20value%20of%20intersectionality%20in%20understanding%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20girls.pdf?la=en&vs=3339

Section 2: Research Funding

Several interviewees noted concerns about a lack of flexibility in research funding, and related frustration that research design is often fleshed out *after* funding is received—an approach that can result in a variety of limitations in the research, not least being able to adequately adapt to the needs and challenges presented on the ground. Other interviewees felt that researchers should work harder to engage donors, in order to ensure that funding opportunities support action-oriented approaches that are central to feminist-informed research. Donors must also be willing to support research partnerships that build upon and utilize local research expertise in genuine rather than tokenistic ways. Key concerns related to research funding are summarized below:

A. Research processes—particularly those that focus on understanding prevalence and incidence –do not often secure sufficient funding to ensure findings are used to improve programming on the ground. Global good practice tells us that "researchers and donors have an ethical obligation to help ensure that their findings are properly interpreted and used to advance policy and design interventions" (Ellsberg and Potts, 2018). However, interviewees for this learning brief noted that this responsibility is often overlooked—a problem also highlighted in global guidance on researching GBV. According to the *Research to Action Toolkit: VAWG in Conflict and Humanitarian Settings:*

> 'Through efforts such as the *What Works5* programme there has been an increased focus on developing new evidence to better understand what works to prevent and respond to VAWG and an increase in data on VAWG in conflict and post-conflict settings, however gaps still remain in connecting these results to action. Often, completed research is written for academics rather than practitioners and is accessible only in pay-for-access peer reviewed academic journals. Even when results are freely available, practitioners and policymakers often may not know how to interpret the data or understand how to take action in response to the findings' (The Global Women's Institute, 2019, p.5).

One egregious example offered by an interviewee is when research involves a control group of women and men who—after the research is completed--may not be supported to access an intervention the research indicates is worthwhile. Interviewees also noted that too often, the responsibility to ensure that research generates social change (a foundation of feminist-informed research practice, as noted above), is not upheld because funds were not obtained *prior to implementing the research* for such activities.

Understanding what action-oriented research entails is critical to undertaking advocacy with donors. Action-oriented reseach helps to ensure that the outcome of the research are used to inform better programming (see Box 3 for one example of what 'action' means). Ten essentials to action-oriented research are:

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5 What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls is an innovative global programme working in 13 countries across the world building the evidence base on What Works to prevent violence in low-middle income settings. For more information, see https://www.whatworks.co.za/about/about-what-works

- ✓ Focus on transformational change and how this is brought about. Be explicit about what is meant by transformation and examine drivers and mechanisms of transformational change.
- ✓ Focus on solution processes, including identifying the desired/aspired outcomes, and what needs to change for conditions to materialize those outcomes.
- ✓ Focus on practical knowledge about how to implement change.
- ✓ Approach research as occurring from within the system being studied, so that research is not treated as some external event happening apart from the dynamics being studied, but rather is understood intrinsic to the environment being researched.
- ✓ Work with normative aspects, in other words, understand how values and ethics shape the researchers' experience.
- ✓ Seek to transcend current thinking and approaches in order to open up space for new questions, insights and solutions.
- ✓ Take a multi-faceted approach to understand and shape desired change.
- ✓ Acknowledge the value of researchers in promoting and leading action for change.
- ✓ Encourage experimentation and change related to action for change.
- ✓ Be reflexive. That is, be willing to undertake critical reflection about how personal, linguistic, political, cultural and other circumstance influence ideas about change, in order to improve capacity to think and act innovatively. [6]

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[6] Adapted from: https://www.ecolise.eu/ten-essentials-for-action-oriented-research/

Box 3: Putting the "Action" into Feminist Participatory Action Research: The Work of Asia-Pacific Law and Development Forum

1. Through Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), women collect evidence about what is happening in their communities and collectively take action. Backed with strong, locally produced research and documented evidence, women challenge rights violations and gendered power imbalances. FPAR is a potent tool for enabling women to take control of development agendas and programmes that are affecting their lives.
2. Our principal purpose of doing FPAR is to change systems and structures to improve the lives of women. We interpret "Change" as "Structural Change", ie. change to structures and systems of oppression particularly patriarchy and the fusion of patriarchy with globalisation, fundamentalisms and militarism.
3. Action in FPAR includes advocacy to make others change things: asking government to make policy change, asking employers to change company practice, asking patriarchs to change customary law.
4. Action in FPAR includes women making direct change themselves in heir communities: taking over decision-making spaces, setting up collectives, shifting local power structures.
5. The FPAR process is not a simple two-step process of Research and then Action, but the research itself is an action
    a. In determining what problems to research and in asking questions about inequality in a community, the research process starts to raise consciousness and awareness of that inequality.
    b. By holding a focus group or interview with government officials, asking them about why development is not just and creating gender equality, women start holding government to account and demanding change.

Adapted from: APWLD, 2017. Changing Development from the Inside-Out: Regional Feminist Participatory Action Research Report AWPLD Breaking out of Marginalisation Programme. http://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2017-BOOM-RIW-FPAR-Regional-Report.pdf

B. Despite the emphasis on partnerships in global guidance, it is unusual for funding to adequately support real, sustained and empowering patnerships with local researchers, particularly when the funding and research are being driven from the Global North. Much of the global guidance on researching GBV emphasizes the importance of local partnerships throughout the research process (see Box 4). However, according to interviewees, research funding often does not support genuine partnership—even at the most basic level of budgeting for translators to assist with consultations with local women's organizations, groups and individuals.

In addition, there is little recognition of asymmetries in power among international and local researchers (often driven by who controls funding), and capacity building "is rarely approached rigorously, or adequately resourced" (Willan et al, 2019). A *What Works* intervention aimed

at supporting capacity building, identified eight key themes related to effective capacity development:

- meaningful commitment to capacity development;
- a focus on foundational skills beyond research and interventions;
- capacity development as an organic process;
- driven from the Global South;
- participatory and empowering approaches;
- the importance of soft skills;
- recognizing limitations within resource constraints; and
- a commitment to women's rights and gender equality (Ibid., 2019, p.794).

Ideally, capacity building amplifies women's voices and empowers them to engage in decisions that affect their lives. It recognizes and builds upon the intrinsic knowledge of women and girls in the communities of study. Too often, as asserted by an African proverb, "A foreigner sees what he already knows."[7] In several examples provided by interviewees for this learning brief, local researchers hired by international staff were not only *not* asked to share their expertise, their inputs about appropriate research methods were actively ignored. Supporting participation, on the other hand, is purposefully iterative: as problems or obstacles are recognized, approaches to addressing them are developed and implemented in collaboration with local partners (Onyango and Worthen, 2010). Participatory processes understand and promote women and girls as social actors with skills, energy, ideas and insights into their own situation.

Participatory processes also understand locally based women's researchers and women's organizations as expert leaders and positions them as such in the research planning, budgeting and allocation of responsiblities (including addressing salary

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[7] Quoted in Groupe URD/ALNAP, 2009. Participation Handbook for Humanitarian Field Workers, p 25. https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/alnap-groupe-urd-participation-handbook-2009.pdf

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Box 4: Global Guidance on Building Partnerships in Research

✓ *Facilitate local ownership and actively engage with local groups throughout the design, data collection and analysis process:* Ensure relevant local stakeholders – for example, actively involving women's rights groups, local leaders, and possibly government representatives, etc. - are engaged in design, data collection, and analysis to foster ownership over the process. These groups can also be essential for study uptake and dissemination after data collection and analysis is complete. By involving local actors in routine M&E activities, these stakeholders will be better informed about the work of ongoing programs, better able to understand the benefits, and more prepared to identify possible issues in implementation of the programs.

✓ *Work with locally-based researchers whenever possible:* Whenever possible, it is important to conduct research through or engage with researchers based in the country where data collection is taking place. Researchers based within the local community know the context and how to navigate political and communal barriers that may impede data collection.

✓ *Ensure meaningful engagement with the community throughout data collection:* To increase accountability to the affected populations, provide appropriate transparency and build trust, consider using participatory data collection strategies where logistically possible. At a minimum, design and pilot data collection tools directly with members of the affected populations themselves or with members of NGO staff from the affected community if it is not logistically or ethically possible to pilot directly in the community. In addition, consider using participatory data collection techniques (e.g. photovoice, body mapping, community mapping, free-listing) where participants can see and understand the data being supplied to researchers throughout the process.

✓ *Work with the community to understand and analyze data:* Whenever possible, work directly with members of the community in order to analyze and contextualize the collected data. In true Participatory Action Research (PAR) efforts, community members analyze the data themselves, with support of the research team. This is often not possible in conflict-affected settings, nevertheless every effort should be made to ensure that the data is shared back with participants using community feedback sessions, flyers, reports, and/or through routine program activities, etc.

Excerpted from: 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. https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1356/f/downloads/Manual%20and%20Toolkit%20-%20Website.pdf

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inequities common to research funded by Global North donors). This perspective is vastly different from understanding their role solely or primarily as "implementing partners":

> 'Funding agreements that position women's organizations as implementing partners—rather than thought and practice leaders […]—can undermine organizational autonomy and contribute to privileging Western or Northern voices and the perspectives of certain disciplines, such as public health'(Raising Voices and the African Women's Development Fund, 2019, p.3).

Prioritizing partnership also recognizes that no long-term structural and sustainable change will happen without the support of women's movements: the largest global study on violence against women found that the most critical criteria for bringing about progressive changes to laws and policies on violence against women was the existence of autonomous feminist movements.[8] However, according to Raising Voices and the African Women's Development Fund (2019, p.10), there is a considerable way to go before collaboration in research acheives true partnership:

> 'While efforts to engage in more collaborative research are increasing, these relationships can sometimes become extractive, where the "local" perspective is offered and ownership and decision-making over the research are retained in the Global North institution. In order to address this, we can build and require equitable collaboration and seek out partnerships with research institutes in the Global South'.

Section 3: Research Design

Supporting women's expertise, engagement and leadership came out very strongly in conversations with interviewees about designing research protocols—in fact, this issue was raised as central to all stages and aspects of research planning, implementation, analysis and action. Several additional concerns focused on issues of due diligence in research design, as well as ensuring ethics and advisory boards have the capacity to address issues arising during data collection. Key concerns in designing a research protocol are summarized below:

A. Often, international researchers do not take the time to engage in due diligence related to the benefits of the research. Interviewees for this learning brief noted a number of negative outcomes related to this issue. For example, international researchers may not adequately review existing research—particularly if it requires reviewing research in local languages—such that they waste valuable funds replicating studies. The World Health Oranization (WHO, 2007, p.7) highlights the importance of due dilegence in relation to sexual violence research:

> 'An […] important question is whether the information that is being sought is truly needed. This may be especially pertinent, given that, in some situations, there is a risk that sexual violence is being "over-researched". This risk arises when multiple sexual

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8 Htun and Weldon, cited in APWLD, 2018. Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR). https://apwld.org/feminist-participatory-action-research-fpar/

violence inquiries are conducted in the same place, by different organizations or individuals, with little or no information sharing or coordination.'

International researchers often also prioritize their own learning rather than engaging in a process with local women about priorities for their learning. Guidance from over fifteen years ago cautioned against this, and yet it is still occurring in many settings:

'Research can either be a positive force for change or it can sit on a shelf, advancing only the career paths of individual investigators. The field of international violence research is filled with examples of both. In the past, it was not uncommon for women's groups and others working on violence to be totally unaware that research on violence had been conducted in their country, often by foreign investigators or university-based researchers who presented their results only at international conferences or in academic journals' (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005, p.217).

Such an approach is not only antithetical to feminist-informed approaches, it also makes it challenging to subsequently turn research into action, because the identification of the research issues and questions is not done collaboratively.

An additional concern raised by interviewees in relation to due diligence--particularly in research involving Global North and Global South partnerships—is the process for identifying research partners. For example, there may be an assumption that southern academic partners are best positioned to undertake research, even though these partners may reflect and reinforce power hierarchies, that work on GBV prevention seeks to transform. Good practice requires that international researchers take the time to understand southern partners' reference systems, including their attitudes, beliefs and practices related to GBV and empowerment of women and girls. Enabling transparency throughout the research process can also assist in addressing issues arising related to practices by research partners (both international and national/local) that may not support the values of feminist-informed practice. Strategies for transparency include establishing codes of conduct and memoranda of understanding that detail the rights and responsibilities of all research partners. These documents can not only serve to identify expected standards of behaviour in the partnership, but can also make explicit processes

for shared decision-making and communitication, as well as how to negotiate challenges in the partnership.[9]

Yet another concern was focused on making sure that the research protocol is aligned with international standards; in other words, that due diligence has been undertaken to ensure knowledge, resources and capacity exist to implement the research without 'cutting corners' or compromising research safety and ethics. Several interviewees noted observing research practices in humanitarian settings that did not apply the same standard of rigor, and would not be acceptable in the Global North, such as changing research questions after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, or undertaking research where no referral for services was available.

B. **Ethical review and advisory boards are often situated in the Global North, with limited understanding of the local context, and limited ability to act nimbly should issues arise during the implementation of the research.** According to a couple of interviewees for this learning brief, this arrangement can result at minimum in cumbersome research processes and, at worst, serious safety issues for women and girls when international advisory boards are not sufficiently aware of local systems and structures to be able to provide recommendations for dealing with security issues that may arise. Good practice guidance suggests that research oversight should, at minimum, involve pulling together a local project committee or group comprised of those working on GBV. WHO emphasizes that:

> 'Communication and coordination between organizations or individuals working on sexual violence should be promoted in order to avoid duplication of effort and to maximize the utility of existing data. Collaborative networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other humanitarian and women's organizations should be established wherever possible. It is unfair to ask women and communities to undergo repeated interviews and, potentially, repeated risks, for the convenience of multiple organizations and researchers' (WHO, 2007, p.11).

International researchers may need to take measures that facilitate opportunities for local women's advocacy, service delivery and other groups to actively participate in decision-making processes as advisory partners, particularly in settings where women's voices are

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[9] See: Christian Aid, 2018. UK-Based Academics: Resource Materials to Support Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/UK-academics-fair-equitable-partnerships-Sept-18_0.pdf

suppressed. Several interviewees noted that this means being conscious about not using exclusive 'researchese' language that is difficult for non-research 'experts' to understand and may effectively silence local partners; it is important to take the time with advisory groups to make sure there is clarity about terms being used. It is also critical to support engagement of women and girls who represent and understand intersecting issues of oppression, such as those exposed to discrimination based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc. In addition to supporting resolution of issues arising, such groups can play an important role in developing referral networks for research participants and in supporting dissemination of findings.

Section Four: Data Collection

Many issues raised by interviewees about data collection -in terms of action-orientation, participation, consultation, etc.- have already been identified in previous sections of this learning brief. However, one glaring concern not yet covered, but raised by several interviewees, is that **research on GBV in humanitarian settings is still being undertaken without sufficient attention to risks involved.** Global guidance recognizes that the principle of "Do No Harm" is impossible to guarantee; nonetheless, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that benefits outweigh risks. Researchers must be held accountable to following global guidelines and recommendations that represent decades of learning about safety and ethics in research. For example:

> 'By putting in place referral pathways and systems for responding to adverse events, alongside mechanisms to continuously check for unintended negative consequences both during and after the research, researchers will be prepared to respond to harm, should it occur. By doing their utmost to ensure methodologically sound science helps to better respond to and prevent violence in women and girls' lives, researchers can contribute to minimise the 'everyday' harms this research seeks to address' (Ellsberg and Potts, 2018, p.13)

Despite the availability of fairly detailed guidance on measures to be taken to reduce risk (also see Tools and Guidelines at the end of this learning brief), researchers are still engaging in practices that put women and girls at risk. For example, some studies have interviewed women in the same household with men about exposure to violence — sometimes even in the same room. Others ask questions that are not only not in confidential settings, but are inappropriate to the context and can result, for example, in adolescent girls being stigmatized. In some settings the remuneration to research participants during data collection can further endanger them, or insufficient consultation can mean that entire communities of women are at risk when researchers come in

and ask questions about exposure to violence. Backlash can also be directed at women's groups that are directly or indirectly involved in the research.

These ongoing security issues are exacerbated by data collection processes that fail to check in with local women's groups in the research sites about issues arising—or that fail to appreciate that it may be difficult for local women's groups to challenge bad or dangerous research practices.

Section 5: Data Analysis and Data Dissemination

Concerns of interviewees about data analysis and data sharing not only emphasized additional issues related to partnership, but also ethical concerns about how data is presented in reports, as summarized below:

A. Even in settings where local women are engaged in data collection processes, they are often overlooked as key partners in data analysis and data dissemination. Sometimes, this is because funding does not exist to support their ongoing engagement, which is noted in the Section 2 above. In addition, engaging local women's organizations and groups in data analysis may require extra steps that researchers are reluctant to undertake—such as translation, or designing creative approaches to share data with women in the community who are illiterate. However, when local women are engaged in data analysis, interviewees noted their engagement not only improves understanding of the data, but also shaped the research recommendations to make them more relevant to the context (see case study below).

Data dissemination is another area in which local partnerships are overlooked. Traditional research is often an 'extractive' process, such that results from the research are not shared with the original respondents, or even with the enumerators employed to undertake the research in the field (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005, p.221). And yet, global guidance emphasizes the important of sharing data with communities in safe and ethical ways, particularly to programmes that help prevent and respond to GBV (WHO, 2007, p.10-11). While strategies must recognize risks of reporting, and should be chosen with sensitivity to the culture, environment and context, a failure to invest in participatory data dissemination processes misses critical opportunities to enhance the impact of the research:

'Far from being a separate undertaking to the research itself, the dissemination and communication of research findings is arguably one of the most critical phases of the research process. When researchers and communications specialists work collaboratively with local women's organizations to develop nuanced messages and ensure that research publications and outputs are open and accessible, the effective communication of research findings can ultimately result in improvements to programmes and policies and meaningful

investment by donors and governments to prevent VAWG and promote gender equality. On the other hand, if the dissemination and communication of findings fail to reflect the voices of local communities, neglect to mitigate against the potential misuse of research findings, or are largely inaccessible, even the most insightful research findings risk having little to no impact on policy and programme outcomes' (Leung et al, 2019, p.441).

In its guidance on research communication, access, uptake, adaptation and use, Christian Aid (2018, p.8) advises that researchers must ask these critical questions:

- ✓ **Equitable ownership of data and results:** Are the data, findings and publications from the research partnership equitably owned by all partners? Are communication outputs aimed at the Global South being prioritised? What opportunities do you have to present findings in regional and global fora?
- ✓ **Public sharing:** Are all partners free to share findings in public? Is there agreement about when this sharing can take place, and in what formats? Have different data management expectations and legal frameworks been considered?
- ✓ **Southern publishing:** Is there support for research to be published in the South and if so, in which languages? Have Southern publishing and translation been prioritised in the initial allocation of resources? What support is there for Southern-based academics to publish internationally?

Case Study: *Including Local Women in Leadership Roles on the Research Team Allows for More Reliable Data.*

By Katie Robinette, formerly the Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Coordinator at International Rescue Comittee in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

Including local women as enumerators is essential when asking sensitive questions related to GBV, but is unfortunately where many researchers stop in terms of engaging local women in research processes. Research can produce more reliable data and analyses that are better-grounded in reality when local women take up leadership roles in with decision-making authority in the research team, such as defining research questions, designing methodology and data collection tools, advising on context-relevant safety and ethics issues, leading data collection, and interpreting data trends and results.

In eastern DRC, a women-led research team represented the International Rescue Committee in partnership with academic institutions in multiple randomized controlled trial (RCT) impact evaluations of GBV programming. A common strength across these studies was the weight given to the input of local women researchers. One RCT assessed the impact of a curriculum-based program delivered for adolescent girls in safe spaces that engaged caregivers to protect them from violence and encourage a healthy transition to adulthood. The study utilized *Audio-Computer Assisted Self- Interview* (ACASI), a method of data collection in which participants listen to pre-recorded questions through headphones and respond to questions by selecting their answers on a touch screen tablet.

The initial screen displays developed by the academic partner and the software programmer used colors to differentiate between up to eight response options. The local research team pointed out that, not only was there no clear translation in local languages to describe shades of the same color, girls themselves would likely have difficulty differentiating between shades. Instead, the local team proposed using images of common fruits and vegetables to mark the different response options rather than colors (e.g., "If yes, press the banana…If no, press the carrot"). When piloting the tool, this was indeed much easier for girls to understand than colors. In fact, despite initial concerns about using ACASI, nearly 90% of girls felt that the questions were easy to understand and 97% felt that using the tablets was a positive experience. Local innovation ensured that this new technology was adequately adapted to the context, ensuring that the data reflected a more accurate picture of girls' lives and program impact.

Despite the advantages of the insight of local women researchers in the quality of data and study results, there were ongoing challenges in generating funding for positions for local research, as well as ensuring local voices were given weight equal to those of the staff of academic partners.

Another notable RCT in Congo assessed the impact of Cognitive Processing Therapy as a mental health intervention for survivors of sexual violence experiencing severe trauma symptoms. While the overall assessment showed positive results, the one important question lingered: is the intervention effective even in contexts of ongoing conflict and violence, in which survivors are at a continuous risk of re-traumatization?   To understand the degree of insecurity, researchers turned to the in-depth knowledge of the local research and supervision team and members of women-lead community-based organizations to report on 1) the degree of ongoing presence or threat of presence of armed groups and 2) incidents of violence at each of the intervention sites.

Local women involved in the study were able to shed light on a much more nuanced understanding of insecurity according to the women affected by it, beyond the simple absence/presence of armed groups or a count of incidents of violence. For example, intervention sites that neighbored a national park where armed groups retreated for concealment were subject to more attacks, as well as specific indicents of murder and kidnapping, as well as repeated displacement of the local population. Given the relative proximity of threat, anxiety and fear were high even during periods of relative calm. These sites were weighted as high level of ongoing insecurity. Results of the study showed that the intervention was indeed as effective in contexts of high insecurity. The important contribution to understanding how to provide services in contexts of ongoing exposure to trauma hinged on the knowledge and contribution of local women to explain aspects of women's safety that are otherwise difficult or impossible to undertand in many conflict-affected settings.

For more information, see:

Falb K, Tanner S, Asghar K, Souidi S, Mierzwa S, Assazenew A, Bakomere T, Robinette K, Tibebu W, Stark L. Implementation of Audio-Computer Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI) among adolescent girls in humanitarian settings: feasibility, acceptability, and lessons learned. Conflict and Health. 2017.
https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-016-0098-1

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https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2020.1735162

B. **Research reports may be misleading about findings, and data may be presented in such a way as to misrepresent or sensationalize findings, or dehumanize women and girls**

who are the focus of the research. Interviewees in particular noted the challenge of reporting findings of intervention studies, where programmers are effectively engaged in evaluating their own programmes, and reporting the results (to donors, or more widely) can imperil their funding if results do not confirm the efficacy of the intervention. Even with independent evaluations, there is a responsibility of researchers to ensure that interventions that are not effective can be adjusted—sometimes significantly--in order to improve outcomes. If donors are not supportive of experimentation, some programmers may continue to feel compelled to underplay findings about adverse or ineffectual interventions.

Another issue observed by interviewees is that qualitative data is sometimes shared as if it is quantitative—for example, when research reports suggest that focus group discussions estimate that X% of the affected population has been exposed to violence. Qualitative data that is not particularly robust—i.e. based on a small sample size—may also be presented as representative. These approaches can mislead the report's audience. Similarly problematic, data can be shared in a way that sensationalizes survivors, such as representing the violence to which they have been exposed in a gratuitous way that does not benefit the research outcomes or the survivors. At the other end of the spectrum, reporting on quantitative data can be so depersonalized as to 'invisabalize' the survivors that the numbers represent.

Conclusion

This learning brief has sought to illustrate some of the ongoing challenges in undertaking research on GBV in humanitarian contexts. It confirms that there are many areas for improvement, particularly in terms of establishing a theoretical base for the research; being responsible in Global North and Global South partnerships; supporting action-planning related to research outcomes; ensuring sufficient and flexible funding for all stages of the research; engaging local women in research processes in a meaningful and sustained way; and ensuring safe and ethical data collection, analysis and dissemination.

At the same time, the learning brief emphasizes that there is best practice guidance related to these many challenges; it is incumbent on donors, researchers and practitioners to ensure this guidance is adhered to, and researchers are held to account.

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Useful Tools and Guidelines

General

Ellsberg, Mary and Alina Potts, 2018. Ethical Considerations for Research and Evaluation on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ode-evawg-ethical-considerations-for-research-and-eval.pdf

This paper summarizes best practices for conducting research surrounding violence against women and girls (VAWG). The paper additionally makes specific recommendations and evaluations regarding these topics.

Ellsberg, Mary and Lori Heise, 2005. Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42966/9241546476_eng.pdf;jsessionid=E1748CDDCA15015594B246DA214C19F1?sequence=1

This manual provides a detailed guideline on researching Violence Against Women and Girls and Gender-Based Violence in hopes to improve and increase the quality, quantity and comparability of international data on these subjects. The manual outlines ethical and methodological challenges of conducting this research and provides recommendations on improvement.

Gender and Development Network, DFID, 2012. How to Note: Violence Against Women and Girls Chase Guidance Note 3 – Guidance on Monitoring and Evaluation for Programming on Violence Against Women and Girls. https://www.womankind.org.uk/docs/default-source/resources/vawg_guidance3_-me1.pdf?sfvrsn=2

This guidance evaluates the strengths and weakness different methods and approaches within the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) toolbox related to programming on Violence Against Women and Girls. The goal is to provide insight to the challenges and difficulties of implementing Violence Against Women and Girls programming.

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. https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1356/f/downloads/Manual%20and%20Toolkit%20-%20Website.pdf

This manual provides a step-by-step approach to researching, monitoring and evaluating Gender-Based Violence and offers a framework for conducting ethically sound and methodologically strong research.

The Global Women's Institute, 2019. Research to Action Toolkit: VAWG in Conflict and Humanitarian Settings. https://globalwomensinstitute.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs1356/f/downloads/Research%20to%20Action%20Toolkit_VAWG%20in%20Conflict%20and%20Humanitarian%20Settings_0.pdf
This toolkit discusses the basics of quantitative data collection, qualitative data collection and action planning. The goal is to help researchers better understand how to move from research to action in humanitarian settings.

Lombardini, Simone, Kimberly Bowman and Rosa Garwood, 2017. A 'How To' Guide to Measuring Women's Empowerment: Sharing Experience from Oxfam's Impact Evaluation. https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620271/gt-measuring-womens-empowerment-250517-en.pdf?sequence=4

This paper shares Oxfam GB's experience in developing an approach to measure women's empowerment and acts as a resource for other women's organizations conducting similar projects or developing similar tools.

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https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43709/9789241595681_eng.pdf;jsessionid=CDE1FAC36637672E40D4F65D1315ADC1?sequence=1

These guidelines provide ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies.

Feminist Approaches

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Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) offers an expansion of Participatory Action Research using feminist principles. The article provides an overall structure on how to use FPAR in research and the guiding principles behind FPAR.

APWLD, 2017. Changing Development from the Inside-Out: Regional Feminist Participatory Action Research Report AWPLD Breaking out of Marginalisation Programme. http://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2017-BOOM-RIW-FPAR-Regional-Report.pdf

This document looks at the results of using Feminist Participatory Action Research through 10 Case Studies in Asia and provides recommendations for FPAR use in research.

COFEM, 2018. Feminist Pocketbook Tipsheet #5: Feminist Approaches to Building Knowledge and Evidence on GBV. https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TS5-Feminist-approaches-to-building-knowledge-and-evidence-on-GBV.pdf

The Tip Sheet includes an overview on Feminist Research and tips on how this can be applied.

Podems, Donna and Svetlana Negroustoueva, 2016. *Feminist Evaluation.* Better Evaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/themes/feminist_evaluation

This article provides an over of Feminist Evaluation techniques and emphasizes their participatory, empowering and social justice agendas. The article additionally discusses the distinction between Feminist Approach and Gender Approach.

Diversity

UN Women. Training Centre Services. https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/capacity-development-and-training/training-centre-services

The UN Women Training Centre Services offers an expansive collection of free and paid resources to help expand gender equality and diversity in research.

Action-oriented Research

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This Handbook provides a guideline and structure for using Participatory methodology in Humanitarian situations. The two-part handbook provides a framework for developing and implementing a Participatory approach.

Onyango, Grace and Miranda Worthen, 2010. Handbook on Participatory Methods for Community-based Projects: A Guide for Programmers and Implementers Based on the Participatory Action

Research Project with Young Mothers and their Children in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e387/39d54634c05cd900868486e858b474810de7.pdf

This handbook was designed to help researchers use participatory methods in programming for vulnerable populations. The handbook focuses specifically on war affected adults and children.

Partnership

Christian Aid, 2018. Introduction: Fair and Equitable Partnerships for International Development Research. https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/Intro-fair-equitable-development-research-partnerships-Sept-18_0.pdf

This resource offers guidelines for collaborative partnerships between the Global North and Global South. The introduction provides an overall framework for collaboration and equitable research partnerships.

Christian Aid, 2018. Academics Based in the Global South: Resource Materials to Support Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/Southern-academics-fair-equitable-partnerships-Sept-18_0.pdf

This resource offers guidelines for collaborative partnerships between the researchers in the Global North and Global South. This module was created for academics based in the Global South.

Christian Aid, 2018. UK-Based Academics: Resource Materials to Support Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-09/UK-academics-fair-equitable-partnerships-Sept-18_0.pdf

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The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

The GBV AoR Helpdesk
You can contact the GBV AoR Helpdesk by emailing us at:
enquiries@gbviehelpdesk.org.uk
The Helpdesk is available 09.00 to 17.30 GMT Monday to Friday.
Our services are free and confidential.