



EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA Regional Office

GUIDANCE NOTE



GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

MAY 2020

ACRONYMNS

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?	5
3. SELECTED QUALITATIVE METHODS AND SUGGESTED ADAPTATIONS	6
3.1. INTRODUCTION	6
3.2. INTERVIEWS	9
3.3. CASE STUDIES	13
3.4. INTERACTIVE TOOLS	13
3.5. INTERPRETATION OF RECORDS, TRANSCRIPTS, ETC.	14
3.6. KEEPING LOGS AND DIARIES	14
4. BRIEF NOTES ON THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DURING COVID-19	15
4.1. PLANNING THE STUDY	15
4.2. DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND CONSTRAINTS	15
4.3. SELECTING PARTICIPANTS/SAMPLING	17
4.4. PRACTICAL INTERVIEWING	17
4.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	18
4.6. QUALITY AND VALIDITY	20
5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	22
6. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING	23

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.

Beyond these direct impacts, movement restrictions and social distancing measures that have been implemented to reduce the transmission of the disease are having and will continue to have even more far-reaching consequences at the local, national and global level. These changes continue to impact on lives and livelihoods of women and girls in East and Southern Africa. There are several areas where it is anticipated that women will be affected differently than men. These include, among others:

- Care of family members—children, the elderly and sick, further increasing stress levels and negatively affecting women both physically and mentally.
- Women make up 70% of workers in the health and social sector globally.¹ This poses a high level of infection risk.
- Job losses triggered by social distancing, lockdowns and movement controls will impact on women and men and particularly those employed in the informal sector who rely on daily wages with limited savings and access to social protection measures. Households headed by single women are potentially more at risk because of their reliance on one income.
- The expected spike in prices of basic commodities during this time can further increase the vulnerability of single, female-headed households and other marginalized groups.
- Pregnant, lactating and elderly women in urban and rural areas risk malnutrition due to these unprecedented and tough economic times.

➤ Strain imposed by the pandemic (isolation, reduced access to basic services, financial challenges) is leading to a further increase in gender-based violence including domestic violence and sexual exploitation.

➤ The impact of social distancing on reach and access to essential services by gender-based violence (GBV) victims and survivors, particularly legal, police and social services, is also anticipated.

➤ The shutdown of academic institutions putting girls out of school and at greater risk of gender-based violence including sexual exploitation and abuse, early/forced marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), unwanted pregnancies, and HIV infections, among others.

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.

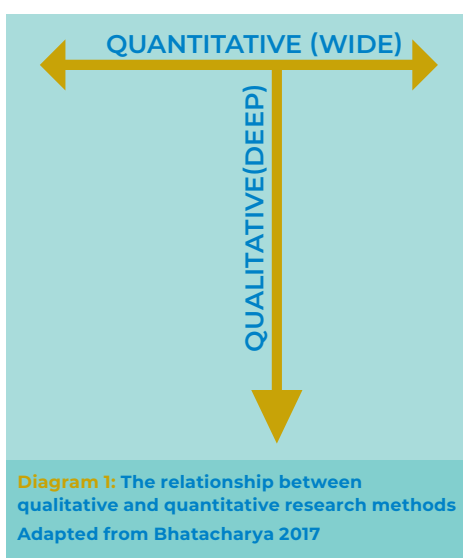
The primary aim of this guidance note is to provide a brief assessment of how COVID-19 impacts on our ability to undertake qualitative research and propose ways to mitigate that, while still ensuring the safety of the researcher and respondent. For ease of use, the guidance note is deliberately kept short and succinct. Where appropriate, the reader will be referred to other more detailed resources that can be consulted as needed and time permitting.

This document is not aimed at providing an exhaustive explanation of qualitative research and how best to harness its powers when doing research during COVID-19 and its aftermath. Neither is it the document's purpose to provide a detailed exposition of good practice in qualitative research as there is a vast amount of guidance on qualitative research in general.

2. WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Qualitative methods of assessment acknowledge that experience is subjective and complex and that an understanding of those complexities is important to get a fuller understanding of a situation. Quantitative methods typically provide answers to the questions where, what, how often and how much, while qualitative methods provide insight into and understanding of the dynamics behind the numbers. Policy makers often demand quantitative measures because they can be measured against one another in different locations and sub-groups, are comparable over time, and, if executed well, leave less room for bias and ambiguity. However, quantitative measures on their own often suffer from a deficiency of meaning and poor interpretability. It is therefore important to consider and use qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary data sources. This construct remains as important during COVID-19 as prior to the pandemic.

Diagram 1, as adapted from Bhattacharya 2017,² graphically demonstrates this complementarity. Whereas quantitative methods typically cover a wide scope and provides numbers and percentages on a range of topics, qualitative methods may cover one or more aspect of a particular topic and dig deep to investigate the underlying meaning and relationships between the patterns uncovered through the quantitative research.



Lather³ 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.

The current social distancing and lock-down conditions being enforced in many countries make it difficult to carry out this type of research effectively, given that most qualitative research methods are face-to-face and dependent on human interaction. However, that does not reduce the need for qualitative data. In some ways, data that reflects people's lived experiences has become even more important than ever. Within this context, Ravitch⁴ highlights that under COVID-19 conditions, the importance of 'emergent design' and 'researcher and design responsiveness' is greater than ever. She also argues for the linking of more traditional qualitative methods with methodologies such as Trauma-Informed Methodology⁵ and Chronic Illness Methodology.^{6,7}



3. SELECTED QUALITATIVE METHODS AND SUGGESTED ADAPTATIONS

3.1. INTRODUCTION

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.

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

	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	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.
OTHER	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.	
	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.

The next section will discuss each of these methods and the COVID-19 related impacts and consequences in more detail.

3.2. INTERVIEWS

Unstructured interviews:

Unstructured interviews work best when conducted with an individual or a small group of two to three people at most. Such an interview may or may not start with a specific question related to the research objectives. If it does not start with a specific question, the conversation will be subtly guided by the researcher towards the research objectives. The remainder of the interview and interactions between researcher and participants will then be determined by the discussion line. In this kind of interview, the researcher typically listens more than talks and allows the respondent to determine the content and direction of the interview while gently steering him or her within the framework of the research question.

COVID-19 limitations on unstructured interviews:

Unstructured interviews are very dependent on physical presence and face-to-face interviews. Physical presence helps the researcher to build trust and rapport with the participant and helps to identify subtle changes in mood and body language that could influence the understanding of what is said or even influence the direction and progression of the interview. During periods of movement restriction and social distancing, face-to-face interviews will be severely limited or altogether impossible.

In the absence of face-to-face interviews, remote interviews via phone or video conferencing are the most likely alternative. However, many of the techniques designed to build rapport and create an atmosphere conducive to open and safe conversations will be difficult to use when interviewing or having a remote conversation. It is therefore better to restrict this method to interviews with one person at a time and perhaps conduct a series of interviews over time to establish a relationship of trust and openness with the participant.

A change to remote interviewing will make it difficult to reach populations without phone and internet access and limit the possibilities of using these methods to reach poor and marginalized communities.

Examples of questions that could be used in an unstructured interview context during COVID-19

Unstructured interviews usually start with one broad question. Here are some examples:

1. What does the COVID-19 pandemic mean to you?
2. Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic will result in a different future for women?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you and your family?
4. How is the COVID_19 pandemic affecting women?
5. Are women and men affected differently by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Structured interviews (open-ended questionnaire surveys):

Group interviews, which allow several people to contribute or exchange ideas, usually fall into the category of structured interviews. However, structured interviews can also be held with individuals. Such interviews make use of an interview schedule that usually consists of a list of open-ended, pre-identified questions without response categories and can be semi-structured or structured. Semi-structured interview schedules allow for some flexibility in terms of which topics will be pursued, but these are listed and considered prior to the interview. The flow of the interview is then determined by the answers of the respondent rather than the interview schedule.

In contrast, structured interview schedules are more formalized in terms of flow and content with open-ended responses to all of them. Depending on the context and research question, group sizes for structured interviews can consist of 10-30 people noting that group size is usually inversely related to levels of participation and feelings of ownership and inclusion.

Focus group discussions are a special variant of group interviews. They usually consist of a small group of five to eight participants who are selected because of their specific insights, knowledge and/or experience on a specific issue. The researcher asks them one or more specific questions related to the identified research objectives.

COVID-19 limitations on structured interviews:

As is the case with unstructured interviews, structured interviews are unlikely to take place in the traditional face-to-face manner during the pandemic. Since this method is often applied to groups as well as individuals, limitations on the gathering of groups will present an additional constraint to this method.

The transition to remote interviewing techniques via mobile phones or video-conferencing has some advantages in that dispersed groups that previously needed to travel to a central point can be reached easier and at lower costs, provided that they have internet connectivity. All the limitations related to building rapport and establishing trust that are relevant to unstructured interviews are also relevant here, although the structured nature of these interviews makes it slightly less of a problem.

Structured group interviews, done virtually through video conferencing, may have to be limited to smaller groups to compensate for the already identified deficiencies of virtual as opposed to face-to-face interviews. A change to remote interviewing will make it difficult to reach populations without phone and internet access and limit the possibilities of using these methods to reach poor and marginalized communities.

Examples of questions that could be used in structured interviews during COVID-19

Below is an example of an extract from a semi-structured interview schedule that can be used by groups and individuals:

Interview Schedule Extract 1: Impact of COVID-19 on Women

- 1.** Have you or the women in your household been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
[probe further on how they have been affected]
- 2.** If the response in Question 1 included a response on economic activities and increased/reduced household income continue with the following questions:
 - a.** You mentioned that your household income has increased/decreased. What would you say are the main reasons for that?
 - b.** How is that change affecting the women in your household?
 - c.** If there has been a reduction of income explore: have you received any information or financial or in-kind support from the Government or other organizations during this time?
- 3.** If the response in Question 1 included a response on time use, continue with the following questions:
 - a.** You mentioned that you spend more/less time on xyz activities. How is that impacting on other areas of your life?
 - b.** Are others in the household helping you with xyz activities?
 - c.** Have there been changes in your household regarding the relative time men spend on xyz activities since the start of COVID-19?
 - d.** Do you think your experience with changes in the time you spend on xyz activities is like that of other women?
[Probe for better understanding of different inter-household dynamics and differences in the community]

Below is the same example from Interview Schedule Extract 1 above, but presented as a structured interview schedule, essentially, an open-ended set of questions, which can be used by groups and individuals:

Interview Schedule Extract 2: Impact of COVID-19 on women

1. Have you or the women in your household been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, how?
2. What kind of economic activities were you involved in before the start of COVID-19?
3. Have these activities changed in any way since the onset of the pandemic? What would you say are the main reasons for these changes, if any? If there were changes, are these changes affecting the women in your household? [If they are affecting women,] how are the women affected?
4. Have you received any information or financial or in-kind support from the Government or other organizations during this time?
5. How much time did you spend on unpaid care activities such as cooking, cleaning, looking after children, buying food, and other essentials for the household prior to the onset of COVID-19?
6. How much time are you currently spending on unpaid care activities?
7. How is the time spent on these activities currently impacting on other areas of your life?
8. Are others in the household helping you with these unpaid care activities?
9. Have there been changes in your household regarding the relative time men spend on unpaid care activities since the start of COVID-19?
10. Do you think your experience with changes in the time you spend on unpaid care activities is like that of other women?

Narrative Enquiry

This research method mimics unstructured interviews in that the researcher tries to get a detailed picture of the views and experiences of the respondent without imposing his/her own ideas on the narrative. However, whereas unstructured interviews can include different communication mechanisms, the narrative enquiry method primarily focuses on the story as the basic unit of communication and analysis. The content as well as the structure of the story is then analysed for the insights that it provides to the researcher.

COVID-19 limitations on narrative enquiry:

The narrative enquiry faces the same limitations under COVID-19 as structured and unstructured interviews, but to a slightly lesser extent. Social distancing will still impact on face-to-face engagements but, depending on the skills of the researcher, may still be possible to carry out remotely. In populations where literacy levels are high, remote storytelling may also be substituted with written narratives. However, the disadvantage of this alternative is that the narrative may be heavily edited or revised by the participant, thus diminishing some of the spontaneity and potential insights that can be gained from the structure of the narrative had it been a verbal conversation. This alternative will also exclude illiterate participants.

As with the other methods, populations without internet or mobile phone access will be difficult to reach or excluded from the research if remote interviewing techniques are used.

Examples of questions that could be used in narrative enquiry during COVID-19

Below are some examples of applying the narrative method during the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions are best posed after creating a relationship of trust and evoking feelings of safety and confidentiality within the interview context. The use of the word please in the requests will depend on cultural context and what preceded that intervention:

1. The narrative of a woman who was hospitalized and survived COVID-19: I understand that you were hospitalized and survived COVID-19? Can you (please) share with me your story?
2. The narrative of a woman who is a survivor of GBV during COVID-19: (Please) tell me about the time you were hurt by your partner.
3. The narrative of a woman who cared for several ill household members during COVID-19: (Please) tell me about the period in which you cared for several ill household members.

Elicitations:

This method involves using something such as a lyric, task, object, picture, videos or other visualizations to elicit or spark a conversation or response from the participant. The conversation/musings that follow are then used by the researcher to direct the discussions along the lines of the research question and construct an analysis on the topic at hand.

COVID-19 limitations on elicitations:

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 it is still possible to flash an image/play a video via share screen mechanisms. Part of the observations that need to be made by the researcher are changes in mood, facial expressions and other non-verbal responses of the respondent to the stimulus provided. This will be more difficult to do when conducting such an interview remotely instead of face-to-face.

As with the other methods, populations without internet or mobile phone access will be difficult to reach or excluded from the research.

Examples of questions that could be used during COVID-19

Even though elicitations would not be widely used during COVID-19 due to the physical proximity required, below are some examples of applying this method during the pandemic:

1. What does this photograph remind you of? Explore further meaning with the participant as the interview progresses.
2. Do you think the music playing now can help someone who is anxious as a result of COVID-19? Explore further meaning with the participant as the interview progresses.
3. Can this face mask be used to prevent the spread of infection? Explore what the participant knows and where they gained that knowledge.

3.3. CASE STUDIES

Case studies are very widely used in the social sciences and entail carrying out a comprehensive investigation and/or analysis of an individual, group, event or phenomenon. A description of the investigative process also forms part of the case study materials. When referring to a singular case study, only one case is studied. A multiple or plural case study contains several singular case studies which are then compared to each other.⁸

COVID-19 limitations on case studies:

Case studies typically have a narrow focus but can become an important substitute for protocols that previously would have required numerous interviews with groups and individuals. This method relies on interviews as well as the study of documents. During the pandemic, a case study can also typically be carried out by interviewing fewer people but spending more time with them during the interviews, or by doing more interviews with the same individual. As with the other methods, populations without internet or mobile phone access will be difficult to reach or excluded from the research.

Examples of the application of case studies during COVID-19

1. A nurse who is involved in the COVID-19 response is subjected to discrimination and exclusion in her community due to her involvement in treating patients with COVID-19. The case study can focus on, among other issues, an analysis of her actions and responses to the situation, the community context and an analysis of community actions and responses as well as that of the nurse's colleagues.

2. A woman who is a cross-border trader cannot continue with her trading activities due to border closures. Carrying out a case study of her situation and coping mechanisms will help the UN Women country office to better design and support interventions aimed at women economic empowerment (WEE) during COVID-19.

3. Can this face mask be used to prevent the spread of infection? Explore what the participant knows and where they gained that knowledge.

3.4. INTERACTIVE TOOLS

Interactive research tools are commonly used in Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a research approach used with groups and communities and embraces methodologies such as Rapid Rural Appraisals and Participatory Rural Appraisals. Even though PAR employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, the emphasis is on participation and action and revolves around a collaboration between researchers and communities/groups. Usually, the objective of a PAR is to assess a given situation and identify ways of improving it⁹. Individual and group interviews also form the backbone of PAR. However, PAR and its associated assessment approaches also utilize a range of interactive and participatory tools. Some of these qualitative tools include participatory mapping¹⁰, wealth ranking¹¹, social mapping¹², and Venn-diagramming¹³. These interactive tools can be very powerful ways of enhancing participation and ownership when conducting research in a community.

COVID-19 limitations on interactive tools:

Social distancing will make active engagement through activities and participatory tools difficult but not impossible to use with some innovation. For example, instead of working with groups, these tools can be used with individuals and an activity such as Venn-diagramming can be done remotely with an individual. Final products can be exchanged using photographs. Some video conferencing facilities have a drawing option where the convener and participants in a meeting can make a collective drawing. This could be a potential substitute for participatory mapping.

3.5. INTERPRETATION OF RECORDS, TRANSCRIPTS, AND RELATED MATERIALS

The interpretation of records, transcripts and other related materials can also be considered part of the qualitative stable of methods. Typically, this can range from using quantitative research as a basis for identifying areas that call for qualitative research to interpret quantitative data by linking it to other knowledge sources and existing publications. Another example of the symbiotic relationship between qualitative and quantitative data is in identifying individual records in a quantitative study which can also be used to identify case studies for example.

COVID-19 limitations on interpretation of records, transcripts:

This is an activity that does not need personal interaction and can be done remotely.

Examples of the use of transcripts and records during COVID-19

1. A study of the anonymized COVID-19 patient case records kept by the Department of Health can reveal gender related trends with regards to incidence, severity of illness, responsiveness to treatment and mortality rates.
2. UN Women supports a project aimed at increasing access to sanitary products in IDP camps during COVID-19. Studying the distribution records can provide some insights into the extent to which the program reached its intended beneficiaries.
3. An integrated assessment of all existing published statistics of COVID-19 in your country can help you to identify potential interventions that UN Women can include in its COVID-19 response package.

3.6. KEEPING LOGS AND DIARIES

When this method is used, the researcher and/or participants take careful notes and detail aspects of their lives, experiences or feelings. In the case of participants, the records are kept in logs and diaries. These are then analysed by the researcher to better understand a specific activity/event/phenomenon. Researchers use their own logs and diaries alongside the data they collected using observation or other methods to identify or reduce bias or broaden their understanding of the findings of a study.

COVID-19 limitations on keeping logs and diaries:

This is an activity that does not necessarily need personal interaction and can be carried out remotely. In cases where it compliments interviews, the same constraints related to interviews described earlier apply.

Examples of the use of transcripts and records during COVID-19

1. Studying the diary of a woman who is a healthcare provider during COVID-19 can generate ideas on how she and her household can be provided with support during the pandemic.

4. BRIEF NOTES ON THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

4.1. PLANNING THE STUDY

The basic sequence and steps normally followed during qualitative research pre-and post-COVID-19 remain the same. When conceptualizing, executing and reporting on the research project, five areas of work are usually included¹⁴

1. Theoretical framework
2. Research design
3. Data collection methods
4. Findings
5. Implications

Within the UN system, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights has provided clear guidelines on the considerations to follow when pursuing a human-rights based approach to data¹⁵. This approach to data is based on the principles of participation, data disaggregation, self-identification, transparency, privacy and accountability. This entails making sure that data is collected with the full participation of target populations and groups such as women of different age groups or the disabled. Likewise, should decisions related to data collection or data on vulnerable or marginalized groups be made in partnership with these groups. During research, attributes such as gender identity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs or ethnicity should only be assigned through self-identification. In the interest of transparency, metadata (data about data) should be made available throughout the research process. Published data should protect the identity of individual subjects, directly or indirectly, and indicators should be used to monitor progress and ensure accountability.

This set of six principles of the human rights-based approach to data should be considered in all research, regardless of whether it is qualitative, quantitative or both. It will be important that the researcher ensures that these principles infuse all five steps of the qualitative research process.

4.2. DATA COLLECTION

METHODS AND CONSTRAINTS

This section summarizes the most important modifications that may have to be made to selected traditional qualitative methods and those most likely to be used during COVID-19. It is important to note that there is no single recipe on how to adjust research methods during this time. Adjustments should be informed by participant characteristics, the research topic, resource availability as well as the geographic location of the research, among others. Flexibility and innovation remain central in the quest to find new and appropriate ways of undertaking familiar tasks during this pandemic.

In general, interviews will have to be done remotely using phone calls or video conferencing. Even when some lockdown measures are relaxed, it is likely that safety considerations such as wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing will remain in place for some time to come. This will impose additional requirements on research protocols and ethics, which will be discussed later. The pandemic is also characterized by rapidly changing circumstances, making it important to act quickly to effectively capture changes on the ground. This is likely to result in more, albeit shorter interviews with shorter time intervals between them. In instances where populations who do not have mobile phones or internet connectivity must be reached, arrangements could be made with village elders or prominent members of the community who have access to the internet to facilitate this process.

Movement restrictions and social distancing will result in group interviews being limited to interviews with smaller groups and perhaps focus groups, rather than general or broad interest group kinds of interviews.

Working with smaller groups and groups specialized in the topic at hand is likely to be more productive when conducting interviews remotely as discussions can be more easily guided, focused and to the point. Since the use of technology can be intimidating to some participants, it may lead to withdrawal or limited participation in the discussion. Reducing group sizes is just one of the potential mechanisms that can be used to make it easier to build trust, foster active participation and get buy-in from the participants.

The use of auxiliary methods to supplement interviews, such as written chat groups or other social media, is likely to increase as it can serve to augment and/or validate discussions and interviews.

TABLE 2: DATA COLLECTION METHODS WITH POTENTIAL MODIFICATIONS NEEDED DURING COVID-19

	METHOD	USUAL CHARACTERISTICS	POTENTIAL COVID-19 MODIFICATIONS
INTERVIEWS	Unstructured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interviews. • 1-3 interviews per participant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). • More and perhaps longer interviews with shorter time intervals.
	Structured interviews,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interviews with groups and individuals. • 10-30 individuals per group. • Focus groups usually smaller (5-8 people), but with less diverse participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). • Phone calls likely to reach a wider population base. • Interview smaller groups. • Use of auxiliary tools such as chats and social media platforms to interact with the group.
	Narrative enquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually face-to-face. • Story telling in which the structure of the narrative is as important as the narrative itself. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remote interviews (phone or videoconferencing). • Written narratives with interaction via video conferencing.
OTHER	Case studies	Comprehensive investigation and/or analysis of an individual, group, event or phenomenon.	This is likely to continue except the interview components will be carried out remotely as per potential modifications listed above.
	Interpretation of records, transcripts	Use existing reports, information and quantitative survey findings to interpret and elaborate in a qualitative manner.	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.	Logs and transcripts remain feasible during COVID-19. If done in conjunction with interviews, some adjustments may need to be made as listed above.

4.3. SELECTING PARTICIPANTS/SAMPLING

The characteristics and selection of participants is largely determined by the nature of the research question, but invariably takes place at two levels: the site or location where the research will be done and the individuals or groups that will be included. Currently, problems related to access have added an additional constraint which further influences and moderates the identification of a target group for the qualitative research and the selection of individual participants. For example, if certain marginalized groups are unreachable during the pandemic or unable to engage in the research process, research about the impact of the pandemic on marginalized groups will be skewed towards those who have been included and the narratives and lived experiences of those who are excluded will therefore not be reflected in the research.

Per definition, qualitative research is based on a smaller number of participants or respondents than quantitative research. However, it is important that the researcher guards against bias. For example, if structured interviews using mobile phone calls are conducted to establish the effect of the pandemic is on women's unpaid care workload, it is advisable to select participant's randomly from a phone number database. This will still only provide a representative picture of women who own mobile phones and not all women. If the objective is to only interview women from the lowest income quintile, it has to be noted that they are less likely to have phones and a large number of them will not even appear on the lists to start off with. If in this example only women who are members of the district gender machinery are interviewed, it will not necessarily reflect what is happening to women in general but may give a good picture of how the pandemic is affecting those members.

It is not always necessary to draw random samples; most qualitative research is based on purposive sampling techniques. Purposive sampling can be done in such a way that

selection is aimed at including individuals in a sampling based on specific characteristics relevant to the research question. The most commonly used purposive sampling universes include:¹⁶

- Typical cases
- Extreme cases
- Deviant cases
- Critical cases
- Convenience sampling
- Maximum variation sampling

In terms of how many individuals need to be interviewed, some qualitative researchers use the rule of thumb of 25. However, Seidman¹⁷ advises that the more the better. Generally, a qualitative researcher knows that enough people have been interviewed when no new information comes to light.

4.4. PRACTICAL INTERVIEWING

As already indicated previously, the COVID-19 pandemic will require methodological adjustments, especially when conducting unstructured and structured interviews with groups and individuals. Under conditions of lock-down and social distancing, it may be necessary to conduct interviews over the phone or via video conference calls. This may limit the number of individuals who could be effectively interviewed over time, and also result in smaller groups being interviewed to ensure greater participation.

An additional consideration will be the actual number of interviews that will be required. Under normal circumstances, Seidman for example proposes conducting three interviews with an individual when doing unstructured interviews. When using this method, the first interview will be devoted to a focused history/review around the research topic, the second interview will cover details of the lived experience, and the researcher and respondent will reflect on meaning during the third and final interview. During COVID-19, this may not be enough. This is because remote interviewing techniques will require more time and phone calls or discussions to build trust and rapport than face-to-face interviews.

Even though a specific phone call would be shorter than a face-to-face interview due to the use of a phone, if the researcher wants to build trust to and collect the necessary information short, but more phone calls may be required. This has implications on the number of questions to be included and the overall planning of the research project. The use of shorter and more frequent interviews may still be necessary when lockdown rules are relaxed and face-to-face interviews can be resumed using face masks.

Even though changes in the format, location, and number of interviews are expected during COVID-19, the general principles underlying qualitative research in general and more particularly interviews remain the same or perhaps even more important. Underpinning all qualitative research is respect and humility for the time that respondents are willing to give towards the research,¹⁸ which also echo several of the principles of the Human Rights Based Approach to data.

Seidman provides very clear general guidelines on how to best to conduct interviews. The following key points are singled out as essential pre-requisites for successful interviews:¹⁹

- **Listen more**, talk less is a principle that will create an atmosphere where the respondent and his/her views and lived experiences are at the centre. Active listening will enable the researcher to identify and explore new avenues of discovery.
- **Following up** on what the participant says by asking questions when you do not understand, asking to hear more about the subject and exploring what was said rather than probing. This will help to enrich and guide the discussion towards greater understanding and insight.
- **Asking real questions** that are open-ended, follow up on comments made by the respondent, and are based on active listening are important. This entails asking open-ended questions, avoiding leading questions and follow-up. Be careful not to interrupt the participant when asking questions.

Whereas all the preceding guidelines remain important during COVID-19, there are several additional considerations that the researcher must build into the research plan. Making use of remote online or even telephonic interviewing will make it more difficult to create rapport and build a relationship of trust with the respondent. During the interview, subtle changes in mood or body language, which act as important clues to the researcher, may not be as readily detected. This could make it difficult for the researcher to adjust the line of enquiry where needed. If the researcher and respondent are conducting online or telephonic interviews in a home or office environment, they may not be able to share and talk as openly as they could if they were in a controlled face-to-face research arrangement. Respondents who have experienced trauma may behave and respond differently during interviews and group discussions. Memory loss and a potential lack of focus could influence outcomes when interviewing traumatized individuals.

4.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The basic ethical standards that usually apply to research remain in place regardless of which research methods are being used. These are summarized in Diagram 1²⁰. Even though these ethical standards are also typically applicable to qualitative research, some of them, for example equal moral respect for people, fair and voluntary participation, and reasonable risk benefit ratios, could perhaps be considered slightly more important during COVID-19. The next sections will highlight the most important points that need attention with respect to qualitative research during COVID-19.

DIAGRAM 1: ETHICAL STANDARDS TO BE UPHELD BY RESEARCHERS



Source: Adapted from WHO 2020²¹

It is also important to note that not only ethical considerations related to research should be considered, but also ethical considerations related to specific areas of work. For example, there are ethical considerations related to working with traumatized individuals, which also need to be respected and included where appropriate in the qualitative research processes.

Important considerations during interviews

Most of the guidelines provided thus far focus on remote data collection via the internet. However, there may also be instances where movement control has been sufficiently relaxed to allow for face-to-face interviews. In these instances, it will be important to continue to adhere to social distancing rules, wear face masks, and sanitize adequately. Furthermore, all local and national regulations that may still be in place at that point in time must be adhered to. In addition, the owners of a building in which the interviews take place may also have their own set of requirements that should be followed. Please consult the more detailed guidelines on safety precautions after the lockdown has been lifted as provided by the Insights Association²².

a. Informed consent

It is as important now as it was before the pandemic that the participant signs an informed consent form. Informed consent basically entails granting permission for the research to be conducted and used in full knowledge of what it will entail and the possible risks, benefits and consequences. Once face-to-face interviews resume (with the requisite social distancing and other precautionary prevention measures in place), in addition to informed consent, all respondents should sign a liability waiver in the event that they contract COVID-19 during or after the interview (Feinberg 2020).

b. Privacy and Confidentiality

As in all, it remains as important now as during pre-COVID-19 times to inform the respondent about the confidentiality of his or her responses and to take all the necessary measures to ensure that this undertaking is not compromised. Due to the subject matter or the nature of record keeping and reporting (e.g. video clips or voice excerpts of interviews), there will be certain instances in which it will not be entirely possible to maintain full confidentiality. The respondents must be informed about this prior to the study and it should be adequately covered in the informed consent form signed by the respondent. Should a potential breach of confidentiality present itself after the participant has signed

the informed consent form, the researcher must go back to the participant(s) to ask for permission to use the collected materials in the new format not included in the informed consent form.

If the research is conducted online or via videoconferencing when individuals are working from home and/or are within earshot of other people, it may not be possible to maintain privacy. It is important that this forms part of the discussion points between researchers and respondents prior to the start of the research. Depending on the nature of the research and related privacy concerns, some mitigation measures may be required. The box below illustrates an such an adjustment as provided by Ravitch.²²

To reduce online discussions, the researcher developed a new data collection plan with the student group being studied. The revised plan involved: 1) starting a Google doc for group-think generally and for specific weekly email prompts for data collection purposes, 2) creating a WhatsApp group and giving written permission to use all chats as data, and 3) sharing transcripts from the first interview—and, instead of doing a second round of interviews, having the participants comment on their own interviews and layering in additional insights and concerns in readiness for an online focus group discussion.

4.6. QUALITY AND VALIDITY

Qualitative research is often described as unscientific²⁴ 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 are:²⁵

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.

5. 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 included in the study.

6. RECOMMENDED FURTHER READINGS

- Bhattacharya, K. 2017. Fundamentals of Qualitative Research. Publisher: Routledge.
- Butina, Michelle. 2015. A Narrative Approach to Qualitative Inquiry. <https://bit.ly/3gGW6IU>
- Fienberg H. 2020. Restarting in-Person Qualitative Research after COVID-19 by Howard Fienberg. <https://bit.ly/3cp49XB>
- FAO 1999. PRA toolkit. <https://bit.ly/2XTyFDP>
- Gentles S.J., Charles C., Ploeg J. and K.A McKibbin 2015. Sampling in Qualitative Research: Insights from an Overview of the Methods Literature. The Qualitative report. Volume 20, Number 11.
- IDS 2020. Community Toolbox. <https://bit.ly/3dnyeYX>
- IDS 2020. Participatory Methods. <https://bit.ly/3eBqpyX>
- IFAD 2009. Good Practices in Participatory Mapping. <https://bit.ly/3eC9XOS>
- Lather P 1991. Getting Smart: Feminist Research with/in the Postmodern. Psychology Press.
- Leonard A. Jason and Jordan Reed 2015. The use of Mixed Methods in Studying a Chronic Illness. Health Psychol Behav Med. 2015; 3(1): 40–51. <https://bit.ly/3gID0Ch>
- MEAS 2014. Venn diagram tip sheet. <https://bit.ly/2XkrLYZ>
- OHCHR 2018. A Human Rights-Based Approach to Data leaving no one behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. <https://bit.ly/3gJjgOU>
- Patton M.Q. 2015. Qualitative research and evaluation methods. Sage Publishers.
- Ravitch, Sharon M. The Best Laid Plans... Qualitative Research Design During COVID-19, Published on March 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2TYLhYR>
- Ravitch, S and Carl Nicole Mittenfelner, 2020. Qualitative Research. Sage Publishers.
- SAMHSA 2015. A Guide to GPRA Data Collection Using Trauma Informed Interviewing Skills.
- Seidman, I. Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 2019. Teachers College Press New York. <https://bit.ly/2XR0UD2>
- Starman, A.B. 2013. The Case Study as a Type of Qualitative Research. Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies, 1/2013. <https://bit.ly/3ewJkLg>
- UN Women 2018. Turning promises into action. <https://bit.ly/36Q9WUJ>
- Village Enterprise 2012. <https://bit.ly/36Sm7jP>
- WHO 2019. Gender Equity in the Health Workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries. <https://bit.ly/2TZj04A>
- WHO 2020. Ethical Standards for Research during Public Health Emergencies: Distilling Existing Guidance to Support COVID-19 R&D. <https://bit.ly/3gSw2L8>

REFERENCES AND END NOTES

- ¹ WHO (2019). Gender equity in the health workforce: Analysis of 104 Countries
- ² Fundamentals of Qualitative Research by Kakali Bhattacharya, 2017. Publisher: Routledge
- ³ Lather P 1991. Getting smart: Feminist research with/in the postmodern. Psychology Press.
- ⁴ Ravitch Sharon M., The Best Laid Plans... Qualitative Research Design During COVID-19, Published on March 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/36OY9pT>
- ⁵ <https://bit.ly/2TXGpn5>
- ⁶ <https://bit.ly/2zHjNQT>
- ⁷ <https://bit.ly/36ReTgj>
- ⁸ Starman, A.B. The Case Study as a Type of Qualitative Research. Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies, 1/2013.
- ⁹ <https://bit.ly/2MivmAx>
- ¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/3crYdNf>
- ¹¹ <https://bit.ly/3eDGDHJ>
- ¹² <https://bit.ly/3eFDKpT>
- ¹³ <https://bit.ly/2ZZ7A4K>
- ¹⁴ Fundamentals of Qualitative Research by Kakali Bhattacharya, 2017. Publisher: Routledge
- ¹⁵ <https://bit.ly/3gImS3F>
- ¹⁶ Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, Patton 2015. Also available at <https://bit.ly/309uLth>
- ¹⁷ Seidman, I. Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 2019. Teachers College Press New York.
- ¹⁸ Ravitch, S and Carl Nicole Mittenfelner, 2020. Qualitative Research. Sage Publishers.
- ¹⁹ Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 2019 by Irving Seidman, Teachers College Press New York.
- ²⁰ Ethical standards for research during public health emergencies: Distilling existing guidance to support COVID-19 R&D, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2MgOJdl>
- ²¹ Ethical standards for research during public health emergencies: Distilling existing guidance to support COVID-19 R&D. <https://bit.ly/2ZWVt8b>
- ²² Restarting in-person qualitative research after COVID-19 by Howard Fienberg. <https://bit.ly/2Xo4F3R>
- ²³ Ravitch, Sharon M. The Best Laid Plans... Qualitative Research Design During COVID-19, Published on March 23, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2ZYt7KE>
- ²⁴ Patton, M.Q. 2015. Qualitative research and evaluation methods. New York: Sage publishing.
- ²⁵ IDS 2020. Community Tool Box. <https://bit.ly/3gHddu8>

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.



East and Southern Africa Regional Office
UN Complex, Gigiri, Block M, Ground Floor
P.O. Box 30218 – 00100
Tel: +254207624365 - Nairobi, Kenya
<http://africa.unwomen.org/en>
esaro.publications@unwomen.org