

SPEAKING OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: 7 TIPS ON DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

As human rights educators, we have experience dealing with topics that are sensitive and difficult and which may sometimes be traumatizing for our participants. We often have to navigate the space between sensitizing others to difficult issues and making sure that they are not overwhelmed or impacted negatively by engaging with the issue.

This balance can be even more difficult to strike when conducting a needs assessment or baseline study in partnership with communities that have experienced discrimination. We may want to gain more insight into a particular context (e.g., the state of gender-based violence in a particular community) but we also want to avoid re-traumatizing the very people who are providing this information (who may have been subjected to the same violence you are attempting to understand).

During a needs assessment, baseline study, or context analysis, we need to remain respectful of the information we are receiving. That includes thinking of the needs of the people with whom we work and of whom we are asking so very much. If we appreciate their contribution, we should be respectful of their time and ensure that they feel comfortable and safe enough to share their ideas.

Below are 7 tips to ensure that your partners feel supported while addressing sensitive or difficult subject matter.

1. COMMUNICATE CLEARLY IN THE INVITATION

- When inviting participants to take part in a data-gathering activity, such as a focus group discussion, be clear about the goal and objectives. Participants should be aware of what kind of activity they will be attending and have the time to prepare themselves for a potentially difficult conversation.
- Clarity is also needed with regard to logistics. Ensure participants are well informed about the location and time of the activity so that they can make preparations to be present.

2. CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE TIME AND VENUE

- Women, especially in more rural areas, might require additional time in the morning to tend to their domestic responsibilities. Activities should be scheduled to begin in the late morning or early afternoon.
- For many participants, particularly women and girls, walking long distances to a destination can potentially expose them to harassment or violence. Consider the location of your venue and, if possible, arrange for transportation or reimbursement for transportation.

3. USE CONSENT FORMS AND TAKE THE APPROPRIATE TIME TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

- When carrying out data-gathering activities, such as focus group discussions and interviews provide participants with consent forms. These forms should provide participants with all necessary information to help them make an informed decision about participating in the discussion. The form should include information on the purpose of the data gathering activity and on how the information they provide-will be used. By signing the consent forms, participants will be agreeing to participate in the discussion.
- Make sure to indicate the way that you will be documenting information. A participant might be comfortable with the presence of a note-taker but uncomfortable with audio or visual recording equipment. Have a back-up plan in the case that a participant is uncomfortable with the way(s) you had planned to record the session.
- Participants should be encouraged to carefully read through the consent forms. Have members of the facilitation team available to answer participants' questions.

4. AGREE ON RULES AS A GROUP

- In the introduction to your activity, allow participants to discuss the rules needed to create a safe and inclusive environment. This participatory process will help participants own the process and set the tone for the discussion.
- Using a large poster or flipchart, take note of the rules that participants suggest and post them in a place where they can be seen by all.

5. ENSURE PARTICIPANTS FEEL SAFE EXPRESSING THEMSELVES

- When planning data-gathering activities, consider the elements that will encourage discussion and allow participants to feel safe sharing their thoughts and opinions. For example, would women participating in a focus group feel comfortable discussing sexual violence in the presence of men from their community? Would younger women feel comfortable discussing topics of gender roles or sexuality in the presence of older women from their communities?

6. BE PREPARED TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT OR EXEMPTIONS

- When addressing sensitive issues such as gender-based violence during a focus group discussion for example, remind participants that they are not expected to provide personal testimony of gender-based violence. Explain that they can speak in general about the types of gender-based violence that may exist in their communities.
- However, this may not stop participants from volunteering personal information of past experiences. Facilitators need to be able to provide the appropriate support to anyone who might be emotionally affected by the discussion. This support includes allowing participants to remove themselves from the discussion at any time, providing emotional support for an affected participant, or pointing them to the appropriate services/resources should they exist.

7. PROVIDE CHILD CARE

- Consider that a lack of child care may be a barrier for the participation of many women in your activities. If possible, consider arranging child care services so that these women may actively participate in an activity or event.

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