

ACTIONAID FEMINIST RESEARCH GUIDELINES OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Research is one of our strongest tools for advocacy with governments, international institutions and duty bearers; external engagement, tracking impact and learning from our programmes. Research products are key to bringing about shifts in power that will ensure that womxn and young people living in poverty and exclusion secure their rights.¹ The research process in and of itself can be a transformative process; since collaboratively reflecting on power is itself an activist pedagogy.

The 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. They accompany our ActionAid Research Signature and Strategy and are a set of ideas for conducting research with a feminist approach that is rooted in our principles and mission and supports ActionAid's change objectives.²

This guidance draws on existing feedback and guidelines within the ActionAid federation and from feminist researchers from the global south.³ It was initially put together in response to an analysis of ActionAid's research and has been further developed to respond to affiliates who have made research a strategic priority, and who are specifically keen to work with others to ensure their research process and product has a feminist lens.⁴

The guidance supports research project managers to follow ActionAid's Top Ten **feminist leadership principles**⁵ to ensure our research uses a gender transformative approach at all levels - from the thinking up of research ideas (whether for an exposé or for long term community analysis), to developing partnerships, to managing or conducting research, through to the analysis, the publication(s) and the influencing.

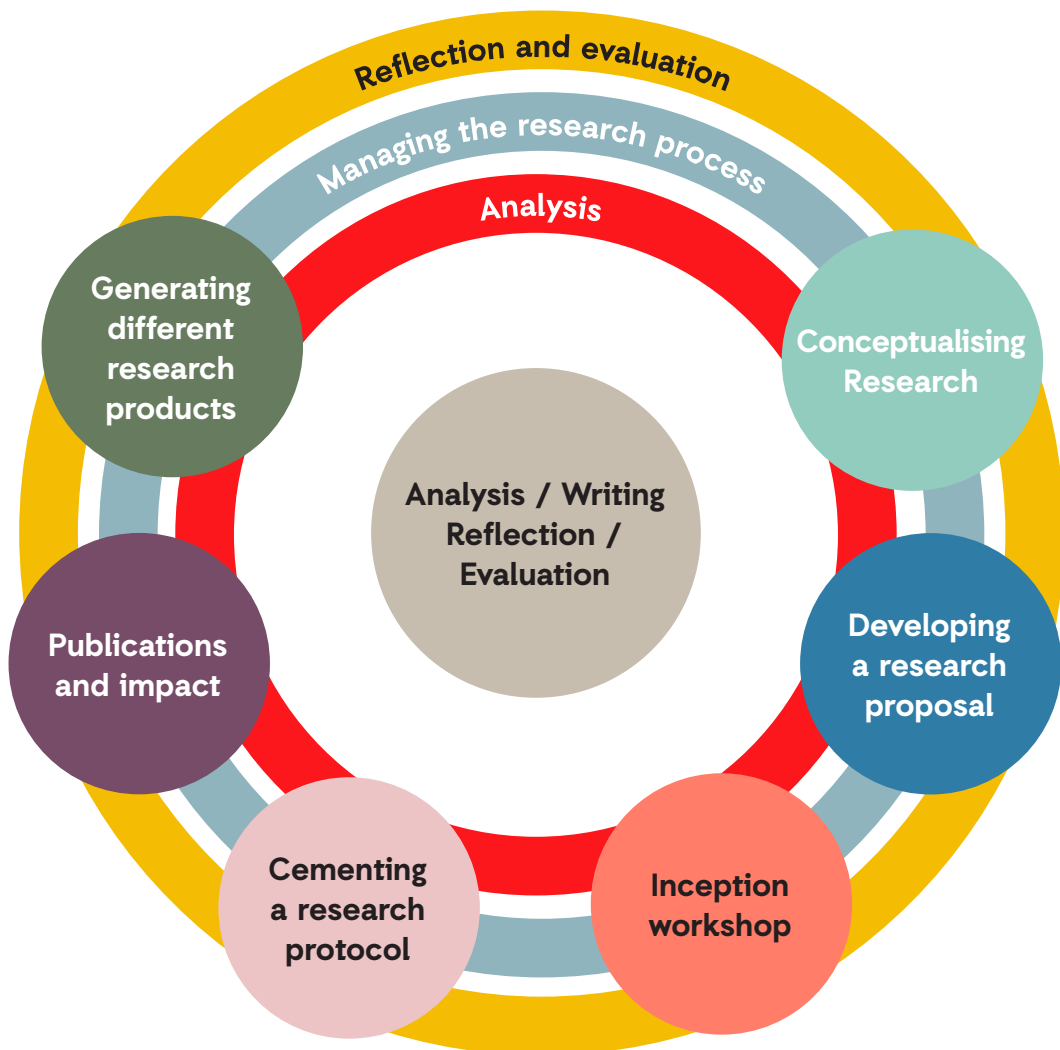
The guidelines outline best practice: every research project is different. For example, quick deadlines, especially around fundraising proposals, may not permit such a thorough analysis of context and corporate exposés will require specific expertise. In addition, not everything in the note will be relevant for your project, and it doesn't claim to cover every scenario. Nonetheless, to ensure a thorough feminist analysis, quality products, productive partnerships and to adhere to our ideology and HRBA, it is strongly encouraged that research project managers follow the basic steps. This note is a summary of rationale and politics of the guidelines. For further reference go to the **full document**.

If you have any questions on the content, or cannot access the documents, please contact the Global Secretariat Research Advisor – kate.carroll@actionaid.org

1. The spelling of womxn with 'x' avoids the suffix 'men/man', and avoids binary language thus showing solidarity with and recognition of a diversity of people- LGBTQIA+, including trans people and those who choose not to identify themselves by gender.
2. 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>
3. Thanks specifically to: Trimita Chakma, Isabella Matambanadzo & Awino Okech
4. Margie Buchanan-Smith; *Making the most of research within ActionAid International*; ActionAid IPD; 2009 & internal discussions, available on request.
5. For more detail, see: https://actionaidglobal.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/GlobalSecretariat/Eesq7Y35X4Nik-60sB0tBsQBqTdCg46C1yHkAlwiZ7_gpw?e=CNiOq3



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



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

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.⁶ 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 womxn and girls 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.⁷

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.

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 womxn at different points in their history and in varying contexts. 'Intersectionality' was coined by a black feminist, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989,⁸ although its roots go back to postcolonial and African-American feminist histories, as well as Third World Liberation movements.⁹ **Intersectional feminism** is an understanding that different forms of structural oppression overlap. For example, Crenshaw found that African-American women faced discrimination from gender, race and class which significantly impacted their access to justice, compared to other women.

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

6. 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.
7. *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>
8. Crenshaw, K., 1991, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*. *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6): 1241-1299.
9. See: Salem, Sara, 2019, <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/capitalism-postcolonialism-and-gender-complicating-development>

together interrogate why inequalities occur. This helps support programming and practise that breaks down systems and structures that sustain them. Inclusion is a central tenet of the Research Signature. Using feminist analysis, we aim to identify how to break the barriers around participation and promote shared use of power in our research processes. We recognize and support communities to put their skills, values and contributions at the forefront of research processes.

A feminist research approach and the advancing of feminist alternatives can provide a glue to link our local, national and international work. Developing evidence is key to advocating for better programming, as well as for changes at national and international level. Evidence supports us to identify different pathways for change, whether through alternatives, new campaigns or new programme learnings.

ActionAid's Research Strategy

ActionAid's theory of change outlines that our work must be empowering, build collective solidarity,

identify alternatives and achieve campaign and advocacy goals which shift power.

"We believe that an end to poverty and injustice can be achieved through purposeful individual and collective action, led by the active agency of people living in poverty and supported by solidarity, credible rights-based alternatives and campaigns that address the structural causes and consequences of poverty."¹⁰

Our nested research theory of change mirrors this. ActionAid research should subvert traditional notions of evidence on questions of international development and economic policy as being produced in the global north or by individuals and institutions connected with the global north 'on' people in the global south, whose lives are often fetishised and whose voices – especially those of womxn and girls - are often silenced.

ActionAid's research mission is to support ActionAid's overall mission by producing evidence, including at a local level, that is complemented by analysis and evidence from different places and seeks to shift power at local, national and global levels - to challenge dominant narratives and false solutions by generating alternative ways of organising economies and societies, of being and doing.

Research - both in process and product should wherever possible:	
Be empowering	Research, reflection and enquiry is part of ActionAid's programme cycle and as such should build on participants' 'power within', equipping them with different tools and concepts and enabling collective reflection, analysis and action together as collaborative participants.
Build solidarity	If a research process builds alliances through the varied involvement of different actors (partners, alliances, allies, research institutes), or if the evidence is disseminated widely, then it can build solidarity linkages across different levels to ensure collective action for change (power with).
Shift power	Research, when we communicate findings effectively, is one of our strongest tools for external engagement and impact. Research products can play a role in influencing to bring about changes in power that will ensure that womxn and young people living in poverty secure their rights by addressing the structural causes of poverty and offering rights based alternatives (power to).

10. As outlined in ActionAid's strategy; *Action for Global Justice 2028*

ActionAid's Research Signature

**Our ActionAid Research
Signature outlines our research
niche and approach.**

Our Research Signature strapline is that: “people-centred evidence gathering with womxn 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”.

A research ‘signature’ relates to the consistent look and feel of ActionAid’s research. This look and feel is usually achieved through: the consistent use of empowering feminist methodologies, approaches and processes; the application of ActionAid’s brand; and an ideological feminist foundation and analysis.

Key elements of ActionAid Research:

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

- 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. Womxn 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.

2 Strong analysis draws on intersectional feminism:

- 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:

- 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**

Have you:

- **Familiarised** yourself with the Research Signature and ActionAid's Theory of Change and how it applies to research? [see introduction]
- **Used** a feminist lens to consider the format of the research team?
- **Been clear** about your aims?
- **Developed** your concept with an intersectional feminist lens?
- **Involved** LRP staff and partners in the reference group and checked on how information and knowledge flows continue at a country level?
- **Built** in time for a participatory process including participatory research methodologies?
- **Ensured** there is budget for translation?
- **Ensured** there is budget for a set of community materials that can be used for different purposes?
- **Integrated** the issue into a programme, and ensured Reflect Circles continue to take forward discussions?
- **Looked** at ActionAid's guidelines for Focus Group Discussions and check that time has been set aside for these?
- **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?
- **Written** a Research & Project Plan and uploaded it on the [Research Tracker](#)?
- **Had sign off** on your ToR?
- **Drawn** on an intersectional feminist lens to consider who is invited to, and the structure of your inception meeting?
- **Checked** you have the required protocols in place ahead of your research ie. are all parties aware of the ActionAid Research Signature, SHEA and Safeguarding policies and Brand Guidelines?

- **Discussed** how you will make sure your research is rigorous; how you will use feminist analysis to challenge unequal structures and how will you contribute to change?
- **Discussed** intellectual property?
- **Made sure** informed consent is central to your approach?
- **Built** in capacity development required and mitigated negative power dynamics
- **Assessed** your data is rigorous, from a feminist ideology and analysed thoroughly?
- **Got informed** consent for any images or videos used?
- **Considered** power dynamics, budget and time when planning any focus groups?
- **Checked** that the products emerging from your knowledge generation are audience appropriate?
- **Used** appropriate and political language?
- **Checked** your product(s) are communicable?
- **Made** your editor and designer aware of the [ActionAid style guidelines](#)
- **Acknowledged** all research participants?
- **Got your product(s) checked** for libel?
- **Got sign off** on your product(s)?
- **Branded** your product(s) appropriately
- **Used** your Research Signature to assess and evaluate your research?
- **Ensured** all research participants have had the opportunity to engage with reflection and action planning around near final product(s)?
- **Shared** the final product(s) internally with a webinar to staff and on the internal communications list?

For further details, please refer to the [full guidance](#)

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>

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