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EMPOWER JORDAN

Enabling and Mobilizing Civil Society Organizations in Jordan through Reinforced Institutional, Advocacy, and Technical Capacities to **Enhance Coordination for Sustainable Development**

TRAINING MANUAL

Qualitative Research Tools: In-Depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions 2025

Implemented by

acted

ZERO EXCLUSION CARBON POVERTY

In partnership with

KING HUSSEIN FOUNDATION مؤسسة الملك الحسين
مركز المعلومات والبحوث
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Introduction

This training manual is developed as part of the "Empowering Civil Society Organizations in Jordan by Strengthening Institutional and Technical Capacities and Advocacy for Improved Coordination Towards Sustainable Development EMPOWER Jordan" project, implemented in partnership with the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) in Jordan, and generously funded by the European Union.

The primary objective of the project is to empower 21 civil society organizations (CSOs) and 42 community-based organizations (CBOs) across Jordan to become active institutions in promoting human rights and advancing sustainable development through strengthening their institutional structures and technical capacities.

In addition, the training aims to support the project's interventions related to coordination mechanisms among CSOs by fostering collaboration and dialogue between civil society actors and key stakeholders. This is intended to contribute to meaningful policy reforms on issues related to human rights and sustainable development.

In light of increasing social and economic challenges, the need for robust research tools has become more pressing than ever. Such tools are essential to enable civil society organizations (CSOs) to better understand local realities and strengthen their capacity to influence national policies and programs. This training manual is part of a broader initiative aimed at building the skills of CSO staff to carry out qualitative research that elevates the voices of local communities, especially women and marginalized groups, and supports the development of evidence-based interventions. Developed by **the Information and Research Center – King Hussein Foundation**, the manual responds to a practical need on the ground to enhance the knowledge and skills of community researchers in collecting and analyzing qualitative data. It also aims to support the effective use of research findings in advocacy, policy influence, and program development.

The manual focuses on key qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and provides well-rounded training content that combines theoretical knowledge with hands-on practice. It covers topics such as facilitation techniques, ethical considerations, question design, and data analysis supported by examples and case studies relevant to the Jordanian context.

Target Audience

This manual aims to serve the following groups:

- Staff members of civil society organizations.
- Community researchers and activists working on human rights and gender issues within community organizations.
- Program and project staff involved in designing or evaluating evidence-based interventions.
- Local organizations seeking to develop interventions based on a deep understanding of community needs.
- Selected representatives from government entities participating in project activities.

The Importance of This Manual

- Contributes to improving the quality of locally produced qualitative research by civil society organizations.
- Supports advocacy efforts by providing tools that help generate narratives based on real experiences and marginalized voices.
- Enhances the effectiveness of programs and projects by linking their design to in-depth qualitative analysis results.
- Provides a practical framework for addressing sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, economic empowerment, and early marriage

Introduction to Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, also referred to as qualitative inquiry, is a foundational approach in the social sciences and humanities. It aims to understand phenomena by exploring individuals' experiences, behaviors, and interpretations of the world around them. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numbers and measurements, qualitative research seeks to uncover deep contextual understanding and meaning through methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and content or textual analysis.

This approach is widely used in fields such as education, social work, public health, gender studies, and public policy. Its strength lies in its ability to capture the voices of marginalized groups and highlight experiences that cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone. Qualitative research helps researchers and decision-makers design interventions that are more responsive to the real needs of target populations.

Definitions of Qualitative Research

Oxford Dictionary of Social Research – Definition of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is "a type of social research that relies on non-numerical data such as words, observations, and images to understand meanings and experiences from the perspective of the people involved."

This definition highlights that the qualitative approach focuses on interpretation and meaning rather than quantitative measurement.

Bogdan & Biklen's Definition of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is "a systematic inquiry process based on descriptive data such as words and observations, conducted in natural settings, and aimed at understanding how people construct meaning about the world they live in."

This definition emphasizes the importance of conducting research in natural contexts and focuses on understanding meanings from the participants' own perspectives.

Uwe Flick's Definition of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research "encompasses a range of methods aimed at describing and interpreting social phenomena as perceived by individuals themselves. It is used to understand social processes that are constructed through language and interaction."

Kvale & Brinkmann's Definition of Qualitative Research

"Qualitative research seeks to understand the world through the eyes and experiences of individuals. Interviews are a key tool for uncovering the meanings and stories that shape their lives."

This definition highlights the importance of interviews as a primary method for accessing individuals' lived experiences in qualitative research.

Thus, qualitative research is:

- A participatory research methodology.
- Aimed at collecting non-statistical (non-numerical) data.
- Focused on understanding people's views on specific topics.

Reasons for Using Qualitative Research Methods in Gender-Related Issues

- To give voice to participants especially women and marginalized groups and to highlight their lived experiences.
- To clarify differences between women's and men's perspectives.
- To enrich the research by embracing diverse and nuanced responses.

Introduction: The Difference Between Qualitative and Quantitative Research

In scientific inquiry, the selection of an appropriate research methodology is pivotal to ensuring the validity and reliability of study findings. Both qualitative and quantitative research represent foundational paradigms, each characterized by distinct epistemological assumptions, objectives, and methodological tools.

Qualitative research is primarily concerned with exploring and interpreting meanings, experiences, and social contexts as articulated by individuals themselves. It employs data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the complexity and diversity inherent in social phenomena. Conversely, quantitative research emphasizes the measurement and statistical analysis of variables, utilizing instruments such as structured surveys and standardized tests, with the aim of producing generalizable results across larger populations.

A thorough comprehension of the distinctions between these approaches enables researchers and practitioners to judiciously select methodologies that align with their research questions, the nature of the data sought, and the contextual parameters of the study.

The following table highlights the key differences between qualitative and quantitative research approaches:

Comparison	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Objective	Understanding meanings, experiences, and context	Measuring phenomena using numbers and statistics
Types of Questions	“How?” and “Why?”	«How much?” and “To what extent?»
Data Collection Methods	Interviews, Focus Groups, Observation	Surveys, Tests, Digital Records
Type of Data	Descriptive (texts, statements, observations)	Quantitative (percentages, rates, numbers)
Sample Size	Small and carefully selected	Large and often random
Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis	Statistical Analysis
Common Use	Understanding individuals’ behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions	Generalizing findings to larger populations
Flexibility	High – Questions can be adapted during the research process	Low – Relies on fixed instruments

Interactive Exercise:

Instructions:

Each group is requested to answer the following question within 10 minutes:

- Which of the following research topics can be studied using qualitative research methods?

A new family planning method has caused health issues among married women in a specific governorate. What actions should be taken?

- There has been a wave of sexual harassment incidents in certain areas. How can these be prevented?
- Plans are underway to build a girls' playground in the community. What characteristics should it have?

Answers:

For the first topic:

The issue requires a medical opinion; therefore, it is not suitable for qualitative research. Instead, it calls for a medical study and consultation with doctors and specialists.

For the second topic:

Qualitative research methods can be applied, especially if there is involvement from the police or the local community. However, the solution might also depend on other stakeholders.

For the third topic:

This topic necessitates a qualitative study to identify the desired features of the playground and explore how to encourage the local community to send their daughters to use the facility.

Conclusion: What is the question?

All topics can be studied using various research methods; however, what determines the choice of a research method is the research question itself. A facilitator can repeatedly use the phrase "What is the question?" to encourage participants to clearly define the research question. Accordingly, it is important to emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer; rather, the choice depends on the nature of the question in order to determine the appropriate research method.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

While qualitative research serves as a robust method for deeply understanding social and human phenomena, it also presents inherent strengths and challenges like any other research approach. This methodology enables the exploration of experiences and contexts that are not easily quantifiable, yet it demands strong analytical capabilities and substantial interpretive effort.

Presented below is a brief summary of the key advantages that characterize qualitative research, along with potential drawbacks or challenges to be mindful of during the design and implementation of qualitative studies.

1. Provides a deep understanding of the social and cultural context.

Qualitative research enables the researcher to delve into the details of the context in which cultural, social, economic, or religious factors influence individuals' behaviors and attitudes. Rather than providing superficial data, it helps uncover the "reasons behind the behavior."

Example:

In a study examining the reluctance of women in rural communities to run for municipal elections, individual interviews revealed that the barriers were not only related to limited opportunities or education but also included fears of social stigma, disapproval from husbands or senior family members, and the absence of female role models in the public sphere. These aspects would not have emerged through a closed-ended questionnaire.

2. Allows participants to express their experiences in their own voice.

Qualitative research prioritizes the participant's voice by allowing them to tell their story in their own language, ensuring a more equitable representation of their personal experience. This approach is particularly important for groups that are often underrepresented in quantitative or formal research.

Example:

In interviews with survivors of gender-based violence, women expressed fears of reporting, feelings of shame, and reluctance to approach official bodies due to previous experiences of neglect or stigma. Such emotions cannot be captured through numbers or closed-ended questionnaire options.

3. Flexibility in research instruments and question design.

Qualitative research provides the researcher with the ability to adapt to the flow of the conversation, modify questions during the interview, or explore new topics that were not anticipated at the outset of the study. This flexibility allows access to unexpected yet highly significant data

Example:

During an interview with a female worker in an industrial area factory, the conversation shifted from questions about the work environment to a more significant topic for her: harassment by supervisors and the silence of colleagues out of fear of dismissal. This shift provided the researcher with an opportunity to understand another dimension of power dynamics in the workplace.

4. Suitable for studying marginalized or underrepresented groups

Qualitative research is considered one of the most effective methods for reaching populations often absent from formal research, such as persons with disabilities, refugees, domestic workers, or out-of-school and unemployed youth.

Example:

In focus group discussions with persons with disabilities in remote areas, participants expressed challenges in accessing health centers, mistreatment by staff, and the absence of visual or mobility aids. These challenges were not documented in the official reports of the Ministry of Health, highlighting the value of qualitative data.

5. Contributes to the development of policies and programs that are more responsive to reality

Qualitative research findings are often presented in a rich, narrative, and contextually detailed form, contributing to the design of programs and policies that consider cultural and social disparities and respond to the real needs of people.

Disadvantages of Qualitative Research

1. Limited Generalizability

Qualitative research does not rely on representative samples of the population; instead, it selects participants based on specific criteria (such as geographic location, age, or experience with the studied phenomenon). Therefore, its findings cannot be statistically generalized to broader populations. In contexts where decisions need to be made at the national level or in public policy, qualitative research alone may not suffice. However, its results remain invaluable for understanding the deep meanings and motivations behind the numbers.

Example:

In a study exploring the reasons behind low secondary school enrollment among girls in a particular village, interviews may reveal that early marriage and fear of harassment during transportation are key factors. However, these findings do not necessarily imply that the same factors apply to other governorates without examining their specific contexts.

2. Time and Effort in Data Collection and Analysis

From designing research instruments to conducting interviews and transcribing them, followed by coding and analyzing texts, qualitative studies go through stages that demand significant time and effort, especially when the sample is diverse or the number of interviews is large. Unlike surveys, which can be distributed and analyzed electronically, interviews require much more time for preparation, recording, transcription, and repeated reading.

3. Heavy Reliance on Researcher Skills

The qualitative researcher does not merely collect data but actively shapes it through their approach, tone of voice, culture, and even facial expressions. If the researcher lacks proper training or skills in interviewing and observation techniques, much of the study's epistemic value may be lost. Additionally, the absence of neutrality or the use of culturally insensitive language can lead to participant withdrawal or inaccurate responses.

4. Researcher Bias and Positionality

Since the qualitative researcher is an integral part of the data collection and interpretation process, their analysis may be influenced by their preconceptions, cultural background, or personal biases. This subjectivity is inherent to the qualitative methodology but can lead to bias if not managed consciously.

Case Example: Researcher Bias in Qualitative Interviews

In a qualitative study aiming to explore the motivations and encouragement of fathers to educate their daughters in a rural area, a researcher conducts one-on-one interviews with a group of fathers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

- During the interviews, some fathers express clear support for girls' education, especially at the primary level, while others voice hesitation about allowing their daughters to pursue secondary or higher education. Their concerns are often linked to distance, financial constraints, or prevailing social norms.

The Challenge:

If the researcher is personally or professionally committed to the issue of girls' education, they may unintentionally focus only on the supportive narratives and overemphasize them in the analysis and writing. In contrast, the perspectives of hesitant fathers might be marginalized or dismissed as "barriers" or outdated attitudes unworthy of deeper exploration.

The researcher might also reformulate interview questions in a way that implies "support is the correct response," thereby influencing the authenticity and reliability of participants' answers.

Potential Impact:

- Producing an unbalanced analysis that portrays an overly optimistic or biased reality.
- Overlooking structural or societal factors influencing fathers' attitudes, such as poverty or lack of accessible schools.
- Generating recommendations that are unrealistic or disconnected from the local context.

5. Low Replicability

Explanation:

Qualitative research findings are closely tied to the temporal, cultural, and personal context in which the study is conducted. As a result, replicating the exact same research with identical outcomes is often difficult—unlike quantitative studies, which rely on fixed formulas and standardized measures. The goal of qualitative research is not replicability, but rather contextual depth. This underscores the importance of transparent documentation of the methodology and context, allowing others to understand how the findings were reached.

6. Difficulty Accessing Certain Populations or Sensitive Topics

When dealing with sensitive topics such as domestic violence, harassment, or reproductive health, researchers may face significant challenges in building trust with participants. Some individuals may be unwilling to speak about their experiences due to fear of stigma or potential consequences. Addressing these challenges requires researchers to be trained in ethical practices, to respect confidentiality, and to ensure psychological support is available when needed.

Example:

In a qualitative study exploring the experiences of survivors of domestic violence within socially conservative communities, researchers may need to engage local intermediaries to facilitate access. Additionally, multiple sessions may be required to establish sufficient trust with participants before initiating formal data collection.

Research and Its Relationship to Policy

Interactive Exercise:

The facilitator asks participants to share their thoughts on the benefits of research and writes their responses on a flipchart. After collecting responses, the facilitator explains the importance of research, highlighting the following key points:

- Strengthening your arguments when advocating for a specific intervention.
- Identifying or accessing evidence that can help persuade decision-makers to take action in a particular direction.
- Influencing policy, either by supporting its adoption or advocating for its revision.

The Relationship Between Qualitative Research, Policy Influence, and Advocacy

The relationship between qualitative research and advocacy or policy influence is one of mutual reinforcement, as qualitative research provides critical support to advocacy efforts in the following ways:

- It strengthens advocacy by grounding it in credible, context-specific data and accurately conveying the voices of participants, target groups, stakeholders, or rights-holders.
- It generates new insights that can help in shaping and refining the core issues of your advocacy agenda.
- It helps identify what is most likely to address the problem effectively from the perspective of the target communities themselves.
- It provides compelling stories and real-life examples that can be used to persuade decision-makers and mobilize public support.

Designing Research to Influence Policy: Key Questions and Steps

1. What is the policy we aim to influence?

Initially, it is essential to identify the targeted public policy. This policy may be related to a societal issue such as gender-based violence, women's participation in the labor market, or education.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the scope of the policy? Local, national, or regional?
- Is the policy currently in the development, implementation, or evaluation phase?
- Which authority is responsible for it (e.g., ministry, municipality, legislative council)?

2. Deciding and Defining How We Want to Influence Policy

There are various approaches to influencing policies, including providing evidence-based recommendations, mobilizing public opinion, or building advocacy coalitions. This requires a clear strategy: is the objective to amend a legal provision, support the implementation of an existing policy, or persuade decision-makers to allocate funding for a specific issue?

Guiding Questions:

- Do we aim to change policies, amend them, or improve their implementation?
- Who are the key decision-makers?
- To what extent are they receptive to data and evidence?

3. What are the research objectives?

The research objectives define the pathways to be followed. For example: do we aim to understand the root causes of a social issue, measure the impact of an existing policy, or document marginalized experiences?

Guiding Questions:

- What are the key questions we are trying to answer?
- How will the answers to these questions contribute to influencing policy?

4. What is the significance of the research?

It is important to clarify how the research fills a knowledge gap or supports an under-addressed issue. Equally important is to demonstrate its potential impact whether in improving policy quality, promoting social justice, or reducing discrimination.

Guiding Questions:

- Why is this research timely?
- What knowledge gap does it aim to fill?
- How will it impact the target groups?

5. Who are the individuals or institutions we need to influence, and what are the most effective ways to reach them?

Producing knowledge alone is not sufficient it must be communicated to key actors, such as policymakers, the media, civil society organizations, or international agencies.

Guiding Questions:

- Who are the main stakeholders?
- What are the most appropriate channels of influence (e.g., meetings, dialogue sessions, policy briefs, media campaigns)?

6. What evidence already exists?

It is essential to review existing studies, reports, and statistics on the topic to avoid duplicating efforts and to ensure that the new research contributes added value.

Guiding Questions:

- What national and international sources are available?
- Are there existing literature reviews, policy papers, or government evaluations?

7. What is the missing data?

By reviewing the available evidence, we can identify what has not yet been documented or analyzed. This may include qualitative data on women's experiences or disaggregated statistics on a specific age group.

Guiding Questions:

- What type of information is currently unavailable?
- Why is it important to obtain this information now?

8. How will we collect the data and information?

The choice of data collection methods should align with the research objectives and the context. These methods may include interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, or the review of official documents.

Guiding Questions:

- Will we use a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach?
- Are there any ethical considerations (e.g., privacy, informed consent, etc.)?

9. Who are the individuals we need to interview?

Selecting a qualitative sample is of great importance. The sample should include diverse groups representing different stakeholders of the issue, such as those affected by the policy, service providers, and decision-makers.

Guiding Question:

- Do we need geographical or demographic diversity in the sample?

10. What approach will we use to analyze the data?

Data analysis should be systematic and transparent. In qualitative studies, methods such as content analysis or discourse analysis may be employed, whereas quantitative studies typically utilize statistical tools.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the most appropriate analytical approach?
- How will we link the findings to policy recommendations?
- Will we use software tools such as SPSS or Excel?

In-Depth Interviews and Facilitator Skills

Definition and Purpose of In-Depth Individual Interviews

In-depth individual interviews are a fundamental qualitative research tool that involves collecting detailed verbal information from individuals relevant to the research topic through a direct face-to-face meeting between the researcher (or their representative) and the participant. During the interview, a set of pre-prepared questions is posed, and responses are accurately documented using dedicated forms.

These interviews are also defined as a systematic process aimed at establishing an open and interactive dialogue between the researcher and the participant, enabling the collection of rich, qualitative data closely linked to the research problem or study topic.

Advantages of In-Depth / Structured Individual Interviews

- Pre-preparing the questions helps carefully select the wording and phrasing.
- It ensures a desired level of structured organization in the data collected.
- Having a pre-designed questionnaire form allows for testing and validation prior to conducting the interview.
- Data collected from structured interviews are easier to review, tabulate, and analyze due to the high consistency of questions, which leads to more standardized responses.

Limitations of In-Depth / Structured Individual Interviews

- The cost of conducting interviews is higher compared to surveys.
- There may be bias introduced by the researcher or the participant.
- It can be difficult or impossible to interview certain key figures, such as ministers or heads of institutions, or to interview individuals in high-risk contexts, as this may endanger the researcher's safety.
- Reduced opportunity for respondents to reflect deeply or review relevant documents and reports before responding.
- Inconsistency in the way questions are posed across different interviews.

General Guidelines for Conducting In-Depth Individual Interviews

- Training the individuals assigned to conduct the interview, noting that it is preferable for the researcher themselves to carry out the interviews.
- Scheduling the interview in advance.
- Selecting the interview location, preferably away from the workplace, to ensure a quiet environment and avoid interruptions.

- The researcher’s appearance and attire should be appropriate and aligned with the social and cultural background of the interviewees.
- The researcher should clearly inform the interviewee from the outset about the objectives and purpose of the study.
- The researcher should ask questions in an unbiased manner and avoid sensitive or embarrassing questions whenever possible.
- Building Rapport: The facilitator/researcher should be kind, polite, and honest. They should avoid excessive praise or showing undue sympathy toward the interviewee. Additionally, the researcher must refrain from condescension or any form of aggression, maintaining a straightforward and respectful demeanor.
- The researcher must practice active listening and provide the interviewee with ample space to freely express their views, while maintaining focus within the scope and topic of the interview.
- Data Recording: The researcher/facilitator must use the appropriate method to document the interview.

Interactive Exercise: Role Play

Participants are divided into working pairs. The first person (the facilitator) asks the second person (the guest) the pre-prepared questions related to the assigned topics. Afterwards, the second person provides feedback on the facilitator’s performance. Roles are then switched, and both participants evaluate each other’s performance, sharing their observations with the entire group.

During this activity, the trainer monitors all groups and compiles common mistakes made during the in-depth interviews. Examples of such mistakes include:

- Did the facilitator read from the paper?
- Did the facilitator provide an introduction?
- Did the facilitator ask for permission before recording?
- Was confidentiality of information assured?
- What was the nature of the body language?
- Did the facilitator listen attentively to the interviewee?
- Was there a thank you at the end and were the interviewee’s questions answered?

It is important to focus on both strengths and weaknesses. The trainer should take notes to avoid forgetting details.

At the end, common mistakes are recorded on a flip chart and practical tips to overcome them are presented.

First: What are facilitation skills and why do we need them?

Facilitation skills are essential tools for researchers or facilitators when conducting individual interviews, focus groups, and data collection sessions. Facilitation is not merely about managing a discussion; it is the art of empowering participants to express themselves freely and ensuring everyone participates within a safe and comfortable environment.

Facilitation skills are also used in planning, conflict resolution, and understanding community needs. The more proficient the researcher or facilitator is in these skills, the more effective the sessions will be, resulting in higher quality outcomes.

Second: The Difference Between Facilitation and Chairing Meetings

Facilitation is similar to chairing meetings in terms of organization, but differs in role:

- The facilitator is not the source of knowledge but rather a guide for the discussion.
- The focus is on how participation happens, not just on what is said.
- The facilitator remains neutral and does not impose their opinions on the group.

Third: Essential Skills of the Facilitator

Some of the most important skills a facilitator needs during qualitative research include:

- Creating an encouraging and safe environment for participation.
- Motivating participants to freely express their ideas.
- Managing dominant personalities without excluding them.
- Organizing the discussion and managing time effectively.
- Practicing active listening without passing judgment.
- Respecting diverse viewpoints.
- Maintaining neutrality and avoiding influencing respondents.

Fourth: How does the facilitator plan an effective session?

When planning any meeting or discussion session, the facilitator should consider the following:

- Environment and General Atmosphere
- Choose a familiar and comfortable location for participants, easily accessible and safe for everyone (including women and persons with disabilities).
- Ensure the room size is appropriate for the number of participants.
- Logistical Arrangements
- Arrange the session in a circular or interactive setup that encourages participation.

- Provide signage and visual materials for display.
- Attend to hospitality and provide basic necessities (water, coffee, breaks, etc.).
- Ensure audio-visual equipment is functioning if available.

Fifth: Basic Rules in Research Sessions

To ensure fair and organized participation, "basic rules" should be established collaboratively with the participants, such as:

- No more than one person speaks at a time.
- Listen to others respectfully.
- Avoid mocking any idea.
- Adhere to the schedule after breaks.
- Equal opportunities for participation.

How to set the rules:

- Ask participants to suggest rules.
- Write the suggestions on a visible flipchart or board.
- Confirm group consensus on these rules.

Sixth: Can facilitation be learned?

Yes, facilitation is a skill that can be learned through training and practice. It is also an art that requires flexibility, empathy, and interactive intelligence. While some people have a natural talent in this area, everyone can improve their skills over time.

Types of Questions in In-Depth Individual Interviews

The questions posed by the researcher form the core of the in-depth individual interview, serving as the primary tool to access participants' experiences and to understand their meanings and implications more deeply. The importance of these questions extends beyond their content to include the timing of their delivery, their phrasing, and the way they are followed up during the conversation.

The quality of a qualitative interview depends on the facilitator's ability to diversify questions according to the flow of dialogue, the participant's responsiveness, and the level of openness and trust. Therefore, it is essential to become familiar with the types of questions used in this kind of interview, understand the function of each type, and employ them flexibly and without coercion.

Questions vary between introductory, probing, interpretive, direct, and indirect types, each playing a specific role in deepening understanding, broadening the discussion, and obtaining rich, meaningful data closely linked to the research question or issue.

Below is a table illustrating the main types of questions used in in-depth qualitative interviews, their objectives, and illustrative examples to help researchers use them effectively during data collection.

Questions' Types	Explanation
Introductory (Opening) Questions	Introductory questions aim to encourage the participant to provide a rich and spontaneous description related to the research topic. Here, the researcher follows up by exploring dimensions of the participant's experiences relevant to the study. Example of such questions: "Could you please tell me about…?" These questions can take various forms, such as direct questions, pauses in speech, or nodding, through which the participant understands that you want them to continue describing. This may also involve repeating a key word, an unusual phrase, something the participant emphasized verbally, or even using body language. These questions require careful attention to what the participant says, so the researcher can pause at "significant cues" within the conversation that may relate to the research questions.
Probing Questions	These questions aim to obtain in-depth answers and to examine their content without specifying particular aspects of that content. Examples include: "Can you talk in more detail about this point?" "Can you give me more examples of that?" »Can you describe in detail what happened"?
Clarifying Questions:	Clarifying questions aim to obtain a more precise description of the interviewee's experiences compared to broader statements. Examples include: "What did you think when the manager chose a man to carry out the task?" "How did you feel when the manager asked you to…?"
Direct questions	Direct questions aim to elicit the participant's opinions on specific aspects and dimensions of the topic under discussion. It is advisable to postpone these questions to a later stage of the interview, after the participant has had the opportunity to express the aspects and dimensions they consider most important.

Indirect questions	These are probing questions that hint at the opinions or attitudes of others while simultaneously implying the participant's own views and stances, which may not be expressed directly. Examples include: "What do you think other students' opinions are regarding competition for grades?" and "How do you think parents would react to hiring a group of novice teachers at the school?"
Explanatory Questions	Explanatory questions require the rephrasing or clarification of a previous answer. Examples include: "So, you mean that…?" or questions aimed at clarifying another response, such as: "Is it correct that you feel annoyed when the teacher corrects your assignments?" They also include questions seeking interpretation of what the participant said, for example: "Is it true that your concern about grades is related to your parents' reactions?" Or questions aimed at more reflective explanations, such as: "Do you see any connection between competing with other students for grades and your relationship with your siblings at home?" In general, researchers should use explanatory questions cautiously, as they may inadvertently impose certain views on the participants.

Interactive Exercise: Formulating Questions for a Research Scenario

Objective: Develop practical skills in crafting qualitative interview questions.

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials: Worksheets / Presentation screens / Training notebooks

Steps:

Present a brief research scenario to participants, for example:

"The researcher is conducting a study to understand the reasons behind the low participation of women in the labor market in a specific area."

Ask participants to formulate one or two questions of each type (introductory – probing – clarifying – direct – indirect – explanatory) relevant to the topic.

After completion, each team/person shares samples of their questions, followed by a group discussion to evaluate their appropriateness.

Discussion Points after the Interactive Exercise:

- What challenges did you face in classifying or formulating the questions?
- Which type of question was easiest or hardest to use?
- How can the type of question influence participant responsiveness?
- How can neutrality be maintained when using explanatory or direct questions?

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

A focus group is:

- A discussion held within a small group led by a trained facilitator, used to gain deeper insights into opinions on a specific topic and to inform future actions.
- Typically consists of 6–10 participants.
- Usually, 3–4 focus groups are needed to ensure that all relevant perspectives have been heard.
- Sessions typically last between 45–90 minutes.
- The focus is on the exchange of ideas among participants rather than on gathering individual responses to every question.
- The number of questions should not exceed 10.
- Centered around a specific topic.
- Moderated by a trained facilitator.
- Participants are encouraged to speak openly and respond to one another's views.

Focus groups are among the most prominent qualitative research tools used to explore experiences, opinions, and social attitudes in complex contexts, especially in relation to gender issues. They provide an interactive group platform through which individuals' perceptions and understandings can be explored particularly on sensitive topics that may be difficult to express in one-on-one interviews. This method combines structured facilitation, group interaction, and social dynamics, offering researchers a unique opportunity to capture diverse voices and to understand how opinions are formed through dialogue, confrontation, and solidarity. For this reason, focus groups are especially suitable for researchers and organizations aiming to gain in-depth insights into local contexts and gender-based differences among groups such as women, men, girls, boys, and individuals from marginalized communities.

This technique is particularly valuable when addressing sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence, early marriage, or reproductive health, where quantitative tools or individual interviews may not be sufficient. Focus groups offer a flexible approach that respects cultural and social dimensions and fosters participation in a safe, interactive environment.

Participants are introduced to the concept of focus groups, their importance in research, practical steps for conducting them, potential facilitation challenges, and strategies for managing different personality types within the group.
Focus groups can be used as a standalone qualitative data collection method or in combination with other qualitative tools (such as observation or in-depth individual interactions). In some cases, focus groups may be used to complement quantitative data either before or after surveys. Generally, it is advisable to conduct focus groups prior to drafting a questionnaire in order to refine and adjust its content based on the group discussions.

For example, if your research focuses on behaviors and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), it is helpful to have a clear understanding of the types of infections and how people refer to them—whether or not you use focus groups. This ensures that the terminology used in the survey aligns with language that is familiar to participants.

Avoid using focus groups when:

Participants are unlikely to feel comfortable in the presence of others, such as when a manager is included in a session with employees under their supervision, or when individuals from low-income backgrounds are grouped with participants from higher social classes. In such cases, some participants may not feel safe disclosing certain information.

Your study requires statistical data; focus group discussions do not produce quantifiable figures.

You make commitments you cannot fulfill, such as telling participants the discussion will directly lead to improved living conditions or solve specific problems. It is unethical to raise participants' expectations beyond what the study can realistically achieve.

Focus groups were used, for instance, to develop a questionnaire measuring nurses' and nursing lecturers' attitudes toward working with older adults in the UK initially tested through focus group discussions. In another example, researchers used focus groups (in addition to surveys) to assess secondary school teachers' perceptions of reproductive health and gender issues.

Beyond gauging perceptions or opinions on a specific topic, researchers may also choose to rely on focus group discussions to assess the progress of a particular program or intervention, and to integrate necessary adjustments in order to enhance its effectiveness and maximize its impact. For instance, physicians and medical interns at the American University of Beirut Medical Center participated in focus group discussions to explore the underlying reasons for ineffective communication between doctors and patients.

Focus groups are useful for exploring important and provocative topics, and they also help uncover unconventional perspectives that may not have occurred to anyone previously, insights that can enhance how participants' needs are understood and addressed. For example, during an analysis of participant views in a Facebook discussion about granting Jordanian nationality to children of Jordanian women married non-Jordanians, the research team became aware of a widely held but inaccurate religious argument against granting citizenship to those not born to a Jordanian father. As a result, the team began developing interventions counter this misconception.
Focus groups are also characterized by their low cost. They do not require special equipment or facilities and can be used to explore a wide range of topics, including sensitive issues such as domestic violence against women or child marriage. Moreover, group dynamics may encourage more reserved individuals to speak up.

Focus groups are not the following:

- Groups that merely gather individuals to answer questions posed by the researcher.
- Groups that are unrelated to research.
- Unplanned gatherings or discussions without a facilitator.
- Silent or passive groups.
- Nominal groups in which participants are simply asked to prioritize topics.
- Groups designed to persuade people to do something.
- Support or therapeutic groups, such as those for individuals recovering from alcohol addiction.

Steps for Facilitating a Focus Group:

- The general steps are similar to those of in-depth interviews.
- Clarify the issue.
- Explain to the participants why you are here.
- Explain the concept of the focus group, and clarify that it is an interaction among group members, and that you would like people to express their opinions. It is preferable that each person speaks in turn, because you want to hear each voice, and the recorder cannot capture two voices at once. Also mention that you do not want to miss valuable information. State that you are

here to facilitate the session and will not participate in the discussion.
- Present the topic of interest and why it matters to you.
- Explain how the focus group will help achieve the research objectives.
- Talk about ethical principles and discussion rules.
- Do not raise participants' expectations.
- Introduce participants to each other.
- Introduce yourself
- Start by identifying the questions.
- Give participants time to think and remain silent. If a long pause occurs, do something like say something funny or tell a short story.
- Observe nonverbal cues and reactions they are an important part of the discussion.
- Take a break, review your notes, and adjust your approach as needed.
- Probe when necessary.
- Listen, summarize, and clarify.
- Alert participants when the focus group is about to end.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

Before the meeting	• Review the research rationale and the session guide. • Practice the questions. • Identify a note-taker or recorder. • Decide who should be invited. • Decide on the use of prompts or stimuli. • Agree on meeting logistics. • Prepare the questions. • Recruit participants. • Review logistical arrangements.
During the meeting	• Thank the group for coming. • Review the purpose and objectives of the session. • Explain the structure of the meeting and how participants can contribute. • Set the tone for the session by asking an opening question and ensuring all opinions on it are heard. • Continue asking the rest of the questions in the same general manner. • After all questions have been covered, ask participants if they have any additional comments. • Inform the group about the next steps and what they can expect moving forward. • Thank the group again for attending.
After the meeting	• Transcribe the recording verbatim or prepare a written summary of the meeting. • Analyze the data by identifying patterns, themes, new questions, and conclusions. • Share the results with the group. • Utilize the results.

Role of the Facilitator in Focus Group Discussions

The facilitator is a trained individual skilled in conducting interviews and understanding group dynamics; their role is to ease the discussion process and ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute. The facilitator should always "keep the ball in the other court" instead of dominating the conversation or asking all the questions themselves. For example, sometimes some participants remain silent and generally agree with what others say.

Therefore, the facilitator's task is to ensure that these individuals are not subjected to any form of intimidation or coercion due to the attitudes of other group members. For this reason, it is recommended to conduct multiple focus groups to ensure the validity and strength of the results.

Focus groups are considered a challeng interactions among group members are highly valuable. There can be difficulties in recording the discussions. Hence, the facilitator usually accompanied by another person whose role is to record the discussion and monitor participants' reactions and their interactions with each other. The note-taker may focus on the seating arrangements (proximity of members), as well as verbal and non-verbal communication methods used (tone of voice, eye contact, body language).

It is highly recommended have a person dedicated recording the discussion, even when a recording device is used. Some researchers may find it difficult use recording devices during focus groups. Although having a recorder allows the facilitator to concentrate on the participants and maintain eye contact, voices sometimes overlap, which limits the researcher's ability to identify the speaker and what was said, thereby affecting the quality of the discussion notes.

Types of Personalities / Participants in Sessions:

- The Know-it-all: The person who tries to dominate the conversation all the time and pretends to know all the information – "Thank you very much for your input. Are there other opinions, or what do the rest of the group members think?"
- The Controller of the Discussion: Tries to answer all the questions and dominates the flow of the discussion – "Thank you very much for the valuable information. Now, I would like to hear the opinions of the other group members."
- The Talkative (Chatty): Talks about everything, whether related to the topic or not – stop looking at this person, glance at the clock, and politely interrupt the conversation.
- The Shy Participant: Look at them, try to engage them by calling their name or asking them a direct question.
- The Soft-Spoken Speaker: Ask them to repeat their statement louder.

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There may also be challenges in scheduling a time that suits everyone if all group members are not in the same natural context. For example, a meeting time convenient for farmers from the same local community may not suit them but might suit the researcher. In such cases, the facilitator should strive to avoid absenteeism by informing participants of the meeting time and place at least one week in advance, allowing them to adjust their plans and schedules. Other barriers to participation in focus groups may include family commitments or travel.

Therefore, it may be appropriate to agree on rules or procedures with everyone from the outset. To reduce overlapping voices and side conversations in focus groups, ask participants to raise their hands before speaking (although this may not always happen); this method can help organize the discussion to some extent. Allowing participants the freedom to answer questions ensures that their feelings are not hurt and that privacy and confidentiality are maintained.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. Taking steps to break the ice helps eliminate formality, and telling jokes or sharing anecdotes by the facilitator or researcher can help lighten the atmosphere and reduce tension.

In one discussion with a group of teenage girls at an institution, we began by asking them about helping their fathers with household chores and what they wished for in the future. The original focus of the topic was on various health issues the girls had experienced and the underlying causes.
Although setting ground rules is an important part of the success of focus groups, the facilitator should not try to impose their opinions during the discussion. Instead, they should adopt as neutral a stance as possible and strive to ease the atmosphere. The facilitator may choose to reduce formality by using participants' first names to reassure them that they have become "friends."

We divide the participants into three working groups as follows:

Group One:

Consists of two people. The first plays the role of the facilitator, and the second is their assistant. They receive Handout 1, which contains the session management steps, and are asked to deliberately do the opposite of the instructions given.

This group is guided to play the role of a poor facilitator (e.g., no introductions, using the phone, disrespecting attendees, not defining roles among the research team members).

Group Two:

Consists of six people. They receive Handout 2 about the types of participants in the session. Each person is asked to act out one of the personalities described in the handout.

Group Three:

Responsible for evaluation and identifying all the mistakes made by the research team and participants.

The groups begin role-playing for 10 minutes. Then, the session is paused to review what happened. We explain what the facilitator should have done to handle the different participant types properly, clarifying the steps everyone should follow to manage the group effectively.

Next, we write the key points and common mistakes made by the trainees on flip chart paper and explain why they were errors. We then ask them to conduct a real session lasting 15 minutes.

Afterward, we ask the attendees for their feedback on the facilitator's performance using the flip chart, focusing on the following points:

- Knowledge of the questions
- Expected answer scenarios
- Friendliness at the beginning of the session
- Managing expectations
- Division of roles among team members
- Use of the phone
- Introductions

The characteristics of the group can present an additional challenge to the success of the focus group, as some members may feel unwilling to express their views simply because the topic does not interest them. The researcher may try to open the discussion by talking about an event or story (such as the Olympic Games), and then let the discussion develop from that point.

The degree to which participants know each other affects the likelihood of interaction among them. In this context, it is important for the facilitator to encourage discussion among the members in order to reduce direct communication or dialogue between the facilitator and the participants. It is also appropriate to use ice-breaking techniques in focus group discussions.

In other cases, some participants may share common backgrounds but have differing viewpoints, causing the discussion to stray from its original focus. In such situations, it becomes the facilitator's responsibility to steer the conversation back to the main topic and to ease any tension during the discussion.

How do you transcribe an interview in writing?

- Keep several notebooks for writing down the interview.
- It is best to transcribe the interview immediately after it ends.
- Ideally, the person who conducted the interview should do the transcription, as they are most able to recall the context and clarify any ambiguous phrases or external interruptions.

- Leave a 5 cm margin on the right and left sides of the page for your notes.
- Keep space at the bottom of the page (three to four lines) to write your impressions, notes, common points, and contradictions in your findings.
- Always use a sharp pencil to write your margin notes, and a blue ink pen (liquid or ballpoint) to write the interview transcript.
- Write your notes as keywords or short phrases summarizing the main idea of a paragraph; avoid full detailed sentences.
- While transcribing, underline important or striking quotes and circle repeated words or phrases.
- Always underline the research questions in pencil to easily distinguish between the researcher's question and the participant's answer.
- It may be helpful to leave spaces when writing the transcript to improve readability ideally, leave a blank line between each question and its answer.
- Do not write on both sides of the page; leave the back side blank.
- Use initials to refer to the participant and the researcher, and note this in the margin in an appropriate place to maintain data confidentiality.
- Abbreviate words using symbols or letters, e.g., use "R" for the researcher and "P" for the participant.
- Leave space at the top of the transcript page to describe the social context. Don't forget to write the date, time, place of the interview, and the interviewee's occupation for analysis purposes.
- During the interview, if there is noise, interruptions, or unclear audio, use symbols to indicate these and explain them to the person transcribing or analyzing the data.

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