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This practical guideline is a component of the ‘[*Exploring GESI Change: qualKit*](https://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au/toolkit/).’ It is designed to support teams in the development of protocols when dealing with sensitive content in interviews and focus groups.

Civil society organisations are invited to adapt and use these tools as part of their ongoing learning agendas. We recommend including ‘Adapted from MacArthur & Grant, 2021’ in any documentation.

The *‘*[*Exploring GESI Change: qualKit*](https://waterforwomen.uts.edu.au/toolkit/)*’* digital toolkit hosts a curated set of qualitative monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) tools designed for gender equality, and social inclusion (GESI) programs and is supported by the Australian Government’s [Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/index.aspx).

**Recommended Citation:** MacArthur, J. & Grant, M. (2021). *Exploring GESI Change: qualKit*: Qualitative Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Outcomes in WASH – Digital Toolkit. Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

**Strategies for Do-no-harm in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)**

Guideline

# Strategies for Do-no-harm in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

All work within the Water for Women fund has a specific mandate to ensure that no harm occurs within the process of designing, delivering, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL).

A strong do-no-harm strategy is centred on “distress protocols” for research participants and researchers. Distress protocols are strategies that MEL teams can take if any participants or researchers become distressed during the research.

Distress is an emotional and often physical response to concepts or conversations that are difficult or worrying. It can happen when thinking about past difficult experiences, or about one’s current state or even about a lack of agency to change one’s future. Some people become quiet, some cry, or look physically overwhelmed, and some even get angry. Distress can happen for both participants and researchers.

Teams should follow these three steps:

1. **Preparation and planning -** Teams should tailor “distress protocols” and collect local contact information for social and health support services (such as women’s shelters and gender-based violence support networks). Information about support/referral services and networks should be included on documentation that is given to all researcher participants, ideally in paper form.
2. **Training** - All members of research teams should be sensitised about power and risk issues relating to women, children and people from marginalised groups, trained on the protocols, and have time for discussion.
3. **Follow-up** - The lead researcher should track any instances of distress and ensure that the proper follow up has been completed.

The following strategies identify steps to be taken in the case of safety concerns or distress. The protocols have been adapted from Draucker, Martsolf & Poole (2009). The strategies empower participants to determine how they wish to proceed, as much is appropriate.

## Participant Distress Protocol

The following protocol should be used in all engagements with participants.

* The research team has a duty of reporting to local police or child protection services if violence or abuse involves a child.
* The research team can only encourage women and men to report violence or abuse regarding an adult to a relevant support agency or the police.
* If the abuse is related to an individual with decreased capacity or mental illness, the team will follow the same protocol as for a child.

In setting up all engagement, researchers should:

* **Provide an information sheet to participants.** Prior to the commencement of any interview, activity or focus group, information regarding the services available should it be required will be provided to all prospective and actual study participants. It should be in the local language and be adapted for low level literacy contexts. This could even include pictures.
* **Ensure participants understand the risks and benefits.** The researcher and/or research team will provide sufficient information regarding the risks and benefits of the research so that individuals may freely accept or decline participation. This information will be made available to the participant prior to the interview commencing. An additional notification of this information will also be given to those participants should they become distressed during the actual study.

These are five possible distress or safety concerns that could arise during or after interviews and focus groups based on previous experiences with similar studies. Multiple concerns may surface at a single time. It should be noted that both men and women may experience distress.

1. Disclosure of violence or conflict
2. Disclosure of violence or abuse of a child (under 18)
3. Feelings of incompetence or inadequacy
4. Feelings of grief or anger
5. Raised consciousness of ongoing hardships
6. Raised consciousness of inequalities
7. Increased tension or conflict in home or workplace
8. Discontentment with current gender dynamics in home or workplace

→ If a participant experiences distress during the engagement, researchers should follow Table 1.

→ If a participant experiences distress after the research and contacts the team, researchers should follow Table 2.

## Researcher Distress and Safety Protocol

The following protocol will be put in place should a researcher become distressed or be at risk during field work and require emergency, additional or on-going assistance. A range of services could be offered depending on the circumstances.

There are pre-identified three safety and distress concerns for the research team as follow:

1. Threat or physical danger
2. Physical illness or accident
3. Feelings of anxiety or severe stress

To mitigate these risks, the research team should have regular team debrief meetings. These meetings will include discussions about mental health and mitigation of any risks. Each member of the research team should carry an emergency contact list with nearby approved hospitals and vehicles should all have a basic first aid kit.

→ If researchers experience distress during the engagement, follow Table 3.

## Further reading

Draucker C B, Martsolf D S and Poole C (2009) Developing Distress Protocols for research on Sensitive Topics. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 23 (5) pp 343-350)

House, S., Ferron, S., Sommer, M., and Cavill, S., 2014. Violence, Gender & WASH. A Practitioner’s Toolkit - Making water, sanitation and hygiene safer through improved programming and services. London: WaterAid/ SHARE.

IWDA, 2018. Do no harm toolkit: integrating the elimination of violence against women into women’s economic empowerment programs. Melbourne, Australia: IWDA. <https://iwda.org.au/resource/do-no-harm-toolkit/>

SNV, 2019. SNV’s approach to ‘Do No Harm’: Bhutan [Practice Brief]. The Hague: SNV

## Table 1. Participant Distress During Engagement – Distress Protocol

Adapted from Draucker, Martsolf & Poole (2009).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant Concern or Distress | | Strategy 1 🡪 | Evaluate 🡪 | Strategy 2 🡪 | Evaluate |
| Disclosure of violence (adult) | A participant indicates a child experienced or is at risk of violence or any other illegal treatment | Pause the discussion/interview.  Remove participant from discussion and accompany to quiet area for the following questions: Tell me what thoughts you are having? Tell me what you are feeling right now? Do you feel you are able to go on about your day? Do you feel safe? Do you have someone you can talk to/someone who can support you?  Inform the participant that the research team will need to contact the local police **OR** child protection committee. | If participant feels able to carry on, resume interview/discussion.  If participant is unable to carry on, stop the discussion/ interview. | n/a | Encourage the participant to call either if he/she experiences increased distress in the hours/days following the focus group  OR  Encourage participant to seek help through a local support network |
| Disclosure of violence (adult) | A participant indicates they have (or someone in their home/community has) experienced gender-based violence or any other illegal treatment  OR  A participant indicates that they or someone in their home or community is at risk of gender-based violence or any other illegal treatment | Pause the discussion/interview.  Remove participant from discussion and accompany to quiet area for the following questions: Tell me what thoughts you are having? Tell me what you are feeling right now? Do you feel you are able to go on about your day? Do you feel safe? Do you have someone you can talk to/someone who can support you?  Encourage the participant to contact their local support network **OR** offer, with participant consent, for a member of the research team to do so. | If participant feels able to carry on, resume interview/discussion.  If participant is unable to carry on, stop the discussion/ interview. | n/a | Encourage the participant to call either if he/she experiences increased distress in the hours/days following the focus group  OR  Encourage participant to seek help through a local support network |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant Concern or Distress | | Strategy 1 🡪 | Evaluate 🡪 | Strategy 2 🡪 | Evaluate |
| Feelings of incompetence or inadequacy | A participant indicates they are experiencing a high level of stress or emotional distress **OR**  Exhibit behaviours suggestive that the discussion/interview is too stressful such as uncontrolled crying, shaking etc | Pause the discussion/Interview.  *[If activity is in a group, find a separate place to]* ask the following questions: Tell me what thoughts you are having? Tell me what you are feeling right now? Do you feel you are able to go on about your day? Do you feel safe? Do you have someone you can talk to/someone who can support you? | If participant feels able to and wants to carry on, resume interview/discussion.  If participant is unable to carry on, move to Strategy 2 | Remove participant from discussion and accompany to quiet area or discontinue interview.  Encourage the participant to contact their local support network **OR** offer, with participant consent, for a member of the research team to do so | Encourage the participant to call either if he/she experiences increased distress in the hours/days following the focus group  OR  Encourage participant to seek help through a local support network |
| Feelings of grief or anger |
| Raised consciousness of ongoing hardships |
| Raised consciousness of inequalities |

## Table 2. Participant Distress After Engagement – Distress Protocol

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant Concern or Distress | | Strategy 1  CSO Support | Strategy 2  Stakeholders | Strategy 3  Support organizations |
| Increased tension or conflict in the home, workplace or community | A boundary actor or CSO staff member observes possible discontentment or GBV  OR  A participant calls a stakeholder, the CSO or the GBV support agency to report discontentment, conflict or harm. | CSO conducts ongoing support and mentorship to stakeholders for their own support and for stakeholders to provide support to beneficiaries. | Stakeholders monitor individuals within their community or workplace who have flagged concerns both during the data collection or have been identified as at risk through the research. | Organizations provide support for individuals to access justice and further support services. These services can include counselling, safe accommodation, medical treatment, and legal support. |
| Discontentment with current gender dynamics | CSOs support stakeholders on vision of change strategies to engage with discontentment in a safe and incremental manner. | Stakeholders are supported to create informal household or workplace level visions of change in a safe and incremental manner. | Organizations provide support for individuals to and community groups are express interest to change gender dynamics in a safe and incremental manner. |

## Table 3. Researcher Distress Protocol

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| --- | --- |
| Research Concern or Distress | Strategies |
| Threat or physical danger | Each member of research team carries an emergency contact list  Follow all international travel advisories  Avoid areas with risk as per international guidelines  Coordinate with national CSO headquarters and travel advisories  Inform relevant project staff member before and after all household visits |
| Physical illness or accident | Travel only in enclosed vehicles with seatbelts during daylight  Each vehicle will care a first aid kit  Ensure updated vaccines  Drink bottled water and food from reputable restaurants  Use bug repellent and nets |
| Feelings of anxiety or severe stress | Conduct ongoing debriefs with research team and supervision  Encourage meditation and prayer for team if applicable  Avoid research on weekends |