



ENGAGE

ENSURE NO
'GRAB AND GO'
EXTRACTIVE
RESEARCH

Best Practice Guidelines in Relation
to Gender-Based Violence Research in
Low- and Middle-Income Countries

The ENGAGE project is a collaboration between partners in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and a UK research team affiliated to the University of Birmingham. Our partnership includes practitioners working on gender issues and supporting survivors of gender-based violence in Guatemala, Kenya and Uganda. The UK team is made up of European academics from three different disciplinary perspectives – nursing, development and social work – who all have experience as practitioners and researchers in the fields of gender-based violence and/or participatory research in LMICs.

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THE PROBLEM

Gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, is one of the most severe consequences of gender inequality. It takes place around the world, but survivors in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) often face specific problems, as a result of inadequate state responses to this violence, and because of cultural or religious norms that blame survivors for experiencing this violence, leading to their stigmatisation or even rejection. Therefore, GBV has severe physical, emotional, social and economic effects.

Research is crucial to better understand the causes and consequences of GBV, as well as the experiences of those who have faced it. Such understanding is vital for designing actions and policies to end all forms of GBV. This has led to the field of gender-based violence becoming an important research area, addressed by academic and civil society researchers from diverse disciplines and perspectives.

But researching GBV is not without risks. Participating in research can cause the re-victimisation of survivors, through the recall of painful events. It can also put survivors at risk, if the perpetrators of violence are still close to them. Participants can also be at risk of stigmatisation and exclusion within their communities if their involvement becomes known.

These problems are especially present when research is undertaken in LMICs by researchers from the Global North, as this creates power inequalities between researchers and participants and can lead to incomplete understandings of participants' local contexts and challenges. Research must therefore be carried out with caution, to not only prevent the risk of re-traumatisation of those participating in research but also to create a positive impact on the lives of those involved and the societies they live in. Careful design of research methodologies is therefore essential.

BACKGROUND

This challenge was the starting point of a University of Birmingham-led project, funded through the Institute for Global Innovation and the Global Challenges Research Fund. The Ensure No 'Grab and Go' Extractive Research (ENGAGE) project led to the creation of the present guidelines. The researchers involved in this project all had experience in doing research on GBV in LMICs. Moreover, they had all experienced the benefits of undertaking such research through non-traditional methods, particularly using participatory and creative research approaches. Participatory approaches offer a way of conducting research that avoids the risks of re-traumatisation, through allowing participants control over the process. It is based on ethical research partnerships, enabling research participants to produce and maintain ownership over their own knowledge. Using creative methods such as photography, film, drama and art can enhance the participatory nature of research.

The ENGAGE project allowed us to understand the extent to which such participatory, collaborative and creative approaches are being used in research on GBV in LMICs. We did this both through a scoping review, which reviewed the variety of and gaps in existing best practice recommendations for the use of participatory and creative methods to research GBV in the Global South, and by empirically exploring the experiences in undertaking research on GBV in LMICs, both through interviews with civil society organisations and researchers in Kenya, and through a workshop with UK and international partners. This led to the development of the present guidelines, which will hopefully contribute to the setting of a global standard for research engagement with survivors of GBV in LMICs.

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THE GUIDELINES

The present guidelines are divided into three different parts, which each address different areas of concern when designing research on GBV in LMICs. They consist of the ENGAGE principles, which identify the core elements to adhere to in such research, and which should lead to the development of a statement of intent which all research partners (researchers from the Global North and researchers from LMICs, and participants) must sign before the start of a research project. They include a framework for a survivor-centred approach, which includes key questions to check whether your research project actually places survivors, their safety and wellbeing at the heart of the project. This way, researchers can avoid exploitative research and

instead aim to make research a meaningful and transformative experience for participants, while contributing to the ending of GBV worldwide. They also include recommendations for core elements to include in a research plan.

Using the guidelines

We have developed the guidelines as one way to ensure that research on GBV in LMICs is undertaken in a way that is fair, safe and ethical. This way research can be a transformative experience for all partners involved. The specific implementations of these guidelines will vary across different contexts.

Table 1: Using the ENGAGE guidelines

WHO

NGO partners in LMICs, their teams and the survivors they work with

HOW

As a resource to understand what to expect from research in terms of roles, contributions and benefits.

WHY

Sometimes, NGO partners and the people they accompany (including GBV survivors) do not understand their rights in research. At times they may feel coerced into facilitating engagement with local communities that may not best serve them.

GBV researchers in LMICs

As a resource to understand what to expect from research, what to negotiate with funders or international partners and how to protect participants.

Sometimes researchers from LMICs feel pressured into facilitating research activities, such as recruitment of participants that are not appropriate or safe. They are sometimes left out of important phases of research, such as its conceptualisation, or the research outputs and publications.

Researchers from Global North

As a framework to ensure that all practices are equitable and safe. As a resource to share with all academic and NGO partners in LMICs, so that they are aware of their rights in GBV research and that the commitment to the ENGAGE guidance is demonstrated.

Enacting the principles and practices within the ENGAGE guidelines is important. Sharing them early in the research process fosters trust and reciprocity and enables the research to be more transformative for GBV survivors by setting the research agenda together.

GBV and research policy makers

To inform policies around best practice in GBV research in LMICs and to guarantee that the research they fund complies with ethical standards.

There is a risk that policies may not be joined up as regards addressing both GBV and research in LMICs. The ENGAGE guidelines draw both aspects together.



SENSITIVITY

All involved partners must account for the sensitive nature of the research topic and its relevance in the local context.



POTENTIAL RISKS

Researchers should anticipate potential risks of conducting the research project and discuss these openly with local partners. Such risks might include research participants feeling disempowered, exploited or traumatised. In addition to anticipating these risks, all partners should consider viable ways for bypassing or addressing problems as they arise: for example, provision of ongoing psychological support for survivors.



COLLABORATIVE

Local partners should be involved throughout all stages of the research, including setting of the research question, designing of methodology, collection and analysis of data and production of various outputs (be they academic or more policy-oriented).



BENEFITS TO PARTIES

Local partners should be involved from the start of the project, allowing sufficient time to build relationships, discuss agendas and agree on research outputs. Time frames should be agreed upon at the outset of the project.

THE ENGAGE PRINCIPLES

The ENGAGE principles list the key elements that researchers should pay attention to when undertaking a research project in order to make sure that the research avoids doing harm to the participants and instead aims to bring about a transformation of the situation of survivors of gender-based violence. A first step towards this is being aware of and **sensitive** to the nature of the research and the **potential risks** for research participants including stigmatisation. These can be context-specific, as different cultural and religious contexts can imply different challenges and risks (including of a legal nature) for researchers and participants. Analysing and mapping these risks is a crucial step in making sure that the research will not put participants in danger. Risk analyses should be made in a **collaborative** way, since participants are often best aware of the safety risks they face.

All stakeholders in the research process (including survivors of GBV, national and international researchers) must have an opportunity to identify what they see as the **potential benefits** of the research, which can range from publications to lobbying or community-based activities.

They should also discuss in an open and transparent way how each of them could contribute towards achieving these goals, to set realistic goals and expectations. This way, all actors in a research process feel their opinions are being given equal value, and will understand how the research could make changes to their personal situation or the societal problems they are concerned about. This will help to avoid research from becoming an extractive or exploitative experience for those involved in it.

All the issues in the guidelines must be reflected in a statement of intent, which should be signed by all individuals in the research at the beginning of the project.

FRAMEWORK FOR A SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH

The ENGAGE framework for survivor-centred GBV research sets out key questions for practice to help guide research teams in developing participatory projects and checking whether projects are placing survivor safety, wellbeing and voice at the heart of the research process. The framework is organised into four domains, as follows:

1) Contextual: Aims to understand the local political, historical and social context, and what this means for the ways in which GBV is experienced and understood;

2) Relational: Aims to make sure that we are building genuine collaboration between all partners, which recognises contributions and shares benefits;

3) Reflexive: Aims to explore how we make sense of the research topic and how we work together, as well as how we can reflect on the values and assumptions we all bring to the research process; and

4) Transformative: Aims to understand how to bring about positive social change through the process and outputs of research so that it benefits survivors and communities.

Underpinning all four domains is a **survivor-centred approach**, prioritising safety and participation, which is central to the research process. The questions are intended to be used collaboratively with all partners on the project, as a tool to explore and negotiate the diversity of expectations, understandings and expertise among participants and researchers.

REFLEXIVE

How do we make sense of things?

- What values and assumptions do we bring:
 - To the research process?
 - To our relationships with each other?
- What processes could help us reflect together?

How will we bring about change?

- What would positive change look like?
- Who decides?
- Who has the power to make change?
- How do we make it happen? (policy, education, advocacy, interventions, etc.)

TRANSFORMATIVE

CONTEXTUAL

What do we know about research context?

- What is the political, historical and cultural context?
- Who has expertise?
- What does the local context mean for risks, sensitivities and understanding of GBV?

SURVIVOR-CENTRED APPROACH

RELATIONAL

How do we work together?

- Who participates?
- Who benefits?
- Who decides?
- How do we allocate roles?
- How do we ensure respect for diversity?
- How do we ensure genuine representation?
- How do we manage power inequalities?



TIME FRAME

The research plan needs a realistic time frame that allows for capacity building and meaningful engagement throughout all phases of research.



CO-RESEARCHERS

True co-development should be a primary goal, with all involved partners acting as co-researchers.

CORE ELEMENTS OF A RESEARCH PLAN

The collective discussions and analysis based on the ENGAGE principles will lead to the collaborative elaboration of a research plan. This research plan will outline the different steps that the research process will entail. It will consist of a realistic **timeline** for each of the different phases of the research: data collection, including the specific methods that will be used; data analysis; writing up of the research results in publications, as well as the potential needs for capacity building in these different phases. For each of these phases, the plan will identify the role of the different **co-researchers**, including GBV survivors. It is crucial here to also identify the roles of participants and researchers from LMICs in the publication of the research results, as this step is often reserved for the academic partners in a research project. A variety of different research outputs should be considered, targeted for different audiences and with different purposes, according to the needs and ideas of all co-researchers. Crucially, the research plan will

describe the **ethical issues** that the co-researchers foresee and the measures to prevent and mitigate these risks. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are crucial issues to address here, as well as the possibility of psychosocial or other forms of support for GBV survivors and researchers. The research plan will also set out the agreements on **communication** between the co-researchers in terms of frequency and forms of communication, as well as how potential disagreements will be discussed and resolved. It should use clear **language** and avoid unnecessary jargon in order to make sure the research plan is understandable and relevant for all co-researchers. Finally, the research plan will result in the elaboration of a **statement of intent** which resumes the principal elements of the research plan, and which will be signed by all co-researchers. This statement of intent increases the transparency of the research process, helps to create greater accountability between all coresearchers and thus establish trust between them.



ETHICAL ISSUES

The research plan should account for potential ethical issues arising within the project. Ethical research practice requires thinking through research relationships or partnerships at two different levels: with the local researchers in universities or NGOs on the ground, and with the research participants.



COMMUNICATION

Good communication should be maintained between all involved partners, including researchers from LMICs, and where possible, research participants, during the development of the research plan.



LANGUAGE

The research plan should be set out in language that is understandable for participants at a community level.

All the issues in the guidelines must be reflected in a statement of intent, which should be signed by all individuals in the research at the beginning of the project.

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