USAID'S COLLECTIVE ACTION TO REDUCE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (CARE-GBV)

How to Use Site Visits to Strengthen Gender-Based Violence Interventions

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Overview

USAID staff and implementing partners (IPs) across all sectors of development have an opportunity to prevent, mitigate, and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) in their programming. This includes a shared responsibility to address risks and incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse.[1]

Site visits are a required component of USAID monitoring,[a] as outlined in the ADS 201 Program Cycle Operational Policy,[2] and are an opportunity to assess the extent to which GBV is being effectively taken into account in activity implementation. Site visits can also be used to ensure compliance with the terms of the award and Agency requirements, as well as to facilitate mutual learning among USAID, IPs, and communities regarding local needs and priorities, barriers and enablers for effective interventions, and program resources related to GBV.

However, site visits that explore GBV can create risks for survivors, their families and communities, service providers, and the site visit team. These risks may include breaches of confidentiality, creating or exacerbating psychological distress, or prompting a backlash toward those who speak about violence. Site visits must be carefully executed to protect the safety and well-being of everyone directly or peripherally involved.

This how-to note provides practical guidance to USAID staff and IPs on planning, hosting, and conducting safe and ethical site visits to strengthen GBV interventions. It complements

Key Points

Site visits that explore GBV and related interventions must be planned and implemented in ways that:

- **Prioritize safety** by assessing and mitigating risks and protecting the confidentiality of survivors

- **Shift power** to survivors, communities, and local IPs by focusing on transparency, diversity, equity, and inclusion

- **Foster mutual learning** through sharing knowledge, ideas, experiences, and challenges

- **Identify strengths and successes** as central components of assessing and monitoring programs and facilitating positive change

USAID's How-To Note: Planning and Conducting Site Visits[3] and covers key terms, approaches, and recommendations for each stage of a site visit. The note draws on a body of global guidance on monitoring, researching, and collecting information on GBV.[4,5,6] While the focus of this note is on site visits to strengthen GBV interventions, many of the recommendations align with those of broader movements to elevate local voices, expertise, and ownership across humanitarian and development practice.

[a.] As part of USAID's 2018 Agency and Acquisition Strategy, the training and responsibilities of Contracting/Agreement Officers will shift from only ensuring compliance to focusing on performance management and adaptive partnering, with an emphasis on appropriate risk management, on-time monitoring and evaluation plans, regular site visits, and consistent, real-time interaction with partners at all levels.

Table 1. Key definitions

Gender-based violence	GBV is "any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived biological sex, gender identity and/or expression, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity. It is rooted in structural gender inequalities, patriarchy, and power imbalances. GBV is typically characterized by the use or threat of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, legal, political, social, and other forms of control and/or abuse."[7]
Sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA)	For the purposes of this note, sexual exploitation is "any actual or attempted abuse by aid workers of a person in a position of relative vulnerability for sexual purposes, including profiting monetarily, socially, or politically." Sexual abuse is "any actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions."[8]
Site Visits	Site visits are typically conducted by those with oversight of an activity. This includes USAID Contracting Officer's Representatives and Agreement Officer's Representatives (CORs/AORs), as well as leadership from national or international offices of IPs, who visit a USAID-funded activity site or office for the purpose of monitoring, oversight, and learning from activity implementation. Site visits may also be conducted by funders or IP senior leadership for purposes of showcasing a program's work (e.g., U.S. Ambassador or high-level representatives of an IP).

KEY APPROACHES TO GUIDE SITE VISITS

Key Approaches to Guide Site Visits

The following approaches are fundamental to all aspects of GBV programming, including planning and conducting site visits. USAID and IP staff who oversee site visits have a critical role in prioritizing these approaches, and recommendations for doing so are included throughout the note.

Survivor-Centered

A survivor-centered approach focuses on the empowerment of survivors by creating a supportive environment for healing. It is implemented by prioritizing survivors' safety, protecting confidentiality, demonstrating respect for survivors' needs and wishes, and practicing nondiscrimination. The approach is responsive to the diverse identities of survivors, including those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression such as those based on disabilities; racial, indigenous, or ethnic identities; sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC); religious affiliation; or nationality, immigrant, or refugee status.[9]

Do No Harm

A do-no-harm approach means that, above all, GBV prevention, mitigation, and response programming must not jeopardize the physical or emotional well-being of survivors, staff, program participants, and community members. USAID and IP staff who provide technical oversight have a critical role to play in prioritizing this approach in planning and conducting site visits.[b]

Participatory

A participatory approach ensures that the voices and leadership of those most affected by programming are at the center of learning and decision-making. Effectively implementing a participatory approach requires an understanding of who in a community wields power and influence in both positive (promoting equality) and negative (reinforcing inequalities) ways. It is important to align efforts with those who are shifting power to include those who are typically marginalized.

Applying a Participatory Approach to Direct Engagement

It will not always be safe or feasible to directly engage program participants or communities during a site visit. However, an IP may not feel it has the power to say no to a funder. A key aspect of being participatory is letting the IP know that those conducting the visit appreciate these dynamics and want to adhere to key survivor-centered principles. When IPs, program participants, or communities communicate concerns or discomfort with certain forms of engagement, this is a meaningful form of participation in itself. Regardless of whether direct engagement is feasible or appropriate, USAID and IPs must work to elevate community voices — including those most marginalized and at risk of GBV — in all discussions and decisions. One example of this is when IPs engage with communities in planning the site visit, including discussing with program participants the key points they would like IPs to share with the funder on their behalf.

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b. Originally developed for collecting information on sexual violence in humanitarian settings, the guidance in WHO's Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Researching, Documenting, and Monitoring Sexual Violence in Emergencies is widely accepted for planning, collecting, and using information on GBV. These recommendations are critical to a do-no-harm approach and are integrated throughout this how-to note.

PLANNING A SITE VISIT

Determine the purpose of your site visit.

Site visits may be conducted for a variety of reasons, including performance monitoring, data verification, learning to inform design and implementation, and compliance with Agency requirements and terms of an award. In addition, site visits are sometimes planned to highlight a program for diplomatic or fundraising opportunities.

- To establish context and narrow the focus of your site visit:
    - Review existing information, including gender or risk analyses that may have been conducted for the project and any external research on local trends and dynamics of GBV.
    - Reflect on the gender and power dynamics present in the context of the programming and site visit.
- Determine what specific information you want to gather during your site visit. Possible questions to consider are noted below and should be based on filling gaps in existing information to benefit current and future programming. Most of these questions are designed to be answered through observation and discussions between the site visit team and IPs.

Learning to inform design and implementation

- Which types of GBV are commonly faced by different groups (e.g., women, adolescent girls, people of diverse SOGIESC, men, and boys)?
- Which social conditions — local, regional, and global — contribute to the tolerance and perpetration of GBV in this community? What are the risk and protective factors that different groups face?[c]
- What expertise and interventions already exist in the community to address GBV? What expertise or interventions are still needed?
- What new programming opportunities are there where communities or organizations have identified needs?
- Do IPs and other stakeholders have appropriate resources to respond effectively?

> GBV OCCURS IN EVERY CONTEXT IN THE WORLD; **THEREFORE, SEEKING INFORMATION ON ITS EXISTENCE IN A GIVEN COMMUNITY IS NOT A VALID PURPOSE FOR A SITE VISIT.**

However, the site visit team may wish to discuss with IP staff the trends and dynamics of GBV as it occurs in the operating context. The information gained during this discussion should supplement (not replace) information gleaned from existing resources, such as gender analyses. These questions should never be asked of community members or program participants.

[c.] Risk factors are conditions or attributes that increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing violence. Protective factors are conditions or attributes that lower the likelihood. These factors occur at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.

- What resources are needed to reach people with specific marginalized identities (e.g., persons with disabilities who might need accommodations that cost money)?
- What do program staff and participants say is working well? What are the factors of success? What do staff and participants say they wish for to improve their ability to achieve successful outcomes?
- What resources, funding, or tools do program staff lack? What do they say they need? Is additional training, coaching, or mentoring needed? Is it possible for USAID to meet these needs?
- What opportunities exist for further integration of GBV prevention, mitigation, and response into programming?

GBV program monitoring

- Is the GBV activity being implemented in accordance with the work plan, using a survivor-centered approach, and meeting other minimum standards, including those discussed in USAID's forthcoming *Foundational Elements for Gender-Based Violence Programming in Development?*
- Are data (particularly survivor data) being collected, stored, analyzed, and shared in ways that comply with informed consent and data protection and information-sharing protocols? Have staff been adequately and appropriately trained on collecting and storing survivor-related data?

Cross-sectoral GBV risk mitigation monitoring

- How are programs identifying, monitoring, and mitigating GBV risks and unintended consequences associated with their activities?
- Have staff received essential training on SEA, basic GBV concepts, referral networks, and survivor-centered responses to disclosures?

Compliance with U.S. Government and Agency requirements and the terms of the award

- Is the program adhering to the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE) Act?[11]
- Is the program adhering to Agency requirements, such as ADS Chapter 205 Integrating Gender Equality & Female Empowerment in USAID's Program Cycle[12] and ADS Chapter 113 Preventing and Addressing Sexual Misconduct?[13]

Pause and Reflect

Once you have identified what information you would like to gather from your site visit, ask yourself:

- What risks are associated with collecting this information during a site visit?
- Are there safer alternatives to site visits for gathering this information?
- How, if at all, will the information gathered benefit participating individuals and communities?

If there are significant risks to collecting this information, or the risks outweigh the benefits to participants and communities, conducting a site visit is not justified. Consider ways to reduce the risks of the visit, such as visiting an IP office rather than an activity site or conducting a remote site visit.

Resources for adapting site visits can be found in the Guide for Adopting Remote Monitoring Approaches During COVID-19.

Identify the site visit team.

Carefully select members of the site visit team according to the purpose and context of the visit.

- The site visit team should be composed of individuals with:
  - Training on or knowledge of the dynamics and consequences of GBV; survivor-centered, participatory, and do-no-harm approaches; and appropriate responses to disclosures of violence[d, e]
  - Context expertise and technical expertise
  - Supportive attitudes and values toward women, girls, and GBV survivors, including those who experience overlapping forms of oppression and marginalization
  - Identities and traits that reflect those of program participants and communities (e.g., language, gender, age, ethnicity)
- Assess whether the USAID Mission has the expertise needed to achieve the purpose of the visit or whether short-term technical assistance is required. Consider involving the Mission's Gender Advisor or a local GBV expert. If needed, inquire about additional support available from USAID/Washington or other Missions through the Agency's gender architecture.
- Consider which members of the team should physically visit the site and which members might be able to support remotely.

Plan the visit.

Once the purpose and team have been identified, focus on developing methods and tools, identifying key stakeholders and participants, selecting sites, and scheduling the visit. USAID should engage IPs as early as possible in this process so that decision-making is transparent and collaborative.

- Discussions and meetings between USAID and IPs should cover:
  - The purpose of the site visit, including how the information gathered will be used
  - Needs or requests from IPs to be included in the site visit (e.g., a site visit that includes GBV capacity-strengthening opportunities that are self-identified by partners and funded by USAID)
  - Which IP staff members should be involved in the site visit and whether program participants, partner organizations, or community members should be involved. Are interpreters required?
  - Methods and tools needed for the site visit, including informed consent protocols (especially for photos and videography) and mechanisms to communicate the results of the visit to IPs and communities
  - Cultural norms of engagement during the planning and facilitation of a visit, and possible risks of the site visit to survivors, program participants and staff, communities, and the site visit team

> IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS SHOULD ALSO DISCUSS THESE POINTS WITH ANY PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS WHO MAY BE INVOLVED IN THE VISIT.

- When developing site visit methods and tools:
  - USAID should consult context and technical experts — including local women's organizations; human rights groups; organizations representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people and those of other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQI+); and other relevant stakeholders — on what types of questions are safe and acceptable.
  - Never plan to seek out or speak directly with survivors, but instead recognize that anyone you speak with may be a survivor. Arrange for site visit teams to have access to referral networks and require them to be trained on safe and ethical responses to disclosures.

[d.] Training on responding to disclosures of violence is particularly important for site visit team members who will be engaging with communities and program participants on GBV.

[e.] USAID staff can use GBV trainings available through USAID University

- Never request access to confidential data on survivors and program participants.

- Consider reducing risks of harm to program participants or community members by replacing sensitive questions that ask them directly about GBV with questions that measure community perceptions of a program or proxies for prevention, mitigation, and response, such as well-being or safety.

- Identify how to engage marginalized groups in ways that do not stigmatize or cause harm. Hold conversations in safe, private locations; use women interviewers and translators when speaking with women and girls; establish robust informed consent protocols; and recognize that some individuals may not want to be identified as part of a certain group (e.g., religious, ethnic, or sexual orientation) and that it may not be safe for them to do so.[14]

- When selecting sites to visit:

  - Prioritize confidentiality and the physical and emotional needs of survivors. Exercise caution if visiting locations where survivors are receiving services or locations considered safe spaces.[g] Refrain from unannounced or surprise visits.

Ensure that informed consent is received from program participants before the visit or consider visiting when the site is closed to meet with staff.

Considerations for Engaging Children

Children often face additional vulnerabilities and risks during information-gathering activities. Site visit teams must plan accordingly by:

- Exploring how objectives of the site visit can be met without directly speaking to children, especially about sensitive subjects

- Developing child-friendly informed consent/assent[f] processes if speaking with children

- Obtaining informed consent from a caregiver or guardian for children who provide informed assent

For additional resources and considerations see USAID's Child Safeguarding Toolkit.

Appreciative Methods and Tools for Site Visits

Appreciative inquiry is a participatory approach that focuses on identifying what has worked well in programs and what might be needed to support more success. This approach is sensitive to the need to do no harm because it involves asking questions that help identify personal and organizational strengths and successes. It does not ignore problems and barriers, but it probes challenges within a context of potential for change. Appreciative inquiry values diverse perspectives, knowledge, and ways of communicating, learning, and processing information.[15, 16]

The following questions for program participants illustrate this approach. These examples can also be adapted for program staff.

- What has been a highlight of your participation in this program? Is there anything you feel proud of that you would like to share regarding how your participation in this program helped you accomplish something?

- Would you like to share some things this program helped you do that led to this success or accomplishment?

- What could this program do to help you (or others) achieve more of your personal or professional goals?

[f.] *Assent* refers to the expressed willingness to participate (either verbal or written) by a child who is too young to provide legal consent.

[g.] Safe spaces are places that promote physical and emotional safety; freedom of expression; and access to knowledge, skills, and resources. In GBV programming, safe spaces for women and girls often serve as an entry point to a variety of confidential support services.

DURING A SITE VISIT

Prioritize safe, transparent, and collaborative engagement.

Focus on building safe and open spaces for collaboration grounded in trust.

- Assume that staff, program participants, community members, and the site visit team include survivors of GBV, whether they have identified as survivors or not.
- IPs should enable program participants, staff, and communities to choose the terms of their engagement through informed consent processes that:
  - Clearly state the purpose of the visit and the potential risks and benefits of engagement
  - Address power differentials[h] by presenting options, emphasizing that participation is not mandatory, and encouraging the expression of opinions, questions, and concerns
- Demonstrate respect, humility, and the desire to listen and learn. Engage in active listening.
- Provide opportunities for IPs to identify areas where they hope to strengthen GBV programming capacity, and to brainstorm how USAID could be responsive in these areas (e.g., through funding a training). Focus on realistic possibilities for support and do not overpromise.
- Build in time for coaching or mentoring based on expressed or assessed needs.

Redirect discussions if identifying information is being shared.

If project staff share identifying information, politely interrupt and let them know that this information should not be shared because it breaches the confidentiality of survivors and is not in line with a survivor-centered approach.

Responding to Reports of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse during a Site Visit

USAID staff are required to report allegations of sexual exploitation or abuse of the beneficiaries of USAID assistance to the Office of Inspector General at +1 (202) 712-1150 or ig.hotline@usaid.gov.

In addition, USAID staff are strongly encouraged to notify the cognizant AO/CO as soon as they become aware of the allegations.

USAID expects its staff and partners to protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals involved in SEA incidents. The Agency's PSEA policy clearly articulates the importance of appropriately safeguarding any personally identifiable information obtained during the reporting process, which should only be shared on a strict need-to-know basis.

It is USAID's general policy to encourage partners not to share the personally identifiable information (PII) related to survivors, as this could pose significant risks to their safety and security and is not necessary for Agency purposes. In the case of alleged perpetrators, USAID for the most part does not require PII.

Source: USAID. Protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) frequently asked questions. Washington (DC): USAID; 2020. Available from: https://www.usaid.gov/PreventingSexualMisconduct/Partners/PSEA/FAQs.

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h. Power differentials are the greater power and influence certain groups have over others, including those between USAID staff and IPs, and among IPs, program participants, and communities.

Responding to Disclosures of GBV

If an individual staff member, community member, or program participant decides to share their personal experience of GBV during a site visit:

Do	Don't
✓ Stay calm	✗ Ignore the person or change the subject abruptly
✓ Treat the information shared confidentially	✗ Write anything down, take photos, record the conversation on your phone or other device, or inform others
✓ Listen more than you speak	
✓ Offer culturally appropriate comfort and support	✗ Ask questions about what happened
✓ Manage expectations of your role	✗ Doubt or contradict what they tell you
✓ Offer to link the individual to available support services if they are not already connected and would like to be connected	✗ Make false promises or offer your advice or opinions
✓ Respect the rights of the person to make their own decisions	✗ Assume you know what the person wants or needs

Adapted from: Inter-Agency Standing Committee. How to support survivors of gender-based violence when a GBV actor is not available in your area. A step-by-step pocket guide for humanitarian practitioners. Geneva: IASC; 2015. Available from: https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/resources/gbv-pocket-guide.

Document observations and information in line with survivor-centered, do-no-harm, and participatory approaches.

When seeking out and documenting stories that demonstrate an activity's success, keep in mind the following:

- Survivors have no obligation to disclose their story, and USAID or IPs should never encourage them to do so.

- Individuals who speak out about violence may face risk of retaliation or harm.

- Direct service providers can often provide meaningful information and perspectives that allow teams to avoid speaking directly with program participants about sensitive subjects.

- Inviting participant narratives should empower participants to share their experiences in the ways that feel most comfortable to them.

- Documenting participants' explicit informed consent is obligatory when interviewing, photographing, or filming anyone about GBV.

- Participants should understand how the information will be used and shared beyond the interaction during the site visit.

- Photos or videos taken from a distance or that blur faces can help protect individuals' privacy and confidentiality.

AFTER A SITE VISIT

Solicit feedback from IPs, program participants, and other parties involved.

- Aim to establish a variety of opportunities and mechanisms for feedback, including through anonymous channels.

- Respond to any concerns raised and preserve feedback that may inform future site visits.

Summarize and share learning and recommendations.

- Draft and submit reports that:

    - Appreciate strengths and successes

    - Protect confidentiality

    - Recognize the efforts and contributions of everyone involved in the site visit

    - Outline concrete actions to strengthen GBV interventions

- Thank the host organization and be prepared to provide supportive feedback about your observations.

Follow through on requests and identified needs for support.

- Establish a specific timeline or plan for following up on actions to assess whether the information gleaned from the site visit is making a positive and sustainable impact and, at a minimum, continues to follow the do-no-harm approach.

- Follow up with concrete actions to address any self-identified or assessed needs for support among IPs.

Resources

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Acknowledgments

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4 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The inter-agency minimum standards for gender-based violence in emergencies programming. Washington (DC): UNFPA; 2019. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/minimum-standards.

5 World Health Organization (WHO). Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies. Geneva: WHO; 2007. Available from: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241595681.

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The goal of the Collective Action to Reduce Gender-Based Violence (CARE-GBV) activity is to strengthen USAID's collective prevention and response, or "collective action" in gender-based violence (GBV) development programming across USAID. For more information about CARE-GBV, click here.

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