

HOW-TO **note**



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How to consider **language** when researching sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH)

For CSOs and researchers in humanitarian or development settings

Why is language important?

- Language is an important component of any research or monitoring and evaluation, but it is especially critical in research into sensitive and gendered topics like sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH).
- In any society, the words we use to talk about sex and violence differ between the sexes, between age groups and socioeconomic groups, and depending on who we are talking to.
- Unless researchers are prepared for and attentive to such differences, they can miss vital information about people's experiences, needs and wishes.

This brief guide suggests practical steps that researchers and programme staff can take to overcome language barriers in their SEAH research and monitoring.



What can go wrong and how to make sure it doesn't.

Communication can break down:

- If the research takes place in a **language or dialect** that participants don't fully understand or feel comfortable in, or which excludes people with relevant experience and insights.
- If the researcher uses words and terms that participants are uncomfortable with, because they carry **stigma or a taboo**.
- If the researcher uses **words and terms** that participants don't understand or understand differently.

At a minimum, researchers should:

- ✓ Understand what languages people speak.
- ✓ Understand what the main and preferred terms and concepts used by participants to discuss the issues are.
- ✓ Understand which terms and concepts are sensitive and should be avoided.
- ✓ Not assume people have the same understanding of the terms being used.
- ✓ Take time at the beginning to explain the terms and concepts being used to make sure you are all talking about the same thing.

Box. 1 [Research with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh](#) found that strong cultural conventions about the language it is acceptable for women and girls to use prevented aid workers from understanding reports of sexual abuse. Some words are simply taboo, so women and girls may use other terms like "staining", "oppression" and "dishonour" to refer to various forms of abuse. Local aid workers understood the words but not their real meaning, and so the cases weren't reported and the women didn't receive support.

Principles

Speak the language of the people you want to hear from

- Research on SEAH needs to pay particular attention to speakers of marginalised languages.
- You will need to know which languages they speak, employ researchers who speak the same languages, and translate research tools into those languages.
- Communities are often linguistically diverse and not everyone will speak or understand the official or majority language.

Use words participants are comfortable with

- The words we use are not neutral. Our choice of words is guided by social and cultural norms.
- Because these norms differ, the same word may mean different things to different people.
- Some words imply a judgement about the people or acts they describe. Some are seen as offensive or not for certain groups like women or children to use. Some are only used by certain groups and indicate membership of those groups.

Use words that mean the same thing to everyone

- Because SEAH can be hard to talk about, we often distance ourselves from these issues by using either indirect or technical words like medical terms, abbreviations, or words in foreign languages to refer to them.
- It is risky to assume that everyone uses or understands those words in the same way. It is therefore especially important in SEAH research to confirm the meaning of the terms used.

How to ensure we use the right language

1. What language do people speak?

- Find out which languages people speak. Community members (not just community leaders) are the best source of information on this. Make sure you consult widely enough to capture the preferences of those whose voices are not always heard. See box 2 below for information sources.
- Include people with disabilities in your consultation on the languages people speak, and seek their input on appropriate communication methods for your research. These may include sign language interpreting, closed captions, and the use of visual in preference to text-based research tools. Without these considerations their insights and experiences relating to safeguarding and SEAH are less likely to be heard.
- Be aware that the way we talk and the words and language we use are part of how we affirm our identity. As such, they also mark our difference from other people and can reduce trust and empathy. Where there is a history of conflict or tension between communities, the “wrong” accent or dialect can make a well-intentioned individual seem like a threat, and make open conversation impossible. This is a particular problem if the research topic is sensitive or carries stigma, as issues of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment do. Extra care should be taken to ensure the language is supportive and non-traumatising for survivors.
- Recruit researchers who speak the preferred languages of research participants, checking with local people that their dialect and accent are readily understood and accepted. This enables participants to speak confidentially and more comfortably about sensitive topics

than if they have to rely on a neighbour or family member to relay their answers¹.

- Consider whether it is helpful to have an “outsider” in the research team to ask questions that programme staff cannot readily ask. This might include challenging participants’ initial assertions that aid workers in the area are not guilty of sexual exploitation, abuse or sexual harassment, or asking about topics that participants are reluctant to discuss with programme staff.
- Train your research team to be alert to language issues (see below) and translate research tools into the language or languages they are most comfortable reading and using to conduct interviews.

Box. 2 Finding out which languages people speak

Download free language maps and language data for a growing number of countries from <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data/>. This doesn’t provide local detail, but could be a starting point for identifying the language skills needed to ask people about language preferences. If possible get up-to-date information on language and communication preferences for local communities by including [four standard questions](#) in scheduled needs assessments and other surveys.

2. What words should we use?

In preparing the research, take time with the research team to consider and consult about potential communication barriers. Plan for a discussion of terminology and words during training prior to research. Talk through potentially sensitive words and concepts with research assistants during training, to gather their insights and draw their attention to potential sensitivities.

- Make a list of terms and concepts used in the research tools, and terms and concepts related to the research topic that might come

up in discussions between the research team and participants.

- Discuss these terms and concepts with the research team. Start by listing together the different expressions that different groups might use in the relevant languages to refer to each concept, depending on who they are talking to. You can use an example like menstruation / menses / period / time of the month to illustrate.
- Think about terms and euphemisms that participants might use or prefer. Which terms or concepts are sensitive? Which terms or concepts will cause embarrassment or anger among participants? Which terms or concepts should be avoided? What translations for all of these terms and concepts will be most accurate and most readily understood? Which terms or words create a supportive environment? This is particularly important when engaging survivors of SEAH or anyone connected.
- Discuss which words are difficult for research assistants to use because they will be considered rude or might face problems in the community after the research.
- Make a list of terms you can and can’t use. Refer to this to adjust research tools before piloting.
- Identify terminology or acronyms that would need to be defined for participants. Which terms will be new to participants and need defining?
- Pay specific attention to any potential sensitivities around terms and concepts when

If the word for “rape” in the relevant language is only ever used to refer to sexual violence by a man against a woman, it may not be the right word to use to discuss violence against men and boys. You may need to consult on an alternative, for instance “torture”, that participants might associate more readily with male rape.

¹ Be mindful that when speaking about sensitive topics such as SEAH recruiting research from within the community could risk privacy. You

may want to consider recruiting researchers who don’t come from within the community to protect privacy.

you pilot your research tools. Allow for time to adjust the terminology used in your tools on the basis of the pilot and to brief the research team on the best words to use (see box below).

3. How to introduce these words and terms during the data collection?

- In interviews and focus group discussions, explain to participants that you might use some words that will be explicit and that this is not meant to embarrass or insult anyone. Explain that you will use these words to better understand and that together you can agree on terms to use during the interview or discussion that everyone feels comfortable with.

Participants may not consider it “sexual exploitation” when an aid worker has sex with a member of the affected community in exchange for gifts or priority access to aid. In that case you could ask them how people do refer to that situation, and agree to use that expression instead to talk about it.

- Introduce terms yourself instead of asking participants to name them. Ask participants if they feel comfortable if the researcher uses this term during the research activity. Ask them if they also feel comfortable using the term themselves during the research activity. If they answer “no” to either of these questions, ask them if there is an alternative term they prefer to be used for this. Be ready to suggest alternative terms if participants are shy or lack ideas.
- You could start with the word “misconduct” and explain that this can have many meanings. There are many different forms of misconduct, including sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment, which is what your research is aiming to understand. In contexts where words like “sexual” are taboo, you can agree with research participants that you will use the word “misconduct” to mean sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment.

- Avoid writing down any of these words on flip charts or blackboards, as this might cause continuous embarrassment. It might also cause misunderstanding or anger if others not taking part in the research activity see these words; it might even result in harm to your research participants.

4. Making sure everyone’s understanding is the same.

- Take time to explain the difference between SEAH and Gender Based Violence (GBV) to participants, and to the research team. SEAH is very often a new concept to communities, and people might think you are talking about GBV. The acronym SEAH is even less known. Be clear that you are discussing SEAH and not what harm and abuse might be happening in the community generally. For more information please see this [RSH paper outlining the differences between GBV and SEAH](#).
- Don’t assume people have the same understanding of the terms being used. Researchers and research participants might know an abbreviation like PSEA or SEAH in an official or dominant language like English or French, even if that is not the main language they speak. Even if people say they have heard this term before and know it, don’t assume that you have the same understanding of the meaning. Ask them to explain their understanding of the term to make sure you are talking about the same thing.
- In contexts where people feel more comfortable to talk about sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment openly, it is best to use the precise terms to avoid misunderstandings. This may entail first discussing what people understand by “sexual exploitation”, “sexual abuse” and “sexual harassment”, and agreeing a brief definition that everyone can refer back to.
- Equally, some terms your organisation may use to show respect, like “sex worker”, may be unfamiliar to participants, who may refer to

a “prostitute” instead. In such cases you may need to explain what you mean and agree on a term everyone understands for the purposes of the interview.

Box. 3 How to test translation of research tools.

Test local language translations of research tools with research assistants and their supervisors to identify potential points of confusion or variance in interpretation and ensure a shared, accurate understanding.

Questions to ask include:

- ✓ What does this question mean?
- ✓ Which parts of the question are unclear?
- ✓ Which questions might be misunderstood by research participants?
- ✓ Do any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable?
- ✓ If you were asking a friend or family member this question, how would you ask it?
- ✓ Are there local words and phrases that would relay the intended meaning better?

Ask a colleague who was not involved in designing or translating the tools to relay the meaning of the translated text verbally back to the original language, and check whether it is correct. Make corrections accordingly without changing the original meaning of the survey questions.

As a final step, pilot the research tools among the target population and make any adjustments before starting data collection.

Further RSH guidance on safe monitoring, evaluation and research.

- [RSH top tips for conducting safe monitoring visits](#)
- [How to note: How to design and deliver safe and ethical monitoring, evaluation and research](#)
- [How-to-note how to research SEAH safely.](#)
- [Research: let's make it safe](#)