

ACTIONAID FEMINIST RESEARCH GUIDELINES

SUMMARY NOTE FOR PEOPLE OUTSIDE ACTIONAID

NOVEMBER 2021



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 research. Drawing on the ActionAid Research Signature and Strategy, they lay out how to conduct research with a feminist approach.

This short note highlights those aspects of the guidelines that will be most **useful for people outside ActionAid, who are not working with ActionAid but are interested in the work. It is specifically useful if you are interested in how ActionAid is trying to practice research in a feminist way; but has some value for feminists who want to understand ActionAid research processes.** It gives an overview of the content of the guidelines and shows the approach we are trying to adopt. The checklist at the end highlights the key things to note, and indicates where in the longer guidelines the reader can look for more information.

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

To address the structural causes of poverty and to challenge and defeat patriarchal power, 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.¹ 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.²

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. ActionAid's long-term engagement in particular communities and knowledge of local, territorial struggles, means that we can track issues over time, reflecting and then building evidence of programme learning and methodologies, existing and new. The - together with our allies – we can 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 tries to 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 these inequalities.

1. 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.
2. 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>



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

Which aspects of the approach might you want to know about if you are external to ActionAid?

The ActionAid Feminist Research Guidelines contain elements which are specifically useful to ActionAid staff members, such as with regards to organisational protocols for sign off. However, the principles embedded within them, as summarised below in ActionAid's Research Signature are universal.

First though, it is important to acknowledge that consciously adopting a feminist research approach is a journey for ActionAid. We may be a federation but are an INGO and we still largely fundraise in the global north. This, alongside other elements, positions us in a particular way and we are mindful of our positionality as we embed our research

processes. Working with partners and allies is key to ActionAid's approach and the organisation strives to learn with others, many of whom (you!) are women's rights organisations with inspirational feminist practice. The Feminist Research Guidelines are a living document and we do appreciate both feedback on how to improve them and on our feminist research practice.

You may find it easier to refer to the table of contents for areas which interest you. You can then dip in and out of the guidelines, seeking to add to your existing knowledge where there are gaps or where you'd like new perspectives. Do also see our [Reflection-Action](#) website for additional research resources.

In ActionAid we use the guidelines to remind us to consciously adopt particular approaches or analysis and to help to kick start conversations about power and process. Whilst there are some non-negotiables particularly with regards to ethics and safeguarding, the aim of the guidelines is to offer points to consider when working with others in research teams, based on knowledge and learning from ActionAid's programming experience with partners, including women's rights organisations and feminist movements, to date.

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.
-

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.
-

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.
-



Women in Bangladesh analyse their risks of flooding and disaster, with a view to reducing risk. PHOTO: TURJOY CHOWDHURY/ACTIONAID

What elements of the Feminist Research Guidelines are most useful for people outside ActionAid?

This section aims to support those people outside ActionAid by pointing to elements in the Guidelines which are more universally useful, or which will help to understand ActionAid's approach. The first step to understanding ActionAid's approach is look ActionAid's Research Signature and understand how our Theory of Change applies to research [see page 8]. Following that, this checklist both reminds us of the different elements to consider when consciously adopting feminist research as well as pointing to the places in the text which will offer further information.

When embarking on research, consider;

- Sense checking the extent the research is done by, with, for and about women
- Acting as a check and balance on the format of the research team, calling out where there are power imbalances [see page 13].
- Ensuring the concept is developed with an intersectional feminist lens [see page 19].
- Ensuring that the research aims are clear, taking women, non-binary people and girls as the focus of the analysis, and that there is an agenda for social change [see page 19].
- Checking in on how knowledge flows within your organisation and between your organisation and others involved [see page 13].
- Building in time for a participatory process including participatory research methodologies as part of research practice where possible, building on programme work, so local knowledge is valued [see page 23].
- Ensuring there is budget for translation [see page 25].
- Ensuring there is budget for a set of community materials that can be used for different purposes after the evidence gathering [see page 42].
- Looking at ActionAid's guidelines for Focus Group Discussions and checking that time has been set aside for these [see page 44].
- Ensuring a full ethics check; 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].
- Using a Research & Project Plan [see page 27].
- Checking you've sign off systems [see page 26].
- Drawing on an intersectional feminist lens to consider who is invited to, and the structure of the inception meeting [see pages 29–32].
- Checking the required protocols in place ahead of your research ie. SHEA and Safeguarding policies, data protection policies, distress protocol and Brand Guidelines (if you have any) and any other protocols held by other partners?
- Discussing 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].
- Discussing intellectual property? [see page 35].
- Making sure informed consent is central to your approach? [see page 38].
- Building in capacity development required and mitigating negative power dynamics? [see page 34].

- Using informed consent for any images or videos used? [see page 38].
- Considering power dynamics, budget and time when planning any focus groups? [see page 44].
- Checking that the products emerging from your knowledge generation are audience appropriate?
- Using appropriate and political language? [see page 43].
- Checking your product(s) are communicable? [see page 42].
- Using style guidelines with editors and designers
- Acknowledging all research participants? [see page 52].
- Checking for libel? [see page 51].
- Checking in on sign off on your product(s)? [see page 26].
- Discussing the branding of joint product(s) appropriately [see page 52].
- Assessing and evaluating research? [see page 53].
- Ensured all research participants have had the opportunity to engage with reflection and action planning around near final product(s)? [see page 53].



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.

<http://actionforglobaljustice.actionaid.org>

International Registration number: 27264198

Website: www.actionaid.org

Telephone: +27 11 731 4500

Fax: +27 11 880 8082

Email: mailjhb@actionaid.org

ActionAid International Secretariat,
Postnet Suite 248, Private Bag X31, Saxonwold 2132,
Johannesburg, South Africa.

November 2021