

**Guidelines to conducting successful Focus Groups  
(prepared for REPLACE 2 project partners)**

**Draft (do not quote)**

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## What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is more than just a large interview; it is a situation where a number of individuals are invited to take part in a discussion in which they not only voice their opinions about certain issues, but also define their beliefs and identities in relation to others in the group. A focus group facilitator needs to be aware, not only of what is being said by participants, but also what is not being said and how individuals behave towards one another. Unlike the in depth interview, focus groups, to some extent are more representative of social interaction that occurs within wider society. Thus they allow the facilitator to gain an insight into how individuals define themselves or their community when interacting with others member of their community. Individuals may define themselves by disassociating themselves with others in society. For example, individuals of a religious persuasion might differentiate themselves from others who do not seem to follow any particular religion in order to define who they are and what they believe in. However, within a focus group situation, where there are many individuals who hold certain beliefs, opinions etc, defining what constitutes as a religious following becomes complex. Focus groups therefore offer a unique opportunity, not only to find out individuals' opinions about certain issues, but also to explore how identities and community beliefs are negotiated and formed.

## Focus of the Focus Group

Because we want to explore the groups' interests and what they feel are appropriate questions to ask within one-to-one interviews, the structure of the focus groups should be loose. Although we want the participants to discuss the interview schedule, we also want them to raise issues that they feel are important to them and/or the community. We therefore need to strike a balance between our agenda and the participants' insights to the practice of FGM.

## The Characteristics of a Good Focus Group Facilitator

Focus group facilitators/Assistant facilitators should have the following qualities:

1. Individuals must have a good knowledge of spoke English, Somali and/or Sudanese
2. Facilitators should have some formal education and experience of working with groups/individuals.
3. Must be assertive and self-confident about their capabilities as a communicator.
4. Be able to think on their feet: With the focus group schedule only acting as a 'guide', facilitators should not be afraid of exploring other avenues of enquiry.
5. Facilitators need to listen to what people are saying: Facilitators must remember what has been discussed, what will need to be discussed and how best to get participants to discuss the issues that are relevant to the research.
6. Facilitators and their assistants should control their non-verbal actions, even if they feel strongly about an issue. Assistant facilitators should not participate in the discussion only if invited by the group of facilitator should they participate.
7. Assistant facilitators do not need to possess the same characteristics as facilitators, they are there to assist and take comprehensive notes.
8. Community members are more likely to share their thoughts and opinions with individuals who have a similar background to theirs.
9. Facilitators don't necessarily have to share their opinions about FGM to the group. However, be prepare to hear unpleasant views or opinions which you disagree with.

10. Keep in mind the goal of conducting the focus group. You need to know the answer to the 'why am I here and what does this all mean'?

## **Recruiting Participants**

When recruiting participants to attend a focus group it is always best to err on the side of caution and recruit more than is necessary. By doing this it will overcome the 'no-show' problem. Research has shown that individuals who are approached to attend focus groups engage in a 'diffusion of responsibility', where they assume that other participants will contribute so they don't feel responsible if they do not attend. When recruiting, potential participants may immediately agree to participate and 'yes, I'll be there'. However, you should not simply take this 'yes' as a sign that the individual truly believes the focus group is a good thing. Facilitators and assistants need to emphasise that it is crucially important that participants attend and that the researchers are extremely interested to hear their views. Also indicate that their participation would benefit the whole community, as this is an issue that concerns members of the Somali/Sudanese community. Also, inform participants that their time will be most appreciated and that there will be refreshments provided. What is important, however, is that you uphold ethical standards and inform the participant about the nature of the research project- hand them a participant information sheet (PIS) -when you first approach them. I shall return to the issue of Ethics shortly.

Once you have recruited individuals, you should maintain contact with them and remind them of the time, date and location of the focus group. It has been known for researchers to send confirmation letters to those participants who agree to take part, however, because of the

## **Composition of the Focus Group**

Groups should consist of no more than 8 participants, if there are no more than this some individuals might feel inhibited about speaking out. It is also very difficult to manage large focus groups and it is especially difficult to decipher what each participant is saying when transcribing the digital recording.

It would be an advantage to arrange focus groups so that they contain individuals of a similar age, marital status, family composition, education level and length of time within the UK/Netherlands. Focus groups are about sharing ideas and experiences, therefore, disagreement and suspicion should be kept to a minimum. Also, Focus groups can provide the space for individuals to talk about issues that are considered inappropriate by others. There is a 'safety in numbers' effect, where people feel as though they can discuss issues with similar individuals. Authority relationships must also be avoided in focus groups, as individuals will seldom speak freely in front of those with power to reward or punish them. Mixed groups, for example Somali and Sudanese women or men, might stimulate an interesting exchange of opinions about FGM. However, facilitators need to establish whether mixed groups are appropriate before inviting participants to take part in a focus group.

## **Where to conduct the Focus Group?**

Facilitators should create a safe and positive atmosphere where individuals can talk openly, and the location or environment in which the discussion is to take place can have a massive impact on the group dynamics. If the discussion is going to take place in a public building, make sure that the room where the discussion will take place

sensitive nature of this research, individuals might not want to divulge personal information, even though you have emphasised that their details would be handled in the strictest confidence. Therefore, maintain contact with participants might be difficult. Nevertheless, maintain an up-beat and positive manner and indicate that you would really love for them to join the group. Facilitators also need to emphasise that the participant's opinions or beliefs will not be judged negatively, that researchers are interested all points of view relating to FGM.

Focus groups should not be conducted at locations that are associated with any FORWARD UK as this could influence participant's opinions relating to FGM. Also, make sure that there are no campaign posters (Anti-FGM posters) that could influence the group discussion.

Try to choose a location that people are familiar with, that is not too inconvenient or difficult to get to or locate. The time and day that the focus group is to take place also needs to be carefully considered. Facilitators need to be aware that individuals have other duties such as work, childcare, observing their religion etc. Facilitators therefore need to be flexible and accommodating when arranging the time and date of the focus group.

The issue of childcare also needs to be taken into consideration. Because of the topic being discussed in the focus group, it would be appropriate for children to be in the same room as the focus group. Therefore, facilitators need to make sure that the location provides adequate facilities, for example, an adjoining room, where children can be supervised.

Make sure that the building has adequate toilet facilities.

will be private in order to ensure participant confidentiality.

Before the focus group commences you should ask the participants if they consent to the interview being digitally recorded. Participants should also be asked to sign a participant consent form indicating that they have been fully informed of the research project and understand the nature of their participation. Again, like the PIS, interviews might need to verbally relay the information on the consent form, for those who have difficulty reading. If participants don't want to sign a consent form, but are happy for the focus group to be recorded, then informed consent can be confirmed by the facilitator reading the informed consent form and the participant verbally indicating that they agree to the five points. Also, emphasise that participants are under no obligation to continue with the focus group and that they can withdraw from the project at anytime without giving any reason. In addition to establishing individual participant's consent, the facilitator must ensure confidentiality when conducting focus groups. Facilitators will ask participants not to divulge information about issues raised within the course of the discussion, particularly information relating to fellow participants.

In order to identify the participant for future references, for example, if they wish to withdraw from the research project, ask them to generate a unique identification number. This could be their initials plus the month and day of their birth, for example, JS initials, 12 day, 10

Finally, make sure you provide adequate refreshment for participants.

## Ethics

As I have already mentioned, when recruiting participants you need to inform them about the project. This is done by giving the participant a participant information sheet (PIS), this explains what the study is about, why they have been chosen, what will happen if they take part, the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part, informs them how the information they disclose will be kept confidential and includes the contact details of the researchers at Coventry University. Some participants may have difficulty understanding written English, Dutch, Somali, Sudanese and therefore you might have to explain this information verbally. If the participant agrees to take part in the study, this information should be relayed to them again before the start of the focus group.

give them advice or support if required. During de-briefing it is an opportune moment to ask the participants if they have any questions or concerns regarding the issues raised or their participation. Some participants might indicate that they wish to withdraw from the project at this stage. If this is the case, inform the participant that all information that they have disclosed will not be included in the project and the digital recording will be deleted.

Facilitators and participants need to be safe. One therefore should be mindful about conducting focus groups in areas which are characterised by high crime rates and violence. In addition to their physical safety, researchers made need to seek emotional support, particularly if they are dealing with a sensitive issue. Listening to participants experiences may raise some feeling and bring back forgot or suppressed memories. If a participant becomes distressed during

month. Inform them that this identification will only be used by the researchers and that their identity will be anonymised in the final report/transcript.

Do not disclose the details or discuss the comments of another participant during the focus group. This not only breaches past participants' confidentially, but the present participants will doubt your ability to maintain their confidence. This is not to say that you can't talk in generalities, for example, if a participant asks you 'what have other people said' in relation to particular point, you could say 'well, a lot of participants have indicated that' etc.

At the end of the focus group de-brief the participant by giving them a copy of the de-briefing sheet (explain this to the participant if they have trouble understanding written English/Somali/Sudanese) that includes information regarding the organisations who work within the area of FGM and who can

There is nothing more unprofessional than being late for an appointment. If you are unable to make it for some reason or are running late, notify the participant and offer to reschedule. Also give yourself plenty of time to conduct the focus group, de-brief the participant and write your report. You should allow yourself at least 30-40 minutes after the participants have left for you to write the report.

### 2. Check to see if the location is suitable:

Check to see whether there are any posters, notices on the walls, which could offend or influence the participants' answers. Make sure no one will disturb the interview by walking into the interview room by placing a notice on the door indicating that a private meeting is in progress.

the focus group, facilitators need to ascertain whether the participant wishes to continue. Upon hearing that the participant does not wish to continue with the focus group, their participation will cease. The facilitator should temporarily stop the discussion and sensitively remove the participant and offer them the contact information for counselling services or organisations addressing FGM. On returning to the focus group, the facilitator will enquire as to whether the group wishes to continue. Information relating to counselling services etc., will be distributed to all participants during debriefing. Investigating sensitive topics can also have a tremendous impact on facilitators' emotional well-being. It is paramount that researchers be granted the same support as participants.

## **Preparing for the Focus Group**

So you have been successful in recruiting individuals to the focus group and you have kept in contact with them to remind them of the time, date and location of the meeting. But what do you need to do before the focus group actually starts? Hopefully, the following, the following pieces of advice should help you to conduct a successful focus group:

1. Make sure that you are on time:
5. Organise the seating arrangements so that the participants can see and interact with each other.
6. Utilise name cards so that people can remember other names.
7. Be familiar with the interview schedule

### 3. Refreshments:

Have refreshments ready, for example, two bottles of water or a cup of herbal tea etc.

### 4. Equipment check:

It is important that you have brought the correct equipment with you. You will need:

- a) Digital Recorder
- b) Spare batteries and/or mains adapter
- c) Microphone
- d) Notepad
- e) Spare pen/pencil

Before the participants arrive, check that the equipment is working by conducting a test of the recording level within the room. Not only does this check whether the equipment is working, it also allows you to see whether there is any noise interference.

## **Facilitating the focus Group**

When participants arrive, welcome them and show lead them to the room where the focus group will take place. Facilitators could start the focus group by establishing some guidelines as to how the session will be conducted. This is a perfect opportunity for participants to contribute to the format of the session, for example, the group decide

8. Have a box of paper tissues ready:

Participants may become upset during the discussion, therefore it is always a good idea to be prepared with paper tissues.

9. Be alert and keep in mind what is the purpose of the focus group:

It is important to know what the goals of the focus group are. In our case we want to make sure that we develop a thorough interview schedule that encapsulates all those questions relating to individuals' belief systems. We want participants to comment on the draft interview schedule and to bring to the research some ideas and questions which would be relevant. Essentially, we want to know what the communities perspectives are relating to FGM and how beliefs are reinforced within the community. We also want to know if the language use in the interview schedule is appropriate.

10. Have all documentation ready:

You will need the PIS, consent form, draft interview schedule, elicitation materials and de-briefing sheet ready to give to participants.

11. Relax and be confident

Give yourself a few minutes before the participants arrive to relax and take stock of your situation. Even if you still doubt your abilities, be confident when conducting the focus group.

when it would be appropriate for breaks etc. Facilitators could also ask the group whether or not they wish for mobile phones to be switched off. If participants object, then please advise them that if they do need to take a call, can they do so quietly without disturbing the group.

Ethical considerations must also be explained before the focus group beings. Also, inform participants where the toilets are and where they can go if they need to take break from the discussion.

After obtaining participants written or oral consent, facilitators should introduce themselves and then invite each participant to briefly introduce themselves to the group. It is crucial to create an open atmosphere at the start of the meeting. Reiterate that facilitators and their assistants are there to listen and not to criticise or condemn. Also emphasise that there are no right and wrong answers, but rather there are different points of view, which are all welcome.

Your introduction should be brief, you do not want to give them a detailed account just a précis, if too much detail is given this could lead to participants not opening up and discussing issues. You should also indicate how long you expect the meeting will last. **DO NOT INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO ASK QUESTIONS AFTER INTRODUCTION.** They could ask question which are unanswerable, such as who is going to read the report? Who really wants this information?

The first question on the focus group schedule is very open and should stimulate some debate. However here are a few things you can do to facilitate or move the discussion along.

1. Motivate participants either with the use of elicitation methods or by raising interesting points for discussion.



Use elicitation methods such as news paper articles, music, photographs, stories or poems to stimulate debate. Pilot the elicitation material, one never knows how individuals may react to say health leaflets or newspaper clippings relating to FGM. Do not rush to use elicitation methods or prompts simply to avoid long silences. Although you may feel uncomfortable about prolonged silences, particularly if you or a participant has asked a question and no one responds. But participants may simply be reflecting on the question or formulating their response and introducing a prompt could distract them from the previous point. Therefore, be patient!

2. Let the participants answer the questions and debate topics of interest.

3. Provide positive feedback and acknowledgement

Facilitators must appreciate when participants are active and let them know that their involvement and opinions are valued. Communicating this approval can be done through body language or verbally. Facilitators must validate the experiences and the meanings that participants place on the practice of FGM even if they disagree with them. You must not say 'No, that's not right'.

4. Communicate in an open manner:

Remember who, what, how AND when. Questions opening with these words generally generate more comprehensive answers. For example, 'How do you feel about this'? or 'what do you know about this'? and who 'Who has most influence in the community'?

5. Avoid the 'victim' mentality:

6. Encourage participants to finish off sentences if they have been interrupted. Also, seek clarification of issues, even if you understand them yourself. Remember, you want participants to explain to explain their beliefs or opinions thoroughly.

7. Recording Equipment

We shall be using digital recorders, which are small obtrusive and thus should not prove to be too distracting. These are a few things one needs to consider when using recording equipment:

- Make sure you have recharged the batteries/device before the focus group. Also carry spare batteries with you. You could use two recorders as a failsafe.
- Place the microphone in an optimal position so that it registers everyone's comments
- If participants start to object to the recording, then turn off and continue to take notes.
- Take notes anyway (do not rely solely on the recording). Make notes on salient individuals within the group and of those points which you think most engaged participants
- To make it easier for the transcriber, it is useful to take note of the first few words uttered by participants. This will therefore allow the transcriber to identify all the participants in the group. It might be worthwhile asking another person to take notes, whilst the moderator runs the group.
- Try to use participants' identification or name when addressing them. This too aids the transcription process.
- Try to use participants' identification or name when addressing them. This too aids the transcription process.
- Take notes:  
The assistant facilitator should take detailed notes of non-verbal

Even if participants stress their difficulties and feel despair regarding their situation, the facilitator needs to acknowledge that it is a difficult and complex situation, but guide participants to focus on how they can make a difference.

Language can tell us more than the actual answer to the question. Take notes about particular moments during the focus group that made an impression on you, say for example, when participants' body language and the answers they give to a question seem mismatched. Laughter and silences can also be very informative.

9. If it looks as though you are going to run out of time, but discussion is going well and interesting points are being raised, facilitators have a few options:

- Ask the group if you can extend the time
- Work quickly through the remaining questions
- Finish before covering all the questions
- Allow for follow-up and feedback to be given by email or one-to-one interviews
- Arrange another meeting

Ask participants to see which option they prefer.

### **Possible scenarios which could occur during the focus groups.**

1. If an individual starts to nominate the discussion. This has the effect of inhibiting others within the group to speak out, what does one do to address this power imbalance?

cues such as hand gestures, facial expressions and how a person is sitting; body language can tell us more than the actual answer to the question. Take notes about a particular moments during the focus group that made an impression on you, say for example, when participants' body

This is where the people disclose negative encounters with say health professionals or individuals from the non-Somali/Sudanese community. Instead of fighting these stories, ask participants to comment on them, 'horror stories' do reveal a lot about individuals' expectations and beliefs.

4. Someone in the group says something which upsets the others. What do you do to minimise causing offence to group members?
5. Participants being to disagree with each other, what do you do? Although disagreements can cause problems, particularly if they become acrimonious, they can also yield valuable insights into participants' perceptions and beliefs. Therefore, ask participants to consider their argument and why they hold to these differing views.
6. A focus group is being conducted by a young facilitator with old women who start to question the facilitator.
7. Someone speaks out in favour of practicing FGM and starts to challenge the interviewer. What do you do?

Power dynamics within focus groups are fluid and complex, however one has to be prepared for questions that participants might ask. For example, participants might ask why they are not getting paid. The answer to this question is that the interviewers are doing a job which they have received training and instruction.

2. A few individuals within the group seem very withdrawn, what do you do in this situation?

One cannot force individuals to speak, but they may consider whether aspects relating to group dynamics could be altered in order for these people to feel less inhibited. A facilitator could also pick up on non-verbal cues, such as a smile, nod or shaking of the head and ask the participant why they disagree etc.

3. The focus group starts to exchange 'horror stories':

contact details of organisations they may wish to contact in order to get support or guidance. Don't rush the de-briefing, answer participants' questions. Also, have your notepad and pen at the ready, because participants can say the most insightful things when the recorder has been switched off. Ask participants why they waited till the end to share this information with you.

Thank the participants once again for their time. Saying goodbye can be very strange, especially if the group have disclosed very personal topics during the interview. After the participants have left you may feel emotionally worn out, however, you should write your report immediately, whilst all the information is fresh in your mind.

## Writing the Report

It is extremely important that you do this immediately after the

Facilitators may face challenging personal questions relating to their social class, ethnic identity or whether they have been circumcised etc. Therefore, these issues need to be considered by facilitator prior to conducting the focus group. You need to know how much you are prepared to disclose.

## Debriefing Participants

After you have finished discussing the issues and the participants doesn't wish to add anything further, stop the digital recorder and begin de-briefing the participant. Hand them the de-brief sheet and explain what is going to happen next. Also ask if they are still happy to continue to participate. If they are still distressed after the interview, indicate that the de-brief sheet has the

interview, whilst you can still remember vividly what aspects of the focus group really had an impact on you. Facilitators and co-facilitators should examine the notes of the meeting and playback the interview and listen for things that you didn't notice when you were conducting the focus group. Particularly pay attention to how you asked questions and whether you feel there needs to be any changes in your approach. Writing the report allows you the facilitator and assistant to reflect on the discussion. Make a note of your initial thoughts relating to the issues discussed and the common themes, if any, which emerged. These reports, together with the field notes, will be very helpful to the research team when it comes to analysing the transcripts of the interviews.