

The Safe and Ethical Conduct of Violence Research



Guidance for Researchers and Research Staff

Purpose

This document provides a brief overview of the policies and best practices for ensuring the safe and ethical conduct of violence¹ research at IPA. It also articulates the specific roles and responsibilities of IPA and its academic partners with respect to violence research. It is intended for principal investigators and research staff at IPA who are already familiar with the ethics of human subjects research, but are interested in more specific guidance related to the collection of violence data.

Background

In many ways, the ethics of violence research is the same as that which guides all research with human subjects: researchers should strive to respect the autonomy of all participants, maximizing potential benefits of participation and minimizing risks while ensuring that both are accrued equitably and respect vulnerable populations. However, due to the traumatic and potentially threatening nature of the subject matter, the weight of each ethical deliberation within the project is heightened. Indeed, it is by no means hyperbole to suggest that if handled improperly, the safety and even the lives of respondents and interviewers may be at risk.

Therefore, it is essential that some special precautions be taken to minimize the risk for harm. In particular, we've identified seven key considerations that all researchers should review before embarking on violence research:

- **Informed consent.** As is the case for all human subjects research the informed consent of all participants is essential. However, there is a debate among researchers about whether the consent language should explicitly acknowledge that the study will include questions about violence. The WHO advises subjects that “some of the topics discussed may be personal and difficult to talk about” but waits until the violence module to specifically address violence.
- **Ensuring participant safety.** Care should be taken to ensure that participants do not suffer any repercussions as a result of their participation in violence research. This is

¹ Note for the purposes of this document, the working definition of violence is to include: neglect, emotional, sexual and physical violence against girls and boys under 18 years old, women, men and vulnerable groups. Economic abuse is not included for the purposes of this document as constructs used to measure this include financial decision-making or other related questions which do not need to follow this guidance given they are less sensitive.

generally done by interviewing only one subject per household and not informing the community that the research includes questions on violence.

- **Protecting privacy and confidentiality.** In addition to normal concerns about privacy, protecting a participant's confidentiality in violence research also means ensuring their safety from reprisal. A participant's privacy should be maintained before, during, and after their interview.
- **Minimizing participant distress.** Due to the sensitive subject matter, it is possible that the interview itself can provoke a powerful emotional response among participants. Where possible, every attempt should be made to minimize participant distress; however, interviewers should also be trained to be sensitive to respondent's experiences and recognize signs of distress and take appropriate steps to support the respondent and/or terminate the interview.
- **Mandatory reporting of violence.** Some settings have laws governing mandatory reporting of suspected cases of violence to local authorities or social service agencies. In some settings, researchers are a protected class and are therefore exempt, but in others they are not. Regardless, researchers should be aware of the legal environment in their setting prior to embarking on a study.
- **Referrals for care and support.** Researchers have an ethical obligation to refer all participants to appropriate services for victims of violence or abuse regardless of whether they report experiencing violence (referring everyone also helps to protect privacy).
- **Protecting field staff.** An often overlooked aspect of violence research is the threat to the interviewer and research team themselves to violence or intimidation as a result of their study. A safety plan should be devised in advance to quickly extricate field teams from volatile situations.

Research Checklist

In consultation with IPA's IRB as well as practitioners and experts in the field of gender-based violence, we have assembled the following check list of items for researchers to consider before launching an violence-related data collection activity.

Note: Adapted from the IRC's Considerations for Conducting Safe and Ethical Violence Research

Study Design and Preparation

- ✓ Research mandatory reporting laws² in your setting and discuss with research team and program staff implications of any laws, and consider these requirements when designing the survey.
- ✓ Draft a safety plan detailing how you will protect interviewers and respondents in the case of immediate violence.

² If collecting **direct, identifiable information** about the respondent (i.e. does your husband hit you? Do you hit your wife?) reporting requirements apply and must be known and implemented in full, because researchers must comply with local law whenever collecting these kinds of questions. IPA IRB may not accept researcher statement that there is no local law on this; rather, we may require confirmation from a local expert / legal counsel. If collecting **indirect, non-identifiable information** about the respondent (i.e. list randomization methods, social acceptability, etc) no reporting requirement because the researchers do not know exactly who is doing these activities

- ✓ Identify referral networks and draft a referral plan. All participants should receive referral information regardless of whether they report violence or distress. If referral information is passed in physical documentation like a business card, all materials should be covert.
- ✓ Establish community or youth advisory boards to make recommendations on acceptability and safety of asking sensitive questions, how to present study to community, etc. if appropriate and feasible.
- ✓ Communicate study to community framed as a general topic to the non-participants in the community (i.e., a survey on intimate partner violence is framed as a study on women's health).
- ✓ Submit to local IRB if available.
- ✓ Submit to IPA IRB or academic IRB of similar standing.

Piloting and Training

- ✓ If you conduct focus group discussions or other qualitative interviews, all tapes should be erased immediately after transcription.
- ✓ Train enumerators to properly ask sensitive questions about violence and how to respond in the case of distress and/or violence.

Administering Surveys

- ✓ Informed consent³ is obtained in all cases.
- ✓ Interviews are conducted in a private setting⁴.
- ✓ Self-response questionnaires (literate populations) and/or Audio Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (ACASI) can be useful for sensitive portions of the interview.
- ✓ Men and women within the same household are not asked about experience of violence for intimate partner violence research.
- ✓ Enumerators and participants are gender-matched.
- ✓ Enumerators do not blame or stigmatize participants for their responses.
- ✓ Enumerators change questions to non-sensitive subjects if the survey is interrupted and/or they notice someone else listening in (can use dummy questionnaires if necessary).
- ✓ All questions are asked in a supportive and non-judgmental manner.
- ✓ Participants are reminded they can stop the questionnaire or skip questions throughout the survey. Prompts regarding the ability to stop or skip questions are given before questions about sensitive behaviors.
- ✓ Enumerators are trained to recognize and deal with a respondent's distress during the interview.
- ✓ End the interview on a positive note that emphasizes a woman's strengths.

Data Storage and Security

- ✓ All standard data security procedures are followed such as encrypting any PII and creating unique identifying codes for each participant.
- ✓ All PII data are destroyed at the conclusion of the project as specified by the IRB.

³ Includes assent of minors.

⁴ It is especially important for interviews to be individually private rather than private at the household level; each partner should not be able to hear or know the content of the other's interview.

Responsibilities

During the Study:

IPA Country Program Responsibilities:

- Systematically refer survivors of abuse/violence identified during the research and in need of assistance to appropriate services (e.g. medical and MHPSS);
- Ensure follow-up for these survivors;
- Monitor the protocol implementation at field level to ensure ethics of the study are maintained;
- Ensure the confidentiality and protection of data
- Systematically inform country offices and IRBs of any change or amendment of the research protocol, methodology or tools;
- Provide guidance to the country office for the referral of survivors of violence and their follow-up;
- Remotely monitor the implementation and adherence to protocol, specifically focusing on ethical considerations of the study;
- Support country offices to ensure the confidentiality and protection of data

PI Responsibilities:

- Remotely monitor the implementation to ensure the protocol and methodology are respected

Protocol Violations

After IRB approval has been obtained and throughout study implementation, IPA and the PI hold final responsibility for ensuring the study is implemented according to the study protocol. In the event of a departure from the protocol, the PI is responsible for immediately informing the IRB, which may or may not require the study to be halted or for additional measures to be taken to prevent future issues from arising.

Any person involved in the study should contact the research advisor to raise concerns regarding adherence to the IRB protocol. The research advisor will discuss the issues with the country program, the PI and the technical units. The PI holds final responsibility to notify the IRB. **However, any person involved in the study can directly contact the IRB should they feel the principal investigator is not upholding this responsibility.**

Further Reading

- [1] Ellsberg M, and Heise L. Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists. Washington DC, United States: World Health Organization, PATH; 2005
- [2] Ellsberg M, Heise L. Bearing witness: Ethics in domestic violence research. Lancet. 2002;359(9317):1599-1604
- [3] Ellsberg M, Heise L, Peña R, Agurto S, Winkvist A. Researching domestic violence against women: Methodological and ethical considerations. Studies in Family Planning. 2001;32(1):1-16

- [4] Jewkes R, Watts C, Abrahams N, Penn-Kekana L, Garcia-Moreno C. Ethical and methodological issues in conducting research on gender-based violence in Southern Africa. *Reproductive Health Matters*. 2000;8(15):93-103
- [5] World Health Organization. *Putting Women's Safety First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women*. Geneva: Global Programme on Evidence for Health Policy, World Health Organization; 1999. Report No.: WHO/EIP/GPE/99.2