

## Six golden principles for interviewing women who may have experienced violence

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Collecting quality and reliable data on violence against women (VAW) through special surveys is crucial if we want to understand and end this scourge.

But collecting accurate data is also very challenging because surveys, regardless of how well the method and tools are designed, do not measure the actual number of women who have been abused, but rather the number of women who are willing and able to disclose abuse. And surveys always do miss the most severe cases; including those institutionalized, locked up, too scared to talk or murdered.

Despite the challenges, we need accurate data because reliable data and statistics are essential in convincing governments and policy-makers to take the issue of violence against women seriously, and to craft better policy and legislation aimed at addressing it. Further, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, with the SDGs indicators, has made monitoring of VAW a must, not a choice. There are still enormous gaps in such statistics, as well as in national and regional capacities to properly collect data on VAW.

Now, in the Asia-Pacific region this need is being addressed by kNOwVAWdata, a 3.5-year initiative launched in August 2016 and supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Asia-Pacific Regional Office and the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Besides proper methods and tools, by far the most important factor in getting reliable stories from survivors through surveys is the skill and training of the interviewer. The importance of a sound and ethical approach for measuring and understanding violence against women is well recognized. However, the value of the skills and training of interviewers is not always fully appreciated.

The stories of survivors, particularly women who have suffered from intimate partner violence, are both a burden and a gift. It can be a burden for the interviewer, because hearing painful stories often makes the interviewer feel responsible for the woman's wellbeing, or makes her feel helpless for not being able to save the woman, or it causes the interviewer to relive her own past experiences of violence. But it can also be seen as an exchange of gifts: the interviewer receives a woman's most painful secrets, in exchange for lending a listening ear, an empathetic heart and making the woman realize that she is worthy and her story is valuable. If an interviewer reaches this level, she can be a truly effective interviewer. This is a very empowering and often life changing experience for interviewers, while many interviewed women feel relief after having told their stories, often for the very first time.

*"I felt empowered listening to women's stories. Especially, feeling trusted to listen to their stories of hardship and violence was empowering. Their tears run, and mine run too, and their voices break. But I felt overjoyed seeing women's faces brighten with relief from sharing the burden of violence and abuse."  
(kNOwVAWdata interviewer, Mongolia)*

# Six golden principles of effective interviewing

## 1 EMPATHY & MATURITY

It is crucial that the interviewer – who will be female – is able to engage with people from different backgrounds with empathy and without judgment. The interviewer must have the ability to build rapport and to deal with sensitive issues. Many women have never disclosed their experiences to anyone before, so the aim is to make women feel safe, valued and supported.

## 2 BEING SENSITIZED

Training for interviewers must include a basic understanding of gender-based violence, its dynamics and causes, and its impact on the health and well-being of women and children. With a deeper understanding of these issues, she will be able to confront and get rid of her own biases and prejudices (such as victim blaming), which is essential to build a good rapport during the interview and get a full and honest disclosure.

## 3 CONFIDENTIALITY & SAFETY

Interviewers must be trained to respect the women's privacy, and to keep information gathered confidential. A woman is often afraid to speak out because of the fear of more violence if her spouse or intimate partner finds out that she has been participating in the survey. Utmost care must be taken that nobody in the household or community finds out about the topic of interest. Interviewers will need to know how to explain the survey (e.g. as a survey on 'women's health and life experiences') without compromising the woman's or her own safety.

## 4 MINIMIZING DISTRESS & PROVIDING SUPPORT INFO

Interviewers should develop skills to be aware of possible distress during the interview and know how to respond if a woman withdraws into herself, or if she gets upset. Interviewers should be empathetic and supportive, but they cannot and should not take on the role of counsellor. At the end of the interview, interviewers must provide all respondents with a list of services and possible providers of support in the wider community. Interviewers should also be trained to refer women who are in danger, who request assistance, or who otherwise need urgent help, to available local services and sources of support.

## 5 REACHING THE UNREACHABLE

Occasionally, a woman selected to be interviewed will prove difficult to track down, may be reluctant to participate, or it may be hard to find privacy to conduct the interview. A selected woman cannot simply be replaced by another woman and every effort should be made to locate her and talk to her in private. We have noticed many times that the women who are the hardest to find or hardest to interview are most likely to be victims/survivors of violence.

## 6 TAKING CARE OF THE INTERVIEWER'S OWN WELL-BEING

Interviewers are in the field because they care about women and about better data. Better data is collected by people who are emotionally well and who know how to take care of themselves. Having come to terms with their own possible experience of violence and understanding how to care for their own well-being is therefore also part of the training. Opportunities for relaxation, discharging, debriefing and counselling during the field work are critical.

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