Ethical and safe conduct of interviews and
discussions on child marriage
Guiding principles

Aim of this resource:

This resource is designed to support those whoa re engaging with interviews and focus groups around sensitive topics related to child marriage and related experiences of mental health and emotional wellbeing. These are not exhaustive, but will provide a useful starting point for those starting to work in this area.

Overall Principle:

Do No Harm: Child marriage can be a sensitive topic for some communities, so you will need to be sure that, when conducting interviews and focus groups, you are not contributing to any potential harm for girls, their families or those who may otherwise be affected by the practice. Treat each individual with respect and listen with empathy. Consider the impact of an interview or discussion on the participants' wellbeing and do not undertake any interview that may make an individual's situation worse. This means, among other things, that you should consider carefully where you hold the discussions, who is present, what questions you ask, etc. The below points further raise things to take into consideration as you prepare for and conduct interviews and/or focus group discussions.

Before the interview/focus group discussion:

1. **Understand the background of the community and the individuals you are speaking with to assess the risks:** Work with a local partner organization to ensure you have a good understanding of the conditions in the community, any specific background information about the individuals you are speaking with, and whether there are any particular topics that may cause individuals distress. Identify the risks associated with speaking with any of the individuals and, if moving forward with the interview, consider how you might mitigate risks. For example – are there pathways for support available if people become distressed? Are there different methods – such as photography or drawings - that could help ease people into discussions about things that distress them.

2. **Prepare referral information and do not make promises that you cannot fulfill:** Work with your local partner organization to understand the referral services available locally. Prepare the partner that if a need arises for legal, health, shelter, social support and security services, you will likely refer those with a need to the local organization who can help with referrals to the appropriate services. In as much as you can, provide the local partner organization with ideas for what that could look like. Be prepared to respond to an emergency situation if a community member shares that they are in imminent danger.

3. **Designing and asking questions:** Prepare questions in a way that should allow you to avoid asking participants to recall painful, personal experiences, but also be prepared to respond to an individual's distress and highlight their strengths. Keep questions broad and ask about a typical experience of a group

of people rather than individual, personal experience. For example, "Tell me about a typical 16-year-old girls' daily experience in your community," as opposed to "Were you married early and how did that affect you?"

4. **Consider where to hold the interview, who will participate in the interview, and who will lead the interview:** Work with the partner organization to identify individuals in the communities who are best suited to answer the questions you have, and whether they should be involved in group discussions or individual interviews. Try to hold focus group discussions and interviews in private areas where the confidentiality of individuals and their responses can be maintained. Consider the power dynamics of those participating in the focus group discussions. For example, you might want to avoid holding focus groups comprised of both community leaders and young people, to avoid placing young people in a vulnerable position to answer questions in front of those who have power in the community. Finally, consider who will lead the interview – whether a leader from the partner organization or yourself or others. Consider how and with whom the participants will feel most free to safely and honestly answer questions and share their thoughts.

5. **Think carefully about whether to have additional participants, such as interpreters or and notetakers:** If you will have others with you, such as notetakers or interpreters, consider the dynamic that will be present due to the increased number of people, their backgrounds, and how the interview participants may feel about others being in the room. If hiring notetakers and interpreters, ensure they understand the guidelines in this document. Most times, the need for notetakers can be avoided through the use of a small digital recording device- just make sure that you have everyone's permission to record the conversation and you have explained how you will keep people's identity protected.

6. **Leave plenty of time:** For some people during your interviews, this may be the first time that they have the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences, which could be difficult. They also may not understand the power dynamics in an interview setting that allow them to choose what they will or won't answer. Give plenty of time and space to your discussions, to allow people the opportunity to ask questions, pause when they are upset, and for you to remind them of their rights during an interview/focus group setting.

During the interview/focus group discussion:

7. **Introduce yourself, the fund and the purpose of the interview/discussion:** As you meet your interviewee or sit down with the focus group, share details about:

    a. **Yourself, your project and the local partner organization.** Introduce yourself, where you come from and your role. Introduce your project/organization, its core values, and its aim. If there are others in the room (i.e. notetakers, interpreters, or representatives from the local

partner) make sure they introduce themselves and share their role in the discussion.

b. **Purpose of gathering the information, how it will be used, and who will have access to the information.** Share the goals of speaking with the participants, and explain how the information you receive may be used. Be as comprehensive as possible in your explanation so that there are no surprises in the future (i.e., if the stories from these discussions are told in ways you haven't thought of).

c. **Voluntary:** Ensure the interviewee understands that participation is entirely voluntary and that they can terminate the interview at any point and skip any question that they do not want to answer. Encourage your interviewees to ask questions. If needed, have a discussion about any potential safety and security risks to the interviewee.

d. **Anonymity and confidentiality:** Share that we will protect a respondent's identity and confidentiality throughout the interview process and in the documentation of the interview. If conducting a focus group, ask all the participants not to reveal the identity or comments of other interview participants with those who are not participating.

e. **Informed consent:** Make certain that each respondent clearly understands the content and purpose of the interview, the intended use of the information, their right not to answer questions, their right to terminate the interview at any time, and their right to put restrictions on how the information is used. **If interviewing anyone less than 18 years of age, provide all this information to a parent or guardian and ask for their consent, in addition to the consent of the respondent, before proceeding**.

8. **Listen to and respect each individual's assessment of her situation and risks to her safety:** Recognize that each individual will have different concerns and that the way they view their concerns may be different from how others might assess them.

Following the interview/focus group discussion:

9. **Ensure information is used positively and, as possible, is communicated back to the participants:** Use information in a way that benefits the community and advances the development of good policies and strategies. As is possible, work through partner organizations to let community members know how their input and information has been used.