ANNEX 14:
PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH ETHICS

This annex outlines research ethics best practices and qualitative data collection methods and techniques. It also offers a sample script for gathering informed consent and includes supplemental resources for additional information to aid in planning and implementing the collection of primary data.

RESEARCH ETHICS

When undertaking research involving human subjects, the gender analysis team must understand the ethical considerations involved. All primary data collection steps should be reviewed to conform with ethical guidelines and include processes to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Interviewers, focus group facilitators, and enumerators should be trained on the gender analysis information needs and ethical data gathering practices.

All research funded by USAID should adhere to the Protection of Human Subjects in Research Supported by USAID policy as well as the best practices identified in the Belmont Report, including informed consent, ethical research designs, and protections for those participating in the study.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) CONSIDERATIONS

Gender analyses are typically considered operational activities to improve programmatic performance and therefore, do not usually require approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, IRB review may be necessary if the gender analysis includes any of the following elements:

- Primary research will be conducted using a formal scientific protocol, such as with a hypothesis to be tested, representative sampling, and data collection tools that require consistent application.
- Personally identifiable information (PII) will be collected beyond what is readily associated with the individual, such as their title and organization.
- The public version of the gender analysis will contain PII or will associate individuals with specific findings. Such disclosures have the potential to place the individuals at risk.
- Primary research will involve individual discussions of gender-based violence (GBV) experiences.
- Primary research will involve children (minors under the age of 18).
- Primary research will collect anthropological and/or ethnographic data.

If IRB approval is needed for the reasons above, you are responsible for obtaining the IRB review as the implementing partner (IP) conducting the research. Some IPs have organizational policies requiring IRB approvals for additional reasons not listed above; also, some countries (or specific ministries) or educational institutions require IRB approval. In all cases, those policies should be followed.

FREE, PRIOR, AND INFORMED CONSENT (FPIC)

Obtaining free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is crucial to ensuring that individuals who provide information (as through interviews and focus groups) fully understand and consent to how their data will be used, stored, and protected, including the level of anonymization that will be applied. It is imperative to obtain participants' FPIC before engaging them in the data collection process, and to obtain their specific consent to be recorded prior to each session. Further guidance on informed consent can be found in USAID Guidance and a Concise Guide to Monitoring Engagement and Verifying FPIC, as well as Considerations for Using Data Responsibly at USAID.

When developing interview or focus group guides, include an introductory script — like the one provided below — to explain the process and gain participants' consent.

Example Interview Script for Informed Consent

Hello, my name is [name]. I am conducting research for [IMPLEMENTING PARTNER NAME], the implementing partner for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [XXX] project. Specifically, we are conducting a gender analysis to understand how gender inequalities relate to [XXX] project, which [describe the overall purpose and objectives of XXX project]. Your insights will help [IMPLEMENTING PARTNER NAME] consider how to integrate gender into all aspects of [XXX] project, ensuring the project supports people of all gender identities, and, when possible, reduces gender inequalities.

In the context of this work, I am interested in finding out more about [describe why they were selected as a relevant stakeholder]. I am interested in your experiences and ideas for how to address gender issues in [sector].

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You can choose not to respond to a question at any time, and we will immediately move on. There are no right or wrong answers, and we are seeking your honest perspectives and experiences. Everything you share with us will remain anonymous, but it is not confidential; this means that we may share quotes or general stories, but your name and any personal information will not be tied to them. The interview should take no more than [60] minutes. Do you have any questions for me before we start?

Optional: If you agree, I would like to record our conversation for my notes, so I don't miss any important points. The audio file (and notes transcribed) will remain in my possession and will not be shared beyond the research team. Do I have your permission to record our interview?

- [If yes:] Thank you. I will begin the recording. I will ask that you confirm your approval one more time when the recording starts, so that your consent is on record.
- [If no:] Thank you. That is not a problem. We will proceed without recording.

Thank you very much for your participation. Let's begin.

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND SAMPLING

Most primary data collection for gender analyses utilizes qualitative methods (see Table 14-1), based on a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to select who should participate. *Purposeful sampling* selects an assortment of individuals from different stakeholder groups (e.g., USAID staff, IPs, government stakeholders, civil society, and project partners and participants), to ensure that diverse perspectives are captured. This is essential to ensure that the sample includes potential project participants representing a range of gender identities, marginalized groups, and intersectional identities. *Snowball sampling* is a useful technique for expanding the sample by asking selected individuals to recommend others to consult.

Quantitative data may also be collected, but this is often beyond the scope and resources of a pre-award gender analysis. If quantitative data is collected, quality assurance measures should be in place to ensure that the data is representative and statistically sound.

TABLE 14-1. EXAMPLES OF PRIMARY QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

METHOD	DESCRIPTION
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	Interviews can be conducted in-person or virtually, depending on participant comfort, preference, safety, accessibility, and connectivity. Ensure that KIIs include members of groups not represented in other data sources. Use a semi-structured approach based on an interview guide: feel free to ask pertinent follow-up questions, and allow interviewees to direct the conversation toward additional issues not covered in the interview guide.
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	FGDs involve a small group of participants, ideally four to ten, who share and discuss their answers to questions, stimulating thoughts that might not arise through individual interviews. When identifying participants, be sensitive to the group composition (gender identity, age, power dynamics, etc.) to ensure that participants are comfortable answering questions among the selected group. Make sure you do not ask questions that could cause shame, discomfort, or have negative consequences to participants — especially those belonging to vulnerable groups (see Safety/Security-Sensitive and Trauma-Informed Stakeholder Consultations with Members of Marginalized Groups for additional information).
Consultative Workshops	Consultative sessions include more participants than FDGs and are structured around an agenda with clear objectives. These sessions usually validate information, generate additional insights, and brainstorm recommendations. The agenda may include presentations, plenary discussions, and breakout groups for further exploration. Consider having multiple facilitators, including members of marginalized communities, to manage the session effectively and ensure representation of different demographic groups. Use tools like flipcharts to aid documentation.
Stakeholder Mapping	Within other primary data collection methods, incorporate a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify organizations and entities at various levels (community, sub-national, national) who can help respond to the different needs of women, men, and individuals of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), as related to the project's purpose. This exercise can help you identify other stakeholders to engage and potentially incorporate, within partnership recommendations.
Case Studies	Incorporate case studies, or vignettes, along with other primary data collection methods to gather a broad range of insights and reflections. Case studies can be presented to (or developed collaboratively with) KIIs and FGDs, providing a valuable way to explore individuals' personal experiences and their reflections on others' stories. Case studies can also prompt discussion of gender norms, revealing what participants believe is acceptable or unacceptable behavior for men, women, boys, girls, and individuals of diverse SOGIESC. Several approaches — such as Positive Deviance, Most Significant Change, and Mapping Life Histories — can be used to collect diverse case studies.

TIPS FOR QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

DEVELOP SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW AND/OR FOCUS GROUP GUIDES.

Developing an introductory script and key questions will help maintain a focused discussion while collecting multiple perspectives on the same questions.

- At the beginning of a discussion, describe how the information will be used, the extent of confidentiality, and the purpose of the meeting or interview.
- Prior to beginning the conversation, make sure that participants provide their full consent to continue and that they are aware they can stop (or remove themselves from the group) at any point. This is especially important if you'll be requesting to record the discussion. For more information, see the section on FPIC above.
- For gender analyses, best practice involves developing specific interview and focus group guides for each stakeholder group, and then tailoring questions to the participant's background.
- Ensure that the questions are specific and can be answered by the participant without requiring them to speculate.

PLAN FOR EFFECTIVE DELIVERY AND NOTETAKING. When conducting interviews with multiple people or FGDs, it may be helpful to engage several team members to help facilitate the discussion and to take notes.

- Ideally, interviews should be in the language that the persons being interviewed are most comfortable speaking in, using terminology they are familiar with. If translation is needed, ensure that a dedicated translator is trained on the interview guide and associated terminology.
- Developing a structured format for note-taking will save time during data analysis and will simplify comparison of the answers. Also, consider creating a coding system to tie each question to a specific project component or gender issue.

PRIORITIZE PARTICIPANT COMFORT AND SAFETY. When preparing a KII or FGD, aim to create an environment where participants will feel comfortable sharing their perspectives openly.

- Consider if a private location is needed, and what location would be most familiar to participants.
- When considering holding multi-person interviews or a FGD, be sensitive to the group composition (gender, age, power dynamics, etc.) to ensure participants' comfort in openly and honestly answering questions. Be cognizant of the interviewers' gender and other identities; decide on who will be facilitating and who will be present with full consideration for developing a trusted rapport with participants.
- When working with survivors of violence, with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) populations, youth, or with other vulnerable populations, confer with technical experts to determine what additional safeguards may be needed.

USE OPEN-ENDED AND PROBING QUESTIONS. By using open-ended or follow-up questions, you can explore relevant topics raised that may not have been initially considered.

- *Pause* to allow participants time for reflection.
- Treat interviews as *conversations* rather than rigid questionnaires; tailor questions to the person's experience and background. This approach can help you gather rich and insightful data that goes beyond your predetermined questions.

- *Alternative forms* of questioning, such as presenting case studies or vignettes, can be useful for addressing sensitive topics or situations where respondents might feel required to provide socially desirable answers. Presenting scenarios for discussion can create a safe distance, enabling participants to share their perspectives more openly.

OBTAIN CONTACT DETAILS FOR FOLLOW-UP AS NECESSARY. Reviewing notes after discussions may suggest further questions. Following up with key informants by phone or email to ask clarifying questions can help you fill in gaps or better understand their original answers. Let people know that you may need to follow up with them after the interview for clarification. However, make sure to collect contact details only if it is safe for participants, and only if the contact data is stored securely.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Sampling Techniques.** What is non-probability sampling? Everything you need to know is a guide to thinking through selecting your sample of stakeholders and understanding the nuances of reducing bias. Another guide, from the World Food Programme, provides an overview of sampling techniques indicating when to use them. For more information on purposive sampling (also known as purposeful sampling), refer to Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research and Purposive Sampling. For more information on snowball sampling, see Snowball Sampling, Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide.
- **Stakeholder Mapping.** A stakeholder map may be as simple as organizing a list of contacts by stakeholder category and then analyzing the distribution of categories, or drawing lines between connected stakeholders to create a visual map. For a more advanced tool to organize and visually map stakeholders, see the USAID Learning Lab's Collaboration Mapping resource.
- **Interview Template and Tips.** The Women's Economic Empowerment and Gender Equality (WEEGE) technical guide includes several resources, including an interview guide template, interview good practice tip sheet, and WEEGE Illustrative Questions tool.
- **Focus Group Tips.** Two USAID documents, the Technical Note: Focus Group Interviews and the USAID TIP Sheet, provide guidance on the whole process of conducting focus groups — including the strengths and weaknesses of the approach, participant selection, informed consent, and extracting findings.
- **Example Focus Group Guide.** World Bank's Focus Group Discussion Guide: Women Entrepreneurs is a good example of a discussion guide, including directions for the moderator and examples of discussion questions and follow-up questions.
- **Examples of Alternative Data Collection Tools and Guides.** To use case study or vignette-based methodologies for data collection, the GENNOVATE research initiative and the Global Early Adolescent Study include vignette-based resources that can serve as a model. For other alternative methodologies, CARE's Tipping Point Project provides Methods Briefs that can be adapted to your specific context. The Qualitative Design Toolkit: Qualitative Methods for Monitoring Food Security Activities Funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance includes best practices for qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, multi-criteria analysis, case studies, life history approach, and a range of interactive participatory tools. Save the Children's Kit of Tools for Participatory Research and Evaluation with Children, Young People, and Adults and Young Lives' Methods, Tools, and Instruments for Use with Children provide guidance when conducting research with children and youth.

- **Gender-Sensitivity in Tools and Collection Methods.** Module 6 on Gender Considerations within the Data Collection Process by the World Health Organization (WHO) provides helpful information on ensuring that gender considerations are included at every level of data collection and analysis. (Note: this is part of the WHO toolkit, Incorporating Intersectional Gender Analysis Into Research On Infectious Diseases Of Poverty: A Toolkit for Health Researchers.)
- **Ethical Considerations in Data Collection.** The Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Gender-based Violence Interventions Along the Relief to Development Continuum provides broader ethical considerations to consider in research design, especially with survivors of gender-based violence. The WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting, and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies has more detailed recommendations. For ethical consideration in data collection with children (minors under the age of 18), see Ethical Research Involving Children: Ethical Guidance.