

**Application of International Ethical and Safety Guidelines
on Conducting Violence against Women Research within the Myanmar Context:
Lessons Learned and Ways Forward**

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Constant reevaluation of ethical and safety guidelines for conducting sensitive research across different cultural contexts is paramount to the methodological evolution of research on violence against women. There is a growing body of rigorous research on women's experiences of abuse, violence, discrimination and harassment around the world, including in the South and Southeast Asia region,^{1, 2} grounded in international ethical and safety standards.^{3, 4} However, limited evidence on violence against women exists in the Myanmar context. Consequently, there is little information on ethical and safety considerations for this specific setting. In Myanmar, violence against women in the general population is only now beginning to be openly recognized as a key development concern.¹ Despite the historically low level of prioritization of this issue,² researchers and academics have been documenting women's experiences of violence and abuse for some time, predominantly within the context of medical and health research.¹⁰⁻¹² From 2012 to 2013, the Gender Equality Network (GEN), together with Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, implemented a qualitative study on women's experiences of intimate partner violence, to build the knowledge base of violence against women in Myanmar in line with international ethics and safety standards of violence against women research. In the context of existing literature on violence against women in Myanmar, the resulting report 'Behind the Silence: Violence against Women and their Resilience in Myanmar' became one of the first studies to apply rigorous methodological and ethical standards towards research on women's experiences of abuse in Myanmar. To fully account for the above ethical and safety considerations, as well as apply international best practices, the team worked to develop clear and comprehensive guidelines and procedures for conducting ethical and safe research on violence against women in Myanmar. This included mechanisms and processes to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation, to ensure that respect, trust and engagement with women's stories were foremost in the implementation of the study.

Key words: Ethics, Safety framework, VAUL

INTRODUCTION

Constant reevaluation of ethical and safety guidelines for conducting sensitive research across different cultural contexts is paramount to the methodological evolution of research on violence against women. There is a growing body of rigorous research on women's experiences of abuse,

violence, discrimination and harassment around the world, including in the South and Southeast Asia region,^{1, 2} grounded in international ethical and safety standards.^{3, 4} However, limited evidence on violence

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against women exists in the Myanmar context. Consequently, there is little information on ethical and safety considerations for this specific setting.

Drawing on lessons from the implementation of a qualitative study on violence against women conducted in Myanmar in 2013 to 2014, this article presents critical steps to ensure ethical and safe implementation of research with women who have experienced intimate partner violence and discusses remaining ethics challenges and considerations for future studies on violence against women in Myanmar.

Background

The United Nations defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, occurring in public or private life.’⁵ This broad definition includes, but is not limited to, violence occurring in the family violence within the general community, trafficking and forced prostitution, and violence perpetrated or by the state.

The past two decades have seen substantial methodological improvements in violence against women research,^{1, 6-8} particularly in the Asia-Pacific region.^{1, 2} Consistently applied definitions of violence and methods of conducting research have contributed to a growing body of comparable research on violence against women, particularly in low and middle-income countries.^{1, 2} Stronger international safety and ethical standards have improved women’s disclosure of violence and reduced possible negative outcomes related to conducting research

with human subjects of such a sensitive topic.^{3,9}

In Myanmar, violence against women in the general population is only now beginning to be openly recognized as a key development concern.[#] Despite the historically low level of prioritization of this issue,^{##} researchers and academics have been documenting women’s experiences of violence and abuse for some time, predominantly within the context of medical and health research.¹⁰⁻¹²

Reported prevalence of women’s experience of abuse in Myanmar varies from between 3 to 15 percent of women reported experiencing physical violence¹⁰ to up to 69 percent of women reported experiencing psychological, physical and/or sexual violence in the past twelve months.¹¹ A more recent survey in five townships across Yangon, using community-based screening questions, found that 19 percent of women reported experiencing violence directly, and 53 percent knew women within their communities or families who experienced violence.¹² Overall, one of the primary limitations of existing research on violence against women is a concerning lack of ethical and safety structures in place to mitigate negative consequences of research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable women.

From 2012 to 2013, the Gender Equality Network (GEN), together with Ministry of Social welfare, Relief and Resettlement, implemented a qualitative study on women’s experiences of intimate partner violence, to build the knowledge base of violence against women in Myanmar in line with international ethics and safety standards of violence against women research. The objectives of the study were:

[#]The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has signaled its commitment to the empowerment of women in Myanmar as a signatory to international treaties and conventions around women’s rights, including the right to live free from violence (GEN 2013a). The draft National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) 2013-2022 aspires to the empowerment of all women in Myanmar, and aims to create enabling systems, structures and practices for the advancement of women, gender equality and the realization of women’s rights (The Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2012).

^{##}The 1997 Myanmar National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women argues that violence against women is ‘not a major issue’ in Myanmar and that is only included in the action plan due to its relevance to women’s health and development overall (MNWCWA, 1997).

- To collect narrative information on the different types and patterns of violence against women, in the selected study areas in Myanmar;
- To explore the factors that tend to increase women's vulnerability to violence;
- To identify current mitigation and coping strategies of women affected by violence, including the extent and to whom women disclosed the violence they experience, and women's access to and use of support services and;
- To document the consequences of women's experiences of violence their health, work and relationships.

In the context of existing literature on violence against women in Myanmar, the resulting report 'Behind the Silence: Violence against Women and their resilience in Myanmar' became one of the first studies to apply rigorous methodological and ethical standards toward research on women's experiences of abuse in Myanmar.

Key ethical considerations

With knowledge of internal standards of best practice for conducting research on violence against women, the research team developed a thorough research protocol. This protocol took into account a number of key ethical considerations, including: the larger socio-cultural environment that minimized and stigmatized women's experiences of abuse, the vast ethnic diversity of Myanmar society, and the limited research to-date on highly sensitive issues such as sexual violence and marital rape. Over-arching gender inequalities in Myanmar condone men's power and control over women and contribute to the devaluation of women's voices and experiences.¹³

These gendered values and norms create an environment in which violence against women is both practiced and sanctioned, while simultaneously dismissed or normalized. In situations where women do experience violence - within or outside of the intimate partnership - 'ideas about

appropriate social behavior create a mentality that blames the victim for what she suffers.'¹⁴ Social norms that sanction women's silence within intimate partner relations contribute to women's limited agency to speak out about their experiences of violence - either through informal or formal mechanisms, as 'women are afraid of being labeled as an undutiful wife by society.'¹⁵

This environmental context had implications for study design. Within this social context, women who agreed to speak about their experiences of abuse to the research team would be speaking out despite a societal context of disbelief, fear, and shame. They would be sharing their narratives despite widespread denigration of women's experiences of abuse such as women having 'asked for it' or 'brought it on themselves' in the case of rape,¹⁶ having 'made it all up' in the case of child sexual abuse¹⁷ and sexual harassment,¹⁸ or having 'failed to leave' in the case of wife battering. They may have heard that women who have been assaulted experience further abuse at the hands of the criminal or legal justice system.^{19, 20}

They may have heard about or possibly suffered themselves from a variety of humiliating experiences related to their experience such as job loss, rejection by loved ones, traumatic symptoms, uncomfortable medical, forensic, or psychological examinations, and lasting physical disfigurement or disabilities.²¹ Thus, respect of women's experiences and stories, with an emphasis on trust, became a guiding principle of this study. Furthermore, given these possibilities, extra precautions were taken by the research team to ensure confidentiality, maintain a supportive and non-judgmental interviewing space, and supply women with information on existing services and support systems. These steps would be discussed further, below.

Adopting principles of respect for persons, justice and fairness, beneficence, and normal efficiencies are crucial when under-

taking any research study,^{22, 23} and become additionally important to consider when working on sensitive topics across vastly segmented populations, as in the case of ethnic diversity in Myanmar. Two major steps were taken during the development of the research design to address the issue of ethnic diversity across Myanmar and promote principles of respect for human participants, regardless of ethnicity.

One, ethnicity was not used to stratify the final sample of women who were interviewed. That is, the study did not analyze women's experiences of abuse based on differences across ethnic groups. However, the research team recognized the importance of capturing regional differences in critical areas of inquiry.

For example, whether there were major thematic differences in gender norms and practices and social perceptions of violence against women across the geographic range of Myanmar. To address this issue, five secondary sites (Lashio, Magway, Loikaw, Kalay and Labutta) were included in the study design alongside the two primary sites (Yangon and Mawlamyine). Comparable focus-group discussions were held in the five secondary sites to capture nuances in social norms and attitudes and beliefs related to women's experiences of violence across a broader geographical swath of Myanmar.

Finally, the study design included questions on sexual violence within intimate partnerships, given the limited evidence on this form of violence against women in Myanmar. Globally, marital rape is a contested issue. In neighbouring Bangladesh, research points to widespread beliefs that a wife cannot be raped, as it is her duty to provide sex to her husband regardless of her wishes.²⁴ Yet research has found that sexual violence within intimate partnerships is a pervasive form of violence against women,^{1, 2} despite the challenges around interviewing survivors of marital rape.²⁵

In the Myanmar context, stakeholders expressed concerns that women might not

discuss sexual violence within the interview format, given the highly taboo nature of sex and the lack of open discussion around sexual behaviours particularly among women.²⁶⁻²⁸

Given the sensitivities around marital rape, the research team developed an interview guide that was structured sequentially, beginning with questions of low-level sensitivity (e.g., childhood, current life) and ending with the most sensitive questions (sexual practices, including violence). This method allowed the interviewer to build rapport and trust with the woman, and to ensure a higher degree of disclosure and openness. This took time, but a complete and nuanced story was obtained. Furthermore, all in-depth interviews were conducted by local female qualitative researchers, who had experience conducting in-depth interviews on women's health and gender.

To fully account for the above ethical and safety considerations, as well as apply international best practices, the team worked to develop clear and comprehensive guidelines and procedures for conducting ethical and safe research on violence against women in Myanmar. This included mechanisms and processes to ensure confidentiality and voluntary participation, to ensure that respect, trust and engagement with women's stories were foremost in the implementation of the study. The following section outlines the key elements of this study's ethical and safety framework for action.

Ethics and safety framework

Working from international standards of best practice, the research team performed an extensive literature review and consultation process to ensure that the research protocol's ethics and safety framework would uphold international ethical standards but would also fit with the complex and diverse socio-political context of Myanmar. Whilst international standards form an essential foundation, contextual relevance is a vital consideration to ensure that the

ethical consideration and procedures fit for the populations to be included in the sample.

Ethical clearance

The study was submitted to Ethical Review Committee (ERC) of the Department of Medical Research, for ethical review and approval, prior to any activities undertaken as part of the study design and/or implementation. The research team defended the study and applied changes based on the recommendations of the Committee, to ensure that the study adhered to local standards around medical and social science research.

Methodological rigor

A number of steps around sampling, data collection and analysis were taken to ensure that the study met standards of methodological rigor for qualitative research on sensitive topics, such as women's experiences of abuse. The study used purposive sampling methods in order to identify women who met study criteria. Participants were identified through member organizations of the coordinating network that had long-standing relationships with women in the communities where they worked.

Focal points from each member organization underwent training on how to approach possible participants in ways that fostered a sense of mutual trust, respect and appreciation for women's willingness to share traumatic narratives - as well as adhered to principles of confidentiality and voluntary participation.

During data collection, interviews were conducted by female members of the research team, all of whom had undergone a weeklong training on how to conduct interviews with maximum sensitivity and caution while still obtaining relevant data on traumatic experiences of abuse. The interviewer explained the focus and purpose of the study to the participant, and responded to any questions or concerns before the participant gave verbal consent.

The interviewers used a semi-structured guide for conducting the interviews, which

gave the interviewers confidence in the trajectory of the discussion, while also allowing for fluid conversation dynamics. This further created a positive interaction between the interviewer and participant. Finally, the full research team - international technical advisors as well as Myanmar national researchers - were engaged in data analysis to ensure that analysis captured local nuances. To ensure technical accuracy, the final report was peer-reviewed by international and Myanmar national violence against women research experts.

Confidentiality

It was a primary responsibility of the research team to ensure that women's narratives and identities were kept confidential throughout the research process. Prior to implementation, a 'safe name' was used to refer to the study in order to reduce the number of individuals who were aware of the study's focus on intimate partner violence. This was done in order to prevent communities - and possible perpetrators - from learning of the true nature of the study and consequently putting women at risk of further violence or stigma for participating in the study.

During data collection, each woman was given a code, rather than using her actual name on consent forms, and no real names were used in the final report. Interviewers also carried abbreviated question guides that did not include any sensitive questions, in case of any demands by individuals other than the participant to see and approve of the questions.

All consent forms, transcripts and audio recordings were kept in a locked cabinet. Audio recordings were deleted after they had been transcribed, to remove any audio record of participants. All these steps ensured that women's confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

Safety and well-being of participants and researchers

The safety and well-being of participants and the research team was of paramount

importance to the study. Participants themselves identified the place for interview. This gave them maximum discretion over choosing a location where they could disclose sensitive and traumatic events in a comfortable and safe environment.

Attention to the ethical concept of respect for persons also emerged as particularly crucial during the interview process. By its nature, violence against women includes a violation of personal boundaries (whether emotional or physical) and often also the violation of trust within an intimate relationship.

It was, therefore, important not to replicate this violation of trust in the research process. Non-judgmental attitudes, sensitive questioning techniques and allowing the woman to lead the discussion all contributed to maintaining an environment of trust and respect for the participant's well-being. At the end of each interview, the researchers offered the participant contact details for medical, legal and psycho-social resources through local partners.

In addition, the research team included a psycho-social counselor who provided counseling to participants upon request. This process further fostered mutual trust between the participants and interviewers. The counselor also provided de-brief counselling to the interviewers in order to offset the likelihood of vicarious trauma to the research team.

Conclusion

'Behind the Silence: Violence against Women and their Resilience in Myanmar' is one of the first studies in Myanmar to apply rigorous ethical and safety standards to research on violence against women in the general population. Although the generalized ability of this study is limited, given its qualitative nature, the data and findings were robust and much of this was due to the ethical framework and mechanisms in place to achieve quality research on violence against women in Myanmar.

We aim to inspire future studies on women's experiences of violence, as well as other research on sensitive topics, to take up these recommended steps to ensure a strong ethical and safe application of research methods on these topics in Myanmar.

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