Women Working Virtually:

A Protocol for Digital Communications

Salamander Trust, 4M Mentor Mothers Network, Positive Young Women Voices, Making Waves, CFAR-Uganda

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Introduction

Our work is women-led and women-centred, gender-equitable and rights-based. We work nationally and internationally, and connect mainly with women around the world. We have always been heavily dependent on the more affordable digital and communications platforms to do this, and only rarely have opportunities to meet face-to-face. This paper is based on our many years of collective experience of working digitally, which has become particularly relevant with the physical isolation and working from home that has become necessary during the global Covid-19 crisis.

Digital communication has many advantages:

- It increases accessibility to discussions for those not able to travel because of family and other caring responsibilities.
- It increases accessibility for people with limited mobility or ability to travel for physical or mental health reasons.
- It increases accessibility for those with limited or no budgets for their work, which is often volunteer-based, increasing their scope and reach.
- It can make it easy for younger people to engage.
- It reduces travel and lowers the carbon budget.
- It is cheaper than face-to-face meetings.

However, it is clear that there are also many limitations and barriers with this way of working and communicating, due to digital exclusion and the gender digital divide. Digital exclusion can be related to at least four different components:

- lack of access to a device
- no or limited connectivity
- no means to pay for it, and
- limited digital skills.

Gender inequality and gender social norms (see box below) intersect with and exacerbate other factors that determine participation, such as poverty, motivation, confidence, and accessibility (including for people with disabilities). Household and childcare responsibilities can constrain participation. There are practical considerations like time zones and language barriers, and important concerns around confidentiality which need to be taken seriously. Corporate ownership of data, corporate control and corporate profit can also be an issue with digital platforms.

The Gender Digital Divide

Research shows that women in low- and middle-income countries are 10 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone. This means that 197 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone (GSM Association, 2019[1]).

Even when women have a mobile phone, they may not have the money to top it up for anything more than text or phone calls (if that).

Some projects have piloted interventions reaching women in the community through a few who own smartphones. The women are facilitated to organise small community discussion groups. While this kind of in-person community group discussion is not possible during this time of lockdown and travel restrictions, we are seeing that women continue to reach out to their peers for support through telephone calls or one-on-one interaction, remaining socially connected while adhering to physical distancing (Bajenja, 2020[2]). However, in isolation, confidentiality will be a concern for some women, particularly in households where others may not know about their HIV status and there is no space to have private conversations.

We will all need to think about how to effectively support coping mechanisms among community women, enabling them to be utilised to reach as many women as possible to counteract the gender digital divide.

Furthermore, digital communication is challenged by the inability to track effectively the immediate emotional effect on participants of whatever information is shared. It is really important to think about how to respond, provide support, and avoid causing harm.

Below we use our collective experience to present key considerations when planning, connecting and following up digital discussions with and among women living with and affected by HIV around the world.

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[1] GSM Association, 2019, Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019.
https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf
[2] Pers. comm., Ellen Bajenja, 2020

Things to consider:

Group discussions or one-to-one?

- Think first about the aim of the discussion and whether it will be best met by a group discussion or a series of one-to-one calls. One-to-one calls and online group discussions each have their own challenges.
- Self-help and peer support groups can successfully use digital group discussions, especially when people already have connections with each other. 4M Mentor Mothers Network already does this with good results (Hay et al, 2020[3]).
- Webinars are a good way to share information with and among a number of people at the same time. Salamander Trust and 4M Mentor Mothers Network have a lot of experience of using webinars to share information among women living with and affected by HIV.[4]
- If you are looking for collective input to a consultation, for example, carefully consider whether an online group discussion or a series of one-to-one calls will be the best way of allowing people to do this from the perspective of agency, power dynamics, and confidentiality. This may depend on the topic, whether people already know each other, and how well they know the person hosting the call.
- Google forms are a way of collecting information discretely. It is free to use and you can set up a questionnaire easily and get a link which you can share. Clicking on the link opens up a form that individuals can input into privately. Alternatively, you can also send a WhatsApp message in a question form and request that answers are messaged back.
- If the aim is to give space for people to talk about their particular experiences, one-to-one calls might be better, allowing more scope for them to talk about their experiences in the way they prefer.
- If a group discussion is needed, give careful consideration to how to manage it, and prepare well. Confidentiality can be a particular issue in group discussions. There are organisations which provide specialist training on facilitating group discussions online which you may want to check out.[5]

Which platform?

- The best platform to use depends on a number of factors, including whether you are organising a group discussion or one-on-one calls.
- Consider the financial cost of connection to IT for the individual and if you have the funds, make provision to support individuals with money to enable them to connect comfortably
- Consider privacy and whether they are able to talk freely where they are.
- Ask participants in advance which platforms they are able to use, and remember that using platforms that people can access on mobile phones can be helpful.
- If you want to show materials on the call, for instance a power point, then consider Zoom or Google Hangout or Facebook Live.
- If you just want a conversation, or to use text with others, then you could consider WhatsApp or Jitsi or Telegram. You could also use the messaging/chat functions on Skype and other platforms.

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[3] Hay, K., Kwardem, L., Welbourn, A., Namiba, A., Tariq, S., Coventry, L., Dhairyawan, R. and Durrant, A., 2020. "Support for the supporters": a qualitative study of the use of WhatsApp by and for mentor mothers with HIV in the UK. Poster presented to the BHIVA conference. https://salamandertrust.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/4M_AIDSIMPACTPosterJuly2019.pdf

[4] 4M Mentor Mothers project. https://salamandertrust.net/project/4m-health-choice-child-life-perinatal-peer-mentoring-project-women-living-hiv/

[5] The International Association of Facilitators has a wealth of resources and training courses. See for example https://www.iaf-world.org/site/global-flipchart/12/online-facilitation. Training for Change offers a free 'Online Facilitation 101' webinar (https://www.trainingforchange.org/public_workshops/online-101/) and online facilitation resources (https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/?topic%5B2%5D=2&searchbox=)

- If people have to download an app onto their phone to take part, give them good advance warning and check in with them before the call, using it, to make sure it's all working for them and to answer any queries they might have.
- There are a growing number of available platforms – search and ask around, to find out which are in use in the countries and regions you are wanting to connect with.
- It is important as you identify a platform to check in on security provisions for each of them. Some platforms are highly susceptible to being hacked. Provide a password to access them wherever you can.

Planning

- The cost of data can be a big barrier for many people. Give women stipends for data bundles. These should be transferred in advance if possible, or as soon as can be arranged. Check the recipient's preference in terms of mode of transfer - apps such as SendWave (for some African countries) and Western Union can be good options.
- Women's time is heavily impacted by gender inequality, and the pressure on their time is even higher under Covid-19 restrictions. Wherever you can, pay women for their time. This may not always be possible (for example, in some self-help and peer support situations). However, unless and until all women have their financial security guaranteed, be aware that when women are contributing their lived experience and expertise to a discussion they deserve payment.
- Working across time zones can be complicated. Make sure to check what time is suitable for participants, and be clear about which time zone they are in (check on thetimenow.com or a similar website). A follow up reminder of the time is also helpful to ensure that participants are reminded a day prior to the meeting.
- Many women are excluded by the language used for communications. Think about how to include different languages, either at different times, or using interpreting.
- Access to reliable internet is also a challenge. Ensure that people who cannot connect to speak can provide written input.
- Consider safety if people are speaking about difficult issues and other people may be around.
- Consider how to ensure confidentiality of those you are communicating with. Ask them if you are in doubt.
- Ask if people would like you to send a list of questions in advance so they can prepare.
- Think about recording online sessions so they can be shared with people who are not able to attend, and make sure you know how to do this before you start.

Connecting

- Online conversations are an opportunity to build relationships, and should be a positive and supportive experience for everyone involved. They should contribute to well-being and not retraumatise. Make sure there is time for chat, and for people to set the agenda and the boundaries of the conversation. Aim to close gently.
- It can be very difficult to appreciate the immediate emotional effect on participants of the information that is shared. Consider how to determine the effects on participants of the content shared, and respond in a timely manner. Unless there is a well thought out feedback/response mechanism, digital communication might cause harm.
- Be careful of power dynamics – when you can't see people, it is harder to know if they are feeling uncomfortable. Leave space to check in, adjust, and follow their lead.
- Make sure the conversation is open enough for people to contribute points they consider important that might not have been considered in a question framework.
- Take great care about language. Avoid use of jargon and abbreviations unless you are sure all participants understand them. Also avoid stigmatising and judgemental language.
- On the whole, using video can severely reduce connectivity. You could try to say hello to each other using video at the start of the call, but then you tend to get better quality by turning all videos off.

- Encourage all taking part to use plug-in earphones with a speaker included, if they have them. These can be the ones which come with a mobile phone. They don't have to be expensive but can make a big difference. And ask them to sit in a quiet place to take part. This is good to reduce everyone's background noise and improve sound quality for everyone.
- Emphasise to all users the importance of going on mute when they are not speaking, and how they can unmute themselves when they DO want to speak. Background noise from just one speaker can totally wreck the call for others, so sadly this is one key thing that needs strong emphasis, since it can easily happen.
- If you are recording the call or session, tell people how the recording will be used, and get their permission. You may decide to record only part of the session, giving space for people to say things they may not want recorded. Check with participants to see if this would be preferred.
- Have peer support on hand and let participants know. If you notice that someone might need extra support, offer that before people go offline so that if necessary, you can call them 1-1 to check in afterwards.

Follow-up

- Share notes of discussions back with participants, if they have email, and give them the chance to edit their contribution.
- Make sure you continue to respect confidentiality in the follow-up. Check if women are happy for you to use their name or would prefer to be anonymous.
- Share with participants any documents produced using their input. If you are sending a document to a number of participants, use the 'bcc' function to email them, so that you protect their confidentiality.
- If you have recorded the sessions, check that everyone on the call knows you are doing so. If there is any sensitive information shared, it is best to check back with those who have shared it before disseminating the recorded call or webinar further. You can also edit out parts which may be too sensitive for sharing or which are unnecessary to share.
- Consider co-authorship and citational justice (Survivors' Voices, 2019[6], Mott and Cockayne, 2017[7]): ask women if they would like to be co-authors on any document which uses their input. If a journal doesn't allow them to be named as full co-authors, add their names in an acknowledgements list (if they are happy not to be anonymous), and wherever possible cite other things they have authored.

Written collaboration

- Ask participants which written platform is best. You may find that WhatsApp or Facebook messenger are more accessible for some women than email.
- Googledocs can be useful for collaborative drafting of text. However, it requires a google account, which some may not want to have. Also, it is not accessible to everyone if they don't have the components described above, and depends on a reasonably strong and stable internet connection. If you do use googledocs, take care to save regularly, as anyone with access to the document can make changes that might not be agreed by all – so having a previous version to revert to is important. Encourage everyone to use 'suggesting' mode to track changes, rather than 'editing' mode.

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[6] Survivors' Voices, 2019, Ladder of Involvement. https://survivorsvoices.org/involvement-ladder/
[7] Mott, C. and Cockayne, D., 2017. Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement'. Gender, Place & Culture, 24(7), pp.954-973.

Key findings from 4M and Salamander Trust's participatory research on WhatsApp for digital peer support among women living with HIV in the UK who are Mentor Mothers *(Hay et al, 2020[8])*

General concerns about technology use
In addition to concerns specific to using WhatsApp, the women interviewed also expressed various concerns around using technology more generally in relation to peer support services. These should be considered with any digital support tools developed for people living with HIV.

1. Financial Costs
Internet-enabled digital tools and services put the cost of access and use on the individual, through both hardware maintenance and Internet access costs. How these costs can be covered or subsidised by service providers should be considered.

"With the limitations of data and things like that on the phone, you can't have many messages on your phone, taking up all your space...because we use our personal phones. 4M is not providing us to put all this extra information... in your phone." [Participant 3]

"Fortunately, at the moment, I'm in the position where I can pay for my contract... so, it's not an issue for me, but like five years ago that would have been a real issue." [Participant 2]

2. Self-confidence using technology
As the cohort of people living with HIV ages, digital skills and self-efficacy in using digital tools and services could become a greater barrier to access. Digital skills training should be integrated into digital service provision, especially for older users.

"I'm not confident in... and I'm scared of doing something wrong, that... I've, maybe wiped something". [Participant 4]

"I definitely feel like if I had more confidence around certain applications, it would help me a lot {laughs}. It's like if you don't have much confidence around something, It's hard to... make the most of it, basically." [Participant 4]

3. Security & privacy concerns
It is important that communications involving HIV support users to feel empowered by facilitating individual control over personal information, both in connection with commercial entities (e.g. apps) and with others receiving communications. Implications of stigma on digital technology use should be taken into consideration for digital service design and platform choice.
[with commercial platforms] *"It's just a tool, you know, we use, but does our information go anywhere beyond us without us knowing?"* [P3]

[for individuals] *"So, if I'm mentoring, there is, you know, I would aways ask... if you're comfortable with, you know, even, because on some thi[ngs]- like on WhatsApp, there's my [profile] picture...I'm not famous or anything, but even then, someone [other than the mentee] could see that picture and then think, "Oh, well, I've seen that [in relation to HIV]" so you have to be quite careful with someone who really doesn't want to disclose their status, what you're sharing, and what links other people might make."* [P2]

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[8] Hay, et al, ibid

Useful resources:

Useful resources from Salamander Trust and 4M Mentor Mothers Network:

Salamander Trust (2020) The WHAVE Podcast Paper #4: A how-to guide to making a podcast for women living with HIV. www.salamandertrust.net/project/podcasts

Hay, K., Kwardem, L., Welbourn, A., Namiba, A., Tariq, S., Coventry, L., Dhairyawan, R. and Durrant, A., 2020. "Support for the supporters": a qualitative study of the use of WhatsApp by and for mentor mothers with HIV in the UK. AIDS care, pp.1-9. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09540121.2020.1739220

Hay, K., Kwardem, L., Welbourn, A., Namiba, A., Tariq, S., Coventry, L., Dhairyawan, R. and Durrant, A., 2020. "Support for the supporters": a qualitative study of the use of WhatsApp by and for mentor mothers with HIV in the UK. Poster presented to the BHIVA conference. https://salamandertrust.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/4M_AIDSIMPACTPosterJuly2019.pdf

Other useful resources:

Association for Progressive Communications, 2020, Closer than ever: a guide for social change organisations who want to work online. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/closer-ever-guide-social-change-organisations-who-want-work-online

GSM Association, 2019, Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019. https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf

Hunter, D. and Rewa, J., 2020, Leading Groups Online: A down-and-dirty guide to leading online courses, meetings, trainings, and events during the coronavirus pandemic. http://www.leadinggroupsonline.org/ebooks/Leading%20Groups%20Online.pdf

Involve, April 16 2020, Deliberative democracy in the age of Covid-19 Blogpost. https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/news/deliberative-democracy-age-covid-19

Involve, April 2020, Deliberative democracy in the age of Covid-19: Practitioners' online workshop, Summary of Key Themes. https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Covid-19-Deliberative%20democracy%20and%20online%20practice%20-%20Practitioners%20Workshop%20Summary%20Report%209-4-20.pdf

UNESCO, 2018, Designing inclusive digital solutions and developing digital skills: guidelines. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265537

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