

**Designing and Implementing**

**Gender-Sensitive Focus Groups**

Globally there is a lack of gender-disaggregated data available, including on the status of women in politics and related topics. As we collect, analyze and use gender-specific data at the country level we will take steps toward addressing this issue as well as more effectively designing, implementing and evaluating programs.

Collecting high quality data that accurately reflects the perspectives and opinions of participants who are representative of their communities and countries requires both awareness of and attention to gender at every stage of the process, from program design and question development to the implementation and analysis of the findings. It is critical to have accurate information upon which to build a program. Often we assume familiarity with the barriers to women’s participation, and while we may have a general sense, we need to assess and analyze the situation so that program interventions address the root causes and not just symptoms.

This resource brings together research, expert knowledge and best practice examples from programs as a guide to incorporating gender into focus groups in ways that ensure meaningful and substantive results.

**Focus Group Basics**

Focus groups can be a cost effective way to gather qualitative information depending on the approach and methodology. Usually small in size, 7-12 people, focus groups are a moderator-lead discussion about the participants’ experiences, feelings and preferences about a topic.[[1]](#footnote-1) Groups are typically conducted in single-sex settings, often also disaggregated by age, socio-economic status and other relevant demographics, in order to better facilitate responses and capture differing views among genders and other populations. Focus groups can be used at any point during the research process. Early on, they can be useful when little is known about the subject of interest; focus groups can also be used to follow up and give depth to the results of other, quantitative research such as surveys or to measure changes in perceptions over time. It is important to note the range of approaches to focus groups, depending on time and resources. They can range from informal sessions to solicit feedback on a program or activity for internal use to more systematic focus group sessions that lead to a the publication of a formal focus group report. The scale and level of professionalism of the focus group should match the need for and intended uses of the data.

Focus groups are useful when:

* you are looking for a range of feelings that people have on a specific topic;
* the purpose is to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior or motivation;
* you need to hear the language people use to talk about an issue;
* you want to understand differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people (men and women, urban vs. rural citizens, etc.);
* you want to identify trends;
* you want to capture ideas that emerge from a group;
* you want to pilot test ideas, messages, materials and policies;
* you plan to inform the process ahead of developing a survey; and/or
* you need to shed light on survey data already collected.

They are not the best tool when:

* you need statistical projections (e.g., 30 percent describe politicians as “corrupt”);
* other methodologies can produce better quality information or the same quality for less;
* you want to educate the participants;
* you want people to come to consensus;
* the environment is emotionally charged, and a group discussion is likely to intensify a conflict;
* you can’t ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information;
* you are asking for sensitive information that should not be shared in a group;
* you don’t plan to use the results but want to give the appearance of listening; and/or
* you are in a politically repressed environment with very limited freedom of speech or association.

**Advantages and Limitations**

The advantages to using a focus group are many: 1) as previously mentioned, focus groups can be conducted for a low cost and yield results in a short timeframe; 2) the moderator can interact with the participants; 3) the responses to open-ended questions can provide great insight using the participants’ own words; 4) focus group participants can interact which may lead to discussion of concepts not otherwise covered by the researcher; 5) the format of focus groups allows for flexibility; 6) focus groups are one of the only research methods available for collecting data from those who are not literate; and 7) results from a focus group are fairly easy to understand.

There are some limitations to focus groups as well: 1) because of the small number of participants involved, the information obtained through focus groups cannot be generalized for the greater population; 2) the interaction of focus group participants with the moderator and each other can lead to skewed results as participants may seek to please the moderator with their responses or avoid raising opinions that appear to be in conflict with the general consensus; and 3) the moderator could bias results by asking leading questions that support a particular hypothesis or otherwise facilitating the conversation in a biased way.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cost can also be an issue, particularly when conducting a series of focus groups throughout the country, though focus groups are generally less expensive than surveys or other quantitative analysis.

**Program Design and Implementation**

The data collected in focus groups can be used to inform programs and to facilitate discussion on reforms with local stakeholders.

By excluding gender as a consideration in initial data collection, programs risk ignoring some of the fundamental dynamics of democratic accessibility and participation. It can also limit an organization’s ability to effectively integrate gender into future programming or to develop programming with a gender emphasis that responds to internal needs and priorities. Some of the practical gendered considerations to take into account during program development and implementation are:

* **Recruitment: Conducting single-sex sessions with women and men** is a basic first step towards inclusive, representative results, though in some cases it may be appropriate to conduct women only research. This will depend on the topics to be discussed, gender dynamics in the country, and goals of the research. Low participation rates of 20 or 30 percent by one gender or another can skew the findings significantly. If a program is having trouble attracting female participants, they may be facing barriers or obstacles to participation including the recruitment methods, the location and/or time of the focus groups, etc.

NOTE: There also may be age and ethnic subdivisions within gender that may impact participation.

* **Participants:** There is significant evidence that women speak much less in group settings when men are present.[[3]](#footnote-3) The gender composition of focus groups can compromise women’s ability to voice opinions on all issues, especially on matters related to gender. The best way to address this barrier is to hold separate focus groups for men and women.

Box A: An NDI Iraq focus group study in January 2008 explored the attitudes of Iraqi women in 13 cities and towns across the country. Groups were stratified by age, ethnicity, sect and religion.

* **Moderator:** It is valuable to select a moderator from the country and preferably from the same ethnic group in order to have the discussion lead in the participants’ language and by someone that will understand and pick up on cultural cues.Whether the moderators are male or female can greatly impact the levels of participation by women. It may be inappropriate or intimidating for women to attend a focus group led by a man, or affect the quality of their participation. The moderator’s awareness of gender concerns can also influence the way in which s/he facilitates and ultimately the quality of the findings. Gender considerations should always be included in the moderator guide, particularly ways for moderators to encourage equal participation by men and women by making space for women to speak if conducting mixed gender sessions. This is typically not the recommended approach when conducting focus groups on women’s participation issues, as it may preclude open discussion, limit either gender’s participation or otherwise skew the input of participants.

**Developing Questions**

The questions posed during focus groups serve as the agenda for the group discussion, and a good question will elicit substantial interaction among group members.[[4]](#footnote-4)Some questions have the potential to exclude certain points of view through false assumptions or narrow, inappropriate phrasing. Poorly designed questions can greatly jeopardize the quality of the results. Some guidelines for ensuring questions are gender-neutral and capture significant gender differences in opinion are:

* + Where possible, keep questions open so that men and women have the opportunity to interpret the question and answer accordingly. It is also important not to ask leading questions that may limit the range of responses or channel them in a particular direction. For example, rather than asking is collaboration an important leadership quality, ask participants for their opinion of what qualities a political leader should possess.
  + Regardless of the topic, take time to consider, based on country expertise, if men and women may interpret or understand a question or term differently based on different experiences.

**Box B**: In one NDI focus group program, moderators played recorded candidate messages for participants which were followed by discussion. When messages by female candidates were played women and politics always came up, leading to open and participant-initiated discussion of the gendered political realities that were meaningful to them.

* + Ask questions of both men and women to assess different perspectives, even on questions that deal more directly with women’s issues. For example, it is useful to ask both men and women a variety of questions, such as:
* What do you think are the most serious issues facing women that can be addressed by the government?
* Do you think it is important that you are able to choose specific candidates for office, or are you happy to vote for a party that you like and trust them to choose which candidates they send to the parliament? Why?
* What is an important quality or characteristic for a political leader to have?
* What is your opinion of women in political leadership?
  + Use country-specific knowledge to determine if certain questions about gender can be asked directly, or need to be approached indirectly. In some cases mentioning ‘women’ or ‘gender’ in a question could be too leading or direct or elicit a knee-jerk reaction, instead techniques can be used to tease out gendered differences more subtly (see Box B).
  + To best inform future programming with a relevant gender perspective, work to include questions that indirectly address possible barriers to, opportunities for, and perceptions of women’s political participation. For example, rather than only asking whether a participant voted in the past election, ask why or why not, to get more at potential challenges to participation. It can also be useful to ask questions about potential barriers without identifying them as such, for instance asking questions about work and home responsibilities and amount of free time, access to transportation, access to technology, etc.

**Data Analysis**

The way in which findings are interpreted and presented is as important as how the findings were collected. It is generally a best practice to record the focus groups so that the discussions can be transcribed word for word. This allows for easier analysis and serves as a written record of the session that can be useful for later research or to share with partner organizations. The most common analyses then involve both the transcript of the discussions and a shorter summary of the conclusions in a simple, narrative format. Generally you are looking for the consensus position amongst all of the groups, but it may also be important to highlight outliers or particular areas of disagreement.

It is also important to note if and how the responses of the participants differed by gender. For instance, men and women may have different responses to the question “What do you think about the ability of women to be active in politics?” but you should also look at how their responses to to the question “Please express your opinion on how the country has been developing recently” was the same or dissimilar. Certainly the replies to ‘What is your biggest problem or concern in daily life?” may vary based on a range of characteristics, gender among them, although the question was not specifically about gender. When analysing and developing focus group reports, it is important to highlight different perspectives among genders when drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

This gender analysis serves as a systematic attempt to identify key issues contributing to gender inequalities and possible solutions, so that they can be properly addressed. This work provides the basis for gender mainstreaming[[5]](#footnote-5) in future programs and helps determine whether specific programs or actions are needed for women in addition to these gender integrated activities.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**NDI Focus Group Examples**

Borovsky, Gabriella and Asma Ben Yahia, NDI, [*Women's Political Participation In Tunisia After The Revolution, Findings From Focus Groups In Tunisia*](http://www.ndi.org/node/18858) (2012) <http://www.ndi.org/files/womens-political-participation-Tunisia-FG-2012-ENG.pdf>.

Feeley, Rebecca and Driss Choukri, NDI, *Reach Out To Us: Findings From Focus Groups With Young Men And Women In The Democratic Republic Of Congo* (2012) <http://www.ndi.org/files/DRC-Reach-Out-To-Us-ENG.pdf>.

Cook, Traci D. and Dr. Leben Nelson Moro, NDI. *Governing South Sudan: Opinions of South Sudanese on a Government That Can Meet Citizen Expectations* (2012) <http://www.ndi.org/files/Focus-group-governing-South-Sudan.pdf>.

**Additional Resources**

NDI (2010) *Democracy and the Challenge of Change: A Guide to Increasing Women’s Political Participation*, Appendix 6: Focus Groups Advantages and Disadvantages, <http://www.ndi.org/files/Democracy_and_the_Challenge_of_Change.pdf>.

Nevitte, Neil and Melissa Estok, NDI. *Tracking Democracy: Benchmark Surveys for Diagnostics, Program Design and Evaluation* (2009), <http://www.ndi.org/files/Tracking_Democracy_Benchmark_Survey.pdf>.

Canavor, Victoria, NDI. From Proposal to Presentation: The Focus Group Process at NDI (2006).

Feld, Peter, NDI Focus Group Research Study (2006).

USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation (No. 10, 2011) *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips: Conducting Focus Group Interviews,* <http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadw110.pdf>.

1. USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation (1996) *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips: Conducting Focus Group Interviews.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N, and Rook, D. W. (2002) *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice.* Sage Publications: Thousand Oak, CA, pp 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., pg 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., pg 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gender mainstreaming is defined as “the integration of a consideration of gender and its impact on women and men into all aspects of a program.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. European Commission, EuropAid Cooperation Office (2004) *Toolkit on mainstreaming gender equality in EC development cooperation*, Brussels [↑](#footnote-ref-6)