



EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA Regional Office

GUIDANCE NOTE

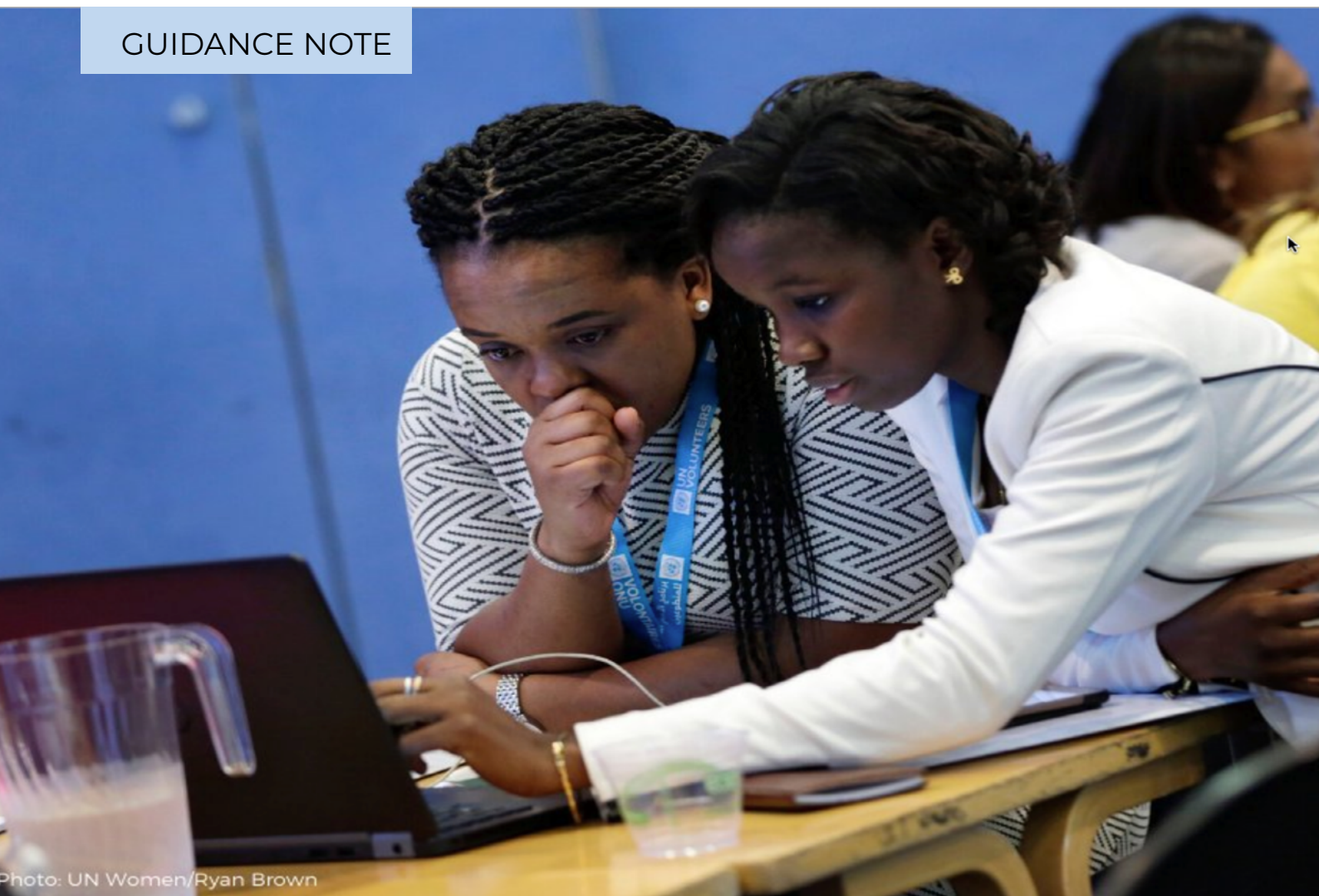


Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DURING COVID-19**

MAY 2020

ACRONYMNS

COVID-19	<u>CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019</u>
FDI	<u>FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT</u>
FGM	<u>FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION</u>
GBV	<u>GENDER BASED VIOLENCE</u>
GEWE	<u>GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT</u>
GPS	<u>GOVERNANCE, PEACE AND SECURITY</u>
NSO	<u>NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE</u>
PAR	<u>PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH</u>
SEA	<u>SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT</u>
SEIA	<u>SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ASSESSMENT</u>
UN	<u>UNITED NATIONS</u>
UNSD	<u>UNITED NATIONS STATISTICAL DIVISION</u>
WEE	<u>WOMEN ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT</u>

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the identification of the first cases of COVID-19 towards the end of 2019, life has changed irrevocably for women and girls in the world and in Africa. For many, these changes may include illness, continued lifelong medical conditions due to contracting the disease, and perhaps even death.

During the coming months, UN Women and its partners will plan and support the implementation of numerous projects in the region aimed at alleviating and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls. It is essential that these actions are based not only on statistical evidence, but also on a good understanding of the dynamics within and between households.

Lather¹ coins qualitative research as research aimed at understanding, interrogating and deconstructing. Typical verbs that can be used to describe this kind of research are describe, interrogate, understand, identify, explore, etc. Feminist research has traditionally been grassroots based and focused on the lived experiences of women. As a result, qualitative research outputs have been one of the most important sources of gender information and data for planning and advocacy purposes. The targeted use of qualitative methods makes them well suited to bring out the voices of poor, vulnerable and/ or marginalized sub-populations as they tend to be more sensitive to identifying and exploring the circumstances of these sub-groups. This is also the primary reason why it remains as important during COVID-19, as before the pandemic, to bring out the voices of these target groups. It is unlikely that the most appropriate policy and programmatic interventions will be identified by only using quantitative methods, given the complexities of the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women, girls and other marginalized groups. That said, it is important that research only be carried out if its purpose and use is clear from the onset, and if it adds value to existing data produced by UN Women, government partners and other agencies.

This guidance note is a high-level summary of the **GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DURING COVID-19**, published by UN-Women.

2. SELECTED QUALITATIVE METHODS AND SUGGESTED ADAPTATIONS

2.1. Overview

This section provides an overview of the commonly used qualitative research methods and, more particularly, those that are most likely to be used during the coming months. Important qualitative tools, such as observation and ethnographies/ auto-ethnographies, are unlikely to be employed by UN Women and its associates during this time and are therefore excluded from the discussion.

Interviews are, and probably will continue to be, the most widely used qualitative method during and post-COVID-19. Specific kinds of interviews, such as unstructured interviews, structured interviews, narrative enquiry and elicitations are elaborated below. This is followed by case studies, interactive tools, interpretation of records, transcripts, and other documents, and keeping logs and diaries.

¹ Patton, M.Q. 2015. Qualitative research and evaluation methods. New York: Sage publishing.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF SELECTED QUALITATIVE METHODS, THEIR MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND POTENTIAL IMPACT AND USE UNDER COVID-19

	METHOD	MAIN CHARACTERISTICS	IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON USE	POTENTIAL COVID-19 USE	DURING RESTRICTED MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL CONTACTS	LIMITED MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL CONTACT ALLOWED
INTERVIEWS	Unstructured Interviews	Conducted with an individual or 2-3 people. Researcher listens more than talks and allows the respondent to largely determine the content and direction of the interview.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited face-to-face interviews Techniques to build rapport and create open and safe atmosphere will be difficult to apply when interviewing remotely. Populations without phone or internet access will be difficult to reach. 	Medium to high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). More and perhaps longer interviews with shorter time intervals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue with remote techniques/ Face to face interviews possible Observe group size limitations if face to face Observe contact and hygiene rules in place in the country/ organization/building if face to face Include liability waiver in signed consent if face to face
	Structured interviews	Structured interviews can be held with groups or individuals and usually consist of a list of open-ended, pre-identified questions that do not have response categories. Focus group discussions usually use structured interview techniques.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited face-to-face interviews Interviews with dispersed groups that previously needed to travel to a central point becomes cheaper and easier provided they have internet connectivity. Structured interviews using phone calls will probably be the qualitative method that will reach the widest range of people. Populations without phone or internet access will be difficult to reach. 	Medium to high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). Phone calls likely to reach a wider population base. Interview smaller groups. Less diverse participants (focus groups). Use of auxiliary tools such as chats and social media platforms to interact with the group. 	See notes on unstructured interviews
	Narrative enquiry	Narrative enquiry method primarily focuses on the story as the basic unit of communication and analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social distancing will impact on direct engagement but, depending on the skills of the researcher, may still be feasible remotely. Populations without phones, internet access will be difficult to reach. 	Medium to high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). Written narratives with interaction via video conferencing. 	See notes on unstructured interviews

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INTERVIEWS	Elicitations	Use something such as a lyric, task, object, picture, videos or other visualizations to elicit or spark a conversation or response from the participant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social distancing will make active engagement through lyrics, tasks, objects, pictures, videos or other visualizations difficult to use. If an interview is conducted remotely, there is still the possibility of flashing an image/playing a video via share screen mechanisms. • Observing non-verbal response of the respondent to the stimulus provided is an important part of this approach. This will be more difficult to do remotely than face-to-face. • Populations without internet access will be difficult to reach. 	Limited to medium	Not advised	<p>See notes on unstructured interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If objects are used, do not let objects change hands or be handled by the participants.
	Case studies	Comprehensive investigation and/or analysis of an individual, group, event or phenomenon.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies typically have a narrow focus but can become an important substitute for protocols that previously would have required several interviews with groups and individuals. This method not only relies on interviews, but also on the study of documents and other information materials. • Populations without phone internet access will be difficult to reach if interviews form part of the case study. 	Medium to high	This is likely to continue except the interview components will be carried out remotely as per potential modifications listed above.	
OTHER	Interactive tools	Appropriate for use with groups and individuals with an emphasis on action and participation.	Social distancing will make active engagement through activities and participatory tools difficult.	Limited	Not advised	<p>See notes on unstructured interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If objects are used, do not let objects change hands or be handled by the participants.
	Interpretation of records, transcripts	Use existing reports, information and quantitative survey findings to interpret and elaborate in a qualitative manner.	This is an activity that does not need personal interaction and can be done remotely.	High	Continues remotely with greater emphasis on web-based rather than library access to resources.	Continues remotely with greater emphasis on web-based rather than library access to resources.
	Keeping logs and transcripts	Researcher and/or participants take careful note and detail aspects of their life, experiences or feelings.	Use of logs and transcripts remains possible during COVID-19. However, since this is typically done in conjunction with other methods such as interviews, some adjustments may be necessary.	High	Logs and transcripts remain feasible during COVID-19. If done with interviews - see notes on interviews.	Logs and transcripts remain feasible during COVID-19. If done in conjunction with interviews, some adjustments may need to be made as listed under unstructured interviews.

2.2. Quality and Validity

Qualitative research is often described as unscientific² based on objections related to sample sizes that are too small, biased samples that are not representative of the study population, self-selection bias if only volunteers are included in a study, the use of group interviews which can trigger dynamics, and responses that are not necessarily the true viewpoints of an individual. Other critiques include that it is not always clear whether the right questions have been asked and difficult to determine the extent to which researcher bias influenced the study. Qualitative research also sometimes suffers from poor documentation or metadata about how the study was

conducted which makes it difficult to make pronouncements about quality. Since these methods generate very valuable and important data, it is essential that some form of quality control is exercised over the process, methods and analysis.

To bridge the quality assessment gap the Cabinet Office of the British government developed a framework consisting of 18 questions that can be used to evaluate qualitative studies. It is not necessary that all these questions be answered in the affirmative, but the more of these questions are positively responded to, the more likely the data is reliable and accepted.

THE 18 QUESTIONS ARE³:

1. How credible are the findings?
2. How has knowledge or understanding been extended by the research?
3. How well does the evaluation address its original aims and purpose?
4. How well is the scope for drawing wider inference explained?
5. How clear is the basis of evaluative appraisal?
6. How defensible is the research design?
7. How well defended are the sample design/target selection of cases/documents?
8. How well is the eventual sample composition and coverage described?
9. How well was the data collection carried out?
10. How well has the approach to and formulation of analysis been conveyed?
11. How well are the contexts of data sources retained and portrayed?
12. How well has diversity of perspective and content been explored?
13. How well has detail, depth and complexity (i.e. richness) of the data been conveyed?
14. How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions - i.e., how well can the route to any conclusions be seen?
15. How clear and coherent is the reporting?
16. How clear are the assumptions/theoretical perspectives/values that have shaped the form and output of the evaluation?
17. What evidence is there of attention to ethical issues?
18. How adequately has the research process been documented?

It is important that these matters of quality be attended to and thought about during the planning and conceptualisation of the qualitative study and not only at the end.

² Patton, M.Q. 2015. Qualitative research and evaluation methods. New York: Sage publishing.

³ IDS 2020. Community Tool Box. <https://bit.ly/36Fh867>

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This document represents a brief overview of the potential impact of COVID-19 on the qualitative research conducted by UN Women and proposes ways to mitigate these impacts while still ensuring the safety of the researcher and respondent.

The guidance notes are purposely kept short and succinct for ease of use. Where appropriate, the reader will be referred to other more detailed resources that can be consulted if the need arises and time allows.

The main conclusions of the guidelines are:

1. Qualitative research is important as it provides insights into the lived experiences of women and girls affected by the pandemic.
2. Restrictions on movement and social distancing make it difficult to adequately conduct quantitative research as these methods have been designed to build strongly on establishing relationships of trust due to the exploratory nature of qualitative research and its quest for a deeper understanding.
3. The environment calls for flexibility and the innovative adaptation of existing methods.
4. Existing methods that most likely still readily lend themselves to use during the pandemic are unstructured interviews, structured interviews, case studies, interpretation of records, transcripts and similar information materials, and keeping logs and diaries.
5. Necessary adaptations include: working via mobile phones or videoconferencing (structured and unstructured interviews); adjusting the study populations based on the research questions, but also the restrictions posed on data collection by the pandemic; working with smaller groups; doing more interviews with individuals as rapport may take longer to establish, and employing techniques such as social media messaging and diaries to supplement data obtained through interviews.
6. Some important ethical considerations that must be considered after lockdowns are relaxed and protected face-to-face interviews can resume have been identified. These include incorporating clauses waiving liability in informed consent forms and ensuring that local, national and building regulations related to COVID-19 are adhered to.
7. Quality assurance guidelines should be considered from the onset of the study to ensure that adequate mechanisms to address quality are included in the study.

UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION
DEDICATED TO GENDER EQUALITY
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN.
A GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN
AND GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS
ESTABLISHED TO ACCELERATE
PROGRESS ON MEETING THEIR
NEEDS WORLDWIDE.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to implement these standards. It stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on five priority areas: increasing women's leadership and participation; ending violence against women; engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes; enhancing women's economic empowerment; and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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