

ACTIONAID FEMINIST RESEARCH GUIDELINES

SUMMARY NOTE FOR ACTIONAID'S GLOBAL SECRETARIAT

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Zandile Mabaso is a member of the Rainbow Activist Alliance, a youth movement from for young black Lesbian women which is supported by ActionAid South Africa. CREDIT: COLLEN MFAZWE.

What are the ActionAid Feminist Research Guidelines?

Research is one of our strongest tools for advocacy with governments, international institutions and duty bearers; external engagement, and tracking impact and learning from our programmes. Research products are key to bringing about shifts in power that will ensure that women, non-binary people and young people living in poverty and exclusion secure their rights. The research process in and of itself can

be a transformative process; since collaboratively reflecting on power is itself an activist pedagogy.

The **Feminist Research Guidelines** aim to support ActionAid staff and partners and those interested in how ActionAid does, or commissions, research which draws on a feminist approach. Drawing on our ActionAid Research Signature and Strategy, and our Feminist Leadership Principles, they lay out how to conduct research with a feminist approach.¹

This short note highlights those aspects of the guidelines that will be most useful for **ActionAid's secretariat staff**. It gives an overview of the **content** of the guidelines, shows our **approach** and then provides a **checklist** which acts as a prompt for those planning research projects - pointing them to where they can get further knowledge in the full guidelines.

1. The document complements existing documents that guide ActionAiders when commissioning research. For example, the templates for ActionAid International ToR & project plan, libel guidelines, in-house style guide, etc. which are all available on sharepoint here: <https://actionaidglobal.sharepoint.com/sites/Research>

Why is a **feminist approach** to research important?

To address the structural causes of poverty and to challenge and defeat patriarchy, and other interlinking systems of oppression based on race, class, caste, age, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity and people's political views, we need decision makers to shift their views and actions. We need evidence to dismantle bias and to challenge how and where power negatively manifests and reproduces oppression, impacting people differently depending on their intersecting identities.

Currently, in most global and national policy fora, what is deemed 'evidence' is typically produced and funded by white, elite, heteronormative, patriarchal, and neoliberal actors, who are more often than not men.² These individuals and institutions are often located in or connected to the global north and are often unwilling to recognise their power and privileges. Rather than being active agents in their narrative, this research consequently tends to silence research 'subjects', often people of colour – and particularly women, girls and non-binary people who are framed as lacking in agency. This perpetuates unhealthy power dynamics and impacts the analysis, and consequently the policy and practise decisions, that are informed by their research.

ActionAid is committed to challenging and diversifying whose knowledge counts, starting with people's role in shaping the priorities and evidence itself and strengthening these alternative narratives which go some way to challenging how people see and understand the world. In this sense, the

research itself can be the activism as it is where - through *Reflection-Action* cycles - the change starts to happen.³

Research and policy analysis, combined with collective action, and ongoing reflection by those involved in the research and activism - is necessary to build evidence-based alternatives to convince and compel decision-makers to change. Our long-term engagement in particular communities means that we can track issues over time, reflecting and then building evidence of programme learning and methodologies, existing and new, and - together with our allies - bring it to national or international attention.

What is an **intersectional feminist approach**?

Drawing on an intersectional feminist framing for our work, we acknowledge gender does not operate alone as a basis for structural inequality. Power and privilege are experienced in different ways by different groups of women at different points in their history and in varying contexts.

Intersectional feminism should be a frame for our work and will strengthen our power analysis. It allows us to understand how different inequalities are constructed and sustained. ActionAid's research should bring to the centre the experiences and rights of those who are most marginalised and together interrogate why inequalities occur. This helps support programming and practise that breaks down systems and structures that sustain them.

2. For example, see Enloe, C. 2014, *Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics*; Chilisa, B. & Ntseane, G., 2010; *Resisting dominant discourses: Implications of indigenous, African feminist theory and methods for gender and education research*. *Gender and Education*, 22 (6); Heleta, S., 2016, 'Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa', *Transformation in Higher Education* 1(1); Tuhiwal Smith, L., 2019, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous people*. 2nd Edition. Zed Books; Sultana, F., 2019; *Decolonizing Development Education and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. *Human Geography* (12): 3.
3. Reflection-Action is ActionAid's harmonised participatory methodology. It uses a range of participatory tools to help create an open, democratic environment in which everyone is able to contribute. Participants work together to analyse their situation, identify rights violations and bring about change. <http://www.networkedtoolbox.com/pages/about-reflection-action/> see also: <http://netbox-production.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/resources/5a4dbe0f6b344789810584f8b1b23ea7.pdf>

What does the approach mean for secretariat staff?

The Global Secretariat (GS) can play a positive role in research, creating a space to amplify the voices and evidence of research partners and participants from across the federation, and enabling collective, global reflection and analysis - combining local knowledge with knowledge from in and outside the organisation in various locations. This can shift power and bring about changes at different levels.

Change can be best achieved through deliberate and conscious sharing of power, ownership and process between affiliates, partners and research participants. Staff in the GS should be specifically conscious of their own role in potentially replicating power dynamics and should be mindful of how the research project is conceived, who with, with what resources and for whom. Project managers need to be aware of their own positionality (including thinking about their ability to work in English), as well as the role of the organisation, and part of the organisation, they work for - both ActionAid as an INGO and as part of the GS in an INGO, and the power that their funding can bring to a project.

As part of or as the instigator of the research project, participants from the GS can be mindful to ensure that everyone in the project group is treated equally and fairly and is on board with the process in every way. Do consider whether you are using a consultant; and think about alternative models. If you do bring in either a consultant or a research institute then the whole team needs to be part of that decision making, and a frank discussion about power, decolonisation and bias needs to be had upfront. This can start with a deliberate choice to seek feminist consultants of colour, and work with research institutes in the global south.

Working across countries also requires being aware and mindful of the team's travel schedules and any challenges in communication. In addition, whilst accountability to donors will be key, the process of change and learning is equally valid and must be given space, even where timeframes are tight.

There is a role to play to help support research conducted by grassroots WROs - through using feminist leadership principles to build strong partnerships and trusting working relationships. Project managers in the GS can ensure that research findings are not diluted due to communication, language, or other barriers that tend to build and enhance power imbalances.

Where an audience for evidence or movement building is in the global north, bringing in research participants to express their perspectives wherever possible is preferable to representation of their narrative, as this helps dismantle bias. Alternatively, use of technology and mechanisms to help build transparency and accountability are some of the ways in which northern affiliates can help ensure authenticity in sharing research findings as well as establish open and clear lines for further discussions.

Creating an enabling environment requires a careful consideration in identification of the relevant actors, stakeholders and decision makers, determining ways in which to engage them in meaningful reflection and discussion so that the research is conducted as a team.



Sabita Rani discussing and gathering evidence around nutrition with women and children in Bangladesh. PHOTO: TURJOY CHOWDHURY/ACTIONAID

ActionAid's Research Signature

Our ActionAid Research Signature outlines our research niche, approach and theory of change.

Our Research Signature strapline is that: "people-centred evidence gathering with women and young people at the core, collectively analysed with knowledge from in and outside the organisation, can enable multiple power shifts. This brings about changes at local, national, international levels".

ActionAid's Research Signature's Key Elements:

People living in poverty are empowered by our research – both process and product:

1

- a. Involves the participation of people living in poverty and exclusion and their movements directly (wherever possible) at every stage of the research process, including in identifying questions, thorough joint analysis, and by bringing in people's new knowledge and strategies for change
- b. Active in using the research evidence for influencing change at different levels
- c. Women and young people actively inform and transform the evidence-gathering, and are well represented throughout the research outputs and attribution: voices are amplified through analysis, perspectives, quotes, pictures, and stories
- d. Ownership of analysis and intellectual property is jointly shared with communities.

Strong analysis draws on intersectional feminism:

2

- a. Focuses on unpacking the nature of gender power relations and the social inequalities which root them
- b. Challenges and/or allows us to better understand social and political realities, looking at the roles of various actors linked to a problem and the dimensions of power that characterise their relationship
- c. Recognises and engages the power relations evident in traditional research practice such as the notion of researcher/researched, and seeks to subvert traditional practice
- d. Historically interested in overcoming the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences by challenging dominant practice and models
- e. Looks at the interconnectedness of structural causes of rights violations from local, national, regional and global perspectives
- f. Understands that changes must take place in laws, policies and resources as well as in culture, beliefs and practices
- g. Is rigorous, comprehensive, accurate, transparent and ethical and fair
- h. Recognizes creativity and non-traditional research processes as authentic tools of resistance and transformation.

3

Builds solidarity by linking our work across levels and adding value as a federation:

- a. Evidence of rights violations at any level provide the basis for changes at other levels (local, national, regional, international)
 - b. Knowledge from different levels supports us to identify pathways for change.
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4

Builds strong research partnerships:

- a. Through partnership, builds solidarity, power, knowledge and capacity between and within ActionAid and different research actors, communities or organisations involved in research.
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Is innovative and engaging:

5

- a. Bold in message, audience appropriate and accessible in language, and with a clear change strategy.
 - b. Useful and used in practically influencing change around ActionAid's strategic objectives & timely
 - c. Relevant and applicable at local, national and international levels, as measured by agreed indicators.
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Women in Bangladesh analyse their risks of flooding and disaster, with a view to reducing risk. PHOTO: TURJOY CHOWDHURY/ACTIONAID

Summary of checklists

The Feminist Research Guidelines are not intended to be read from start to finish, but to dip in to when you want to enrich knowledge. The [Reflection-Action](#) website also houses additional resources. This checklist acts partly as a reminder of the elements you might consider when consciously practising feminist research, and partly as a table of contents, pointing to useful sections of the longer document.

Have you?

- Checked the extent to which your research is done by, with for and about women? [see introduction].
- Clarified your goal and change objectives and how you will achieve these?
- Familiarised yourself with the Research Signature and ActionAid's Theory of Change and how it applies to research? [see page 8].
- Used a feminist lens to consider the format of the research team, with particular regards to power imbalances, if you are bringing in a consultant, is the whole research team involved and happy with selection? If the research is with different affiliates or different partners, do all feel equally involved? [see page 13].
- Been clear about your aims ensuring you are taking women, non-binary people and girls as the focus of the analysis, and that there is an agenda for social change? [see page 8].
- Developed your concept with the research team, involving all partners so the research feels owned at all levels, with an intersectional feminist lens? [see page 19].
- Involved programme staff and partners in the reference group and checked on how information and knowledge flows continue at a country level? [see page 13].
- Built in time for a participatory process including participatory research methodologies as part of research practice where possible so local knowledge is valued? [see page 23].
- Ensured there is budget for translation? [see page 25].
- Ensured there is budget for a set of community materials that can be used for different purposes after the evidence gathering? [see page 42].
- Integrated the issue into a programme, and ensured Reflect Circles continue to take forward discussions? [see page 25].
- Looked at ActionAid's guidelines for Focus Group Discussions and checked that time has been set aside for these? [see page 44].
- Ensured a full ethics check (including with each partner institution) i.e. a risk assessment is complete and continued regularly in case risk changes), permissions and clearances have been granted to the researchers from the country where the research is taking place, and participants to the research are going to be safe when the research is published and their mental and physical health is not at risk as they participate? [see pages 33–40].
- Written a Research & Project Plan and uploaded it on the [Research Tracker](#)? [see page 27].
- Had sign off on your ToR, including from the federation if it is an international product? [see page 26].
- Drawn on an intersectional feminist lens to consider who is invited to, and the structure of your inception meeting? [see pages 29–32].
- Checked you have the required protocols in place ahead of your research i.e. are all parties aware of the ActionAid Research Signature, SHEA and Safeguarding policies, data protection policies, distress protocol and Brand Guidelines? [see page 37].
- Discussed how you will make sure your research is rigorous; how you will use feminist analysis to challenge unequal structures within and through the research process and how will you contribute to change? [see pages 37 and 48–50].
- Discussed intellectual property? [see page 35].

- Made sure informed consent is central to your approach? [see page 38].
- Built in capacity development required and mitigated negative power dynamics? [see page 34].
- Assessed your data is rigorous, from a feminist ideology and analysed thoroughly? [see pages 20 and 48].
- Got informed consent for any images or videos used? [see page 38].
- Considered power dynamics, budget and time when planning any focus groups? [see page 44].
- Checked that the products emerging from your knowledge generation are audience appropriate? [see page 42].
- Used appropriate and political language? [see page 43].
- Checked your product(s) are communicable? [see page 42].
- Made your editor and designer aware of the [ActionAid style guidelines](#)
- Acknowledged all research participants? [see page 52].
- Got your product(s) checked for libel? [see page 51].
- Got sign off on your product(s)? [see page 26].
- Branded your product(s) appropriate? [see page 52].
- Used your Research Signature to assess and evaluate your research? [see page 53].
- Ensured all research participants have had the opportunity to engage with reflection and action planning around near final product(s), and are happy to share collectively identified findings with decision maker? [see page 53].
- Shared the final product(s) internally with a webinar to staff and on the internal communications list? [see page 54].



Activists march through the streets demanding equality and an end to homophobia and prejudice during the annual Soweto Pride, South Africa. PHOTO: ACTIONAID

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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