



## Feminist Pocketbook

### TIP SHEET #5:

## Feminist approaches to building knowledge and evidence on GBV

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG.

This Tip Sheet is part of the COFEM Feminist Pocketbook. For access to the full Pocketbook, go to: [www.cofemsocialchange.org](http://www.cofemsocialchange.org).

*Tip Sheet 5 reviews the principles of feminist research and considers the implications for conducting research on gender-based violence (GBV). It also highlights the need for feminist analysis and approaches as the foundation for GBV prevention and response, and the centrality of local women's organisations and perspectives to the research process.*

### Key points

- Feminist gender-based violence (GBV) research approaches are action oriented and focus on the individual, social, systemic and institutional changes necessary to achieve gender equality. These approaches emphasise that gender inequality is the root cause of violence against women and girls and shapes every aspect of women and girls' lives. Feminist research seeks to transform this inequality.
- Feminist research on GBV is vital to ensure that GBV programming and policies are grounded in the realities of women and girls' experiences and lives, and in transformative approaches to preventing and responding to GBV.
- Feminist research privileges the experiences and perspectives of women and girls and challenges existing inequalities through the research process itself as well as through the analysis, generation and application of research findings.

### What is feminist research?

Feminist research is committed to transforming inequitable gender power dynamics and improving the lives of women and girls. It is action oriented and focuses on individual, social/systemic and institutional change to bring about gender equality.

Feminist research employs gender-power analyses as the basis for understanding and inquiring about the social world. Many different types of research approaches and methods can be used in feminist

research. However, all feminist research shares several core principles:

1. Feminist research methodologies acknowledge that the gender hierarchy between males and females shapes all aspects of our social world, and recognises that this hierarchy — a way of organising society — disempowers women. Thus, feminist research on GBV focuses on the ways in which power, status and resources are distributed unequally between women and men and the effects of this inequality on GBV.

2. Feminist research builds evidence with women and girls with the aim of transforming the inequitable systems and structures of patriarchy that oppress women. Feminist approaches use research as a tool to move towards this goal and end women's experiences of GBV.
3. Feminist research recognises the ways in which the dynamics of gender inequality intersect with other social inequalities including ethnicity, religion, age, disability, class and race.

### Why does a feminist perspective in GBV research matter?

Gender-based violence is driven by gender inequality.<sup>1</sup> Feminist-informed research on GBV aims to build knowledge and understanding about how gender discrimination shapes and affects women and girls' lives — and their experiences of GBV — so that interventions are grounded in analysis that supports the transformation of the patriarchal systems that oppress women.

Feminist research on GBV is critical to ensuring that GBV programming and policies are based in the realities of women and girls' experiences. Feminist-informed qualitative or narrative-based research has been useful, for example, in evaluating social change efforts around GBV — a process that is often non-linear — from the perspectives of women.

The demand for quantitative methods that were first developed for clinical settings and oriented towards statistical measurement of prevalence and specific outcomes has dominated research approaches. These methods do not typically reflect feminist research approaches and values. Without careful consideration in research design, prioritising quantitative data over qualitative and practice-based evidence can contribute — even unwittingly — to marginalising women's voices and, at worst, replicating patriarchal discourses about violence against women and girls. Conversely, feminist research strives to empower women and girls by challenging existing inequalities through the research process itself, as well as through the analysis, generation and application of research findings. Importantly, however, public health-based quantitative approaches based on collecting and analysing data and feminist approaches that prioritise generating knowledge and situating women's experiences within a wide structural analysis are not mutually exclusive. They can, and often do, overlap.

### Methods feminist researchers use

Feminist researchers use many different research methods. Central to each of these methods is the application of core feminist principles. Some methods that particularly support feminist principles and approaches include:

- Action/participatory research
- Comparative case studies
- Content analysis
- Ethnography
- Experiential
- Experimental
- Focus group discussions
- Geographic information systems (GIS)
- Institutional ethnography
- Meta-analysis
- Multisite research
- Needs assessments
- Oral history/life history
- Participant observation
- Survey

### What does feminist research look like in practice?

A feminist and women-centred approach should be applied both to (1) general research studies on GBV (such as prevalence studies or qualitative, exploratory research) and (2) monitoring and evaluation (M&E) research for GBV programs. By doing so, research is more likely to contribute to the overarching feminist principle of transforming patriarchal power structures to achieve gender equality and end GBV. The following steps are important parts of the research process for both general research studies and M&E from a feminist perspective.

1. **Define the research question:** When we research issues related to inequality, it is not possible to design a 'neutral' research study. Rather, the research project is shaped inherently by our commitment to transform gender inequality and we want to frame our research questions in ways that supports this goal.
2. **Partner with local women's organisations and civil society groups:** Feminist approaches to research consider power dynamics among researchers and other people involved in the study and support strategies to ensure both the research and study population can benefit.

<sup>1</sup> See Tip Sheet 2 for a more detailed discussion of GBV.

When local women's rights activists are involved directly from the start, the research team benefits from the activists' extensive knowledge of gender discrimination and GBV in the local context. Partnering with local women's organisations ensures that the voices of local women are represented in the research process.

- 3. Prioritise women's safety:** Ethics and safety are both the foundation and centre of feminist-oriented research on GBV. This includes ensuring to the greatest extent possible the safety and security of research participants (and other women in the community), as well as confidentiality, voluntary participation, transparency and accountability.
- 4. Evaluate and re-evaluate the study's progress:** Feminist research evaluates constantly the re-

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**Feminist research also recognises women as experts and co-producers of knowledge rather than simply as individuals from whom data is extracted.**

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search process in relation to the broader context. Through this vigilance, feminist research looks for issues or unintended consequences that might arise from the process of data collection.

## Characteristics of feminist research on GBV

*The following characteristics of feminist research help apply feminist principles into practice.*

### Women's leadership and the privileging of women's knowledge and experiences

In feminist research, women hold leadership roles in decision-making and are central in the co-production of knowledge. Feminist research on GBV takes a woman-centred perspective in relation to definitions of violence, and shapes research design, implementation and analysis from this standpoint. Feminist research recognises the expertise and practice-based knowledge of service providers and women's rights activists, and works with and alongside them to generate analysis and understanding.

### Intersectionality and multiple forms of oppression

Feminist research acknowledges the importance of an intersectional framework. Intersectionality situates women's experiences within an understanding of the ways in which multiple forms of oppression, such as gender inequality, heterosexism, racism, ableism, and class inequalities, influence exposure to, experience of, and access to services in relation to, violence. For example, if we are researching in an ethnically diverse context, it is a central concern to understand how GBV manifests for women of different ethnic groups, and what this means for them.<sup>2</sup>

### Challenging dominant 'positivist' frameworks

Feminist research challenges the existing positivist paradigms in research. Positivism is a philosophy of science based on the belief in the concept of absolute truths demonstrated by science. It insists that a scientific process is objective and not influenced by the social world. Positivism also considers certain

types of research (such as randomised controlled trials or 'RCTs') as objective, and values these methods over other types of research that might be considered more subjective, such as some types of qualitative research. Feminist research rejects this philosophy and understands the research process as embedded in and shaped by the social world. For example, the questions that a researcher asks, and the ways in which those questions are asked, are influenced inherently by the researcher's background, knowledge, experience, ideology and personal history. Feminist research also recognises women as experts and co-producers of knowledge rather than simply as individuals from whom data is extracted. Feminist research acknowledges that the subjects and objects of research are intertwined, and that personal experiences can be used to create scientifically sound knowledge.

### Power dynamics

Feminist research acknowledges that there are power dynamics in every research process. For example, the researcher (as the one who asks questions) holds power over the research participant (as the one who answers questions). Feminist research is therefore attuned to the power imbalances between the researcher and the study population. For example, white feminist researchers from high-income countries who conduct research with women in low- and middle-income countries must consider and address the implications of their position relative to the study population based on race, ethnicity, class and wealth, mobility, citizenship, education level, and other markers of social advantage.

<sup>2</sup> See Tip Sheet 1 for a more detailed discussion of intersectionality.

**5. Consider multiple ways to collect data:** Although public-health approaches tend to prioritise quantitative or statistically oriented research, qualitative methods can be particularly valuable to obtain a full picture from women about their lives. For M&E research, RCTs are considered the ‘gold standard’ of evaluation research. However, alternative M&E methods might sometimes be better suited to local capacity and resources.

**6. Consider what change we want to see:** Feminist M&E is clear about the types of change that the research aims to achieve. We ask: What is the main purpose of our evaluation? How will we use the findings and how will they be used by donors and policy-makers? These questions will guide the research process and all decision-making.

## Practical tips



### Practitioners

- Conduct evaluations and document your own practice-based learning, recognising the valuable contributions of this type of evidence to understanding women’s experiences of GBV and what works to end GBV.
- Advocate for GBV research commissioned by your organisation to align with feminist principles.



### Researchers and donors

- Plan adequate time and costs to conduct feminist-oriented research, including resources to build capacity of local stakeholders in the research process, and return to the community to share results with women upon research completion.
- Collaborate with local research teams and promote the leadership of female researchers.
- Produce information products about the research findings that are accessible to women who participated in the research and whose interests the research serves.



### Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

- Advocate for and support feminist research on GBV.
- Involve local women activists and leaders in decision-making at all stages of the research process.

### Researchers

- Learn about the purpose and principles of feminist research and embed them within all research seeking to build knowledge and evidence about GBV.
- Conduct research on GBV that considers the unique experiences of all women, particularly those who are often overlooked in research, such as women with disabilities and indigenous women.
- Reflect the benefits and outcomes of applying a feminist perspective to research in both the research proposal and dissemination products.



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