

COVID-19 RELATED GUIDANCE

HOW TO CONDUCT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

PROGRAMMING USING ONLINE OR DISTANCE ENGAGEMENT

METHODS

INTRODUCTION

Given the restrictions on movements and convening caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many programs are moving to online or distance engagement modes of delivery. This guidance is intended to assist NDI teams specifically in undertaking programming on violence against women (VAW) using online or distance engagement program delivery modes.

While best practice program engagement on VAW cannot be replicated online, the following criteria must be met before programs are ready to undertake VAW programming online:

- There is the ability to ensure confidentiality of the conversation.
- That participants' identities can be protected.
- A suitably COVID-19 modified list of local referral services, victims' service providers, clinics and shelters is available for participants.
- There must be a trained counsellor online and available to assist if any of the participants need immediate support.
- Ensure the participant is capable and ready to have these discussions wherever they may be and that they are aware of possible risks of people overhearing before starting the program.
- Develop a plan of action for if the survivor abruptly ends the call/chat/video.

The guidance that follows in this document will expand upon the criteria and explain how these requirements can be met.

WHAT HAS CHANGED BECAUSE OF COVID-19?^{1,2,3}

Data shows that violence against women (VAW) and especially domestic violence has increased since the start of COVID-19. An increase in VAW and domestic violence is common in times of conflict or disaster, as VAW is both an indicator and symptom of generalised stress and violence in communities. The current increase is likely due to greater stress and heightened tensions related to health, money, and security while being confined within the home.

NDI's regional trends survey conducted on April 30, 2020 noted that 67% of respondents said there has been an increase in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) since the pandemic. 14% of respondents stated there has been a significant increase since the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparatively, the NDI regional survey from May 15, 2020 noted that 51.7% of respondents stated that SGBV has increased since the pandemic and 15% of respondents stated that SGBV has significantly increased since COVID-19. Additionally, the same questionnaire was used on June 1 and 50.9% of respondents stated that SGBV increased during COVID-19 and 20% of respondents said it has significantly increased.

Best practices for programs addressing gender-based violence is that they: occur in person with specific safeguards; provide victims and survivors with referral resources; and observe Do No Harm (DNH) principles. However, stay-at-home orders and government-mandated movement restrictions have created situations where this is not possible. This also means that survivors can be isolated with their abuser from services and social protections that otherwise may be available to them.

NDI's regional survey on April 30th reported that 54% of respondents reported civil society organizations (CSOs) in their country have enhanced prevention, protection or delivery of support services to address the changing needs of the pandemic. However, 78% said that governments had not made the needed changes to address survivor's needs. In the May report, 71% of respondents stated that CSOs had enhanced prevention, protection or

¹ "Online and ICT-Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls During COVID-19." UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19>

² Global Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19." CARE and IRC. http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Global_RGA_COVID_RDM_3_31_20_FINAL.pdf

³ "COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls." UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

delivery of support services while 71.7% of respondents stated that their governments had not enhanced services. Comparatively, the June 1 questionnaire recorded 71.4% of respondents reported that CSOs had enhanced their support services while 58% of respondents said their government's had not updated their support services.

At the policy level, the current areas of concern are as follows: states de-prioritize the provision of protection and services for women and other vulnerable populations; mechanisms - whether legal or administrative - which are introduced to address the pandemic lead to suspension, limitation or reversal of the rights of women, girls and other marginalized populations (e.g. increased surveillance practices); and decision-making - including on responses to sex and gender-based violence - proceeds without the voice and agency of women and girls.

MOVING VAW PROGRAMS ONLINE

When deciding to move VAW programs online, it is imperative that Do No Harm (DNH) principles are applied at all times. Additionally, all programs must be survivor-centric and put the individual's safety above everything else. This also includes survivor's right to confidentiality, dignity and self-determination, and non-discrimination. Facilitators and program coordinators should be prepared for the unknown due to the unprecedented nature of COVID-19. When something arises that was not prepared for, it is crucial to continue to keep the women's safety as the top priority.⁴ A matter of concern due especially to movement restrictions from COVID-19 is that program conversations could be overheard by someone who is perpetuating violence, which could increase violence against the program participant. Further, if documentation of the program conversation is found or hacked into, it could also increase violence against the participant or other members of the household.

IMPLEMENTER GUIDANCE^{5,6}

Prior to the Program:

There needs to be an **assessment** of the various participant's technology access and different options available to them. This should include looking at overall access, the

⁴ Chi-Chi Undie. "Ethical Considerations Around Remote Data Collection and Research in Humanitarian and Refugee Settings in The Context of COVID-19." Population Council.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YY1VRwRzDto>

⁵ "Identifying & Mitigating Gender-based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response." IASC.

<https://gbvguidelines.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Interagency-GBV-risk-mitigation-and-Covid-ti-psheet.pdf>

⁶ How to Support Survivors of Gender-Based Violence When a GBV Actor is Not Available in Your Area." IASC.

https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2019-07/GBV_PocketGuide021718.pdf

stability and strength of internet services, and the availability and strength of mobile networks. Teams should also work with local service providers to understand mechanisms of reporting abuse and what documentation evidence is needed in regard to local or national laws. This may include text message chains or emails sent. Ensure participants are aware of these mechanisms and assist participants in reporting if they want you to.

Confidentiality is one of the most important areas of focus for programs. Before beginning the program, participants and facilitators must agree not to record conversations, share other's experiences, take photos of the participants, take videos of the participants, disclose who participated in the program, or act in any other way that could put a participant at risk. If there is the intent by facilitators to use parts of the conversation, participants must first agree and all identifying factors should be replaced. The GWD team is currently working with the legal team to develop an informed consent form. This guidance will be updated with a link to the informed consent form once it is prepared.

Before starting the program, participants should be reminded to consider that they may be under **surveillance** before starting the program. Types of surveillance include but are not limited to software that tracks cell phone calls, dataveillance, and personal robots (including Ring and Alexa and co). If a participant is under surveillance, participating in the program could put the participant's safety and/or the confidentiality of their conversations at risk. If a participant suspects that they are under surveillance, there is really no way for them to be sure without expert level knowledge and assistance. However, a person is able to reset their phone to default and reinstall programs individually, avoiding any surveillance software. It should be noted that choosing this option could also create risk for the participant, as whoever installed the software may realize it has been uninstalled leading to an increased likelihood of violence. If a participant is indeed concerned, the safest option for them is not to participate.

There should be a **plan of action** within the program design in the event that someone drops the call or stops responding. This should include: working with the people in the program to decide who will call back; if the implementor is calling back, how much time they should wait before doing so; and, if to ensure an unbroken safety level, the implementor should receive contact via a different method before calling back.

*Scheduling and Logistics:*⁷

Make sure to schedule meetings multiple days ahead of time so people are able to make arrangements and are able to completely focus on the meeting. It is important to adhere to

⁷ "Feminist Organizing Toolkit: Planning Virtual Meetings." WEDO.
<https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ICT-toolkit-English.pdf>

time limits set beforehand as to ensure the women’s participation in the program does not take them away from other parts of their lives.⁸ Before the meeting, explain the goals and objectives of the meeting to ensure everyone feels comfortable in attending and discussing. Ask participants to let you know of any necessary **accessibility or accommodation adjustments** that may be needed so these can be made by the time the meeting begins. If it is expected that there will be language barriers, ensure one of the facilitators is able to translate or that there is a text translation option in the software. If materials will be used during the program, ensure they are translated before the program. Also ensure everyone knows the various functions of the software/platform to be used for the meeting. This includes things like: chat functions, translations, the ability to “raise your hand,” how to mute their mic, and how to turn off their camera. Additionally, most platforms have specific function guides for accessibility options on their website.

Which platform:^{9,10}

There are multiple platforms available depending on the program design, the available finances, and the types of communication required. The sources below offer multiple resources that detail various platform options and situations in which they could be most useful. Platforms need to be monitored for threats and vulnerabilities. Platforms themselves are under constant evaluation and modification to maintain market position, so a platform might attract a good deal of negative assessment at one moment, and swiftly take moves to address the issues raised. Below is a short list of common communication platforms:

- ResourceConnect, Gruveo, and Cyph are programs often used by domestic violence hotlines that do not require account setups
- Wire and BlueJeans are additional options that do not require an account to join a call/video chat
- WebEx allows for strong security measures to be in place
- WhatsApp is end-to-end encrypted, but an account is required to be able to participate

⁸ Chi-Chi Undie. “Ethical Considerations Around Remote Data Collection and Research in Humanitarian and Refugee Settings in The Context of COVID-19.” Population Council.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YY1VRwRzDto>

⁹ “Guide to Secure Group Chat and Conferencing Tools.” Frontline Defenders.

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/resource-publication/guide-secure-group-chat-and-conferencing-tools>

¹⁰ “Video Conferencing and Digital Communications Platforms: Comparison Chart.” National Network to End Domestic Violence.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51dc541ce4b03ebab8c5c88c/t/5e7e62a25ed80a4219adad77/1585341091261/NNEDV_Communication+Tools_Handout.pdf

Facilitation:^{11,12}

To abide by DNH principles and the other best practice criteria, each online engagement needs at least three people: a facilitator, a producer and a counselor. For programs that include men and women discussing their experience with violence, plan out exactly where in the program women and men will be participating as a single group, and when they will be separated. For all sessions where women are present - whether single sex or mixed - there must be women among the facilitators. For men only sessions, the facilitators should be male. In all situations, the program management and the facilitator are responsible for ensuring the women are able to speak freely about their experiences without fear of being questioned, judged, or challenged about their experience, and without fear of reprisal for speaking out. Women's safety and the confidentiality of the conversation are of the highest priority.

When beginning the program, notify the participants of the possible risks they may face for being involved with the program. Pull from the [think10](#) safety planning tool [Facilitator's Guide](#) previously released by GWD. This suggests that you discuss safety options and local service resources with the participants *before* starting the substantive program conversation to ensure they are willing and ready to continue. Additionally, ensure the program facilitators are in a space where they cannot be overheard and are able to keep people's identities confidential. Safety measures for facilitators include: not storing hard copies of sign-in sheets or conversation history, using a work computer and phone, having separate work accounts for various communication platforms, and using headphones to limit who can hear a conversation. Participants should also not be saving hard copies of materials or using their personal accounts. Headphones are suggested for participants as well, however, the volume should be limited so individuals can still hear outside noise in case they need to exit the screen.

It is also important that the facilitators create a space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their stories. As with all group settings, there may be multiple power dynamics in play during the discussions, and to the extent possible bearing in mind the participants' different perceptions of risk and vulnerability, the facilitators should do what they can to create as inclusive and equitable a space as possible. There are multiple ways to help make programs more accessible and equal. When the meeting begins, encourage the participants to agree communication protocols such as staying muted when not speaking, not

¹¹ "Case Management, GBVIMS/GBVIMS+ and the COVID-19 pandemic."

<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/GBV-Case-Management-GBVIMS-GBVIMS-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-GBVIMS-March-2020.pdf>

¹² "Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings." Aspiration.

<https://aspirationtech.org/blog/virtualmeetingpowerdynamics>

interrupting but using the flag option to show when you have a comment, not questioning another person's experiences, and actively listening. Also offer the option for participants to message the facilitator directly during the larger group discussion in case they have an issue they would like to raise privately.

Checking-in:¹³

Facilitators should periodically **check-in** with the participants throughout the meeting to see how everyone is feeling and address any issues that may arise. Participants should be encouraged to use the chat box if they have something to add, and do not want to disrupt the flow of the conversation or do not feel comfortable speaking. The producer should continuously check the chat box for new comments/ideas from participants, and flag these for the facilitator to include in the group discussion. If there are breakout sessions as part of the program design, there should be moderators in each breakout room to help facilitate the conversation and ensure that all participants remain comfortable.

Data Collection:¹⁴

There should be very minimal collection of the participant's identifying factors. Additionally, paper documents that identify the participants' information should not be kept at the facilitator's home. No paper copies of notes on the participants' conversations should be kept. An example of how to avoid this is to use numbers or code names to identify people in paperwork instead of their actual names.

If data will be collected for monitoring and evaluation purposes, the following principles should be followed:

- Establish a data protection plan
- Photos and videos should not be used as part of documentation
- Establish protocols on password protection and management of the online platforms
- Ensure there is just one copy of the data and that it is secured

¹³ "Power Dynamics and Inclusion in Virtual Meetings." Aspiration.

<https://aspirationtech.org/blog/virtualmeetingpowerdynamics>

¹⁴ "Guidance on Establishing Remote Monitoring and Management of GBV Programming in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic." Women's Refugee Commission.

<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/guidance-establishing-remote-monitoring-management-gender-based-violence-programming-covid-19-pandemic/>

GENERAL POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND^{15,16}

1. *The environment for violence against women in the country*

While resources for anti-VAW mitigation, treatment and support are inadequate in most countries, being tagged as a country with high levels of VAW carries significant reputational and partnership risks. For example, the incidence of SGBV in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), led to it becoming known as "the rape capital of the world" with negative consequences for its status as a donor recipient.¹⁷ Therefore, when deciding to move VAW programs online, it is important to first undertake a risk analysis of the environment where the programs will be implemented.

Examples of questions to be included in the risk analysis:

- 1. Is violence against women a crime where you live?*
- 2. Do women in your community commonly experience some form of harassment, abuse or violence?*
- 3. Does your community consider politics "men's work," "dirty," "dangerous" or otherwise inappropriate for women?*
- 4. In your community, are the police generally trusted to respond to claims of harassment or violence against women?*
- 5. Are there services, such as emergency shelters, safe houses, a hotline or support groups that provide a safe place or support for women in danger or who are victims of violence?*
- 6. Since COVID-19, sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in your country has increased, decreased or stayed the same?*
- 7. If there has been an increase in SGBV, has civil society responded to provide enhanced prevention, protection, or delivery of support services?*
- 8. If there has been an increase in SGBV, have governments responded to provide enhanced prevention, protection, or delivery of support services?*

¹⁵ "Guidance and Toolkits for Mobile GBV Service Delivery During COVID-19." Gender-Based Violence AoR, Global Prevention Center.

https://gbvaor.net/thematic-areas?term_node_tid_depth_1%5B121%5D=121&term_node_tid_depth_1%5B63%5D=63&field_language_target_id%5B107%5D=107

¹⁶ "Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) Webinar Series Webinar #3: GBV & COVID-19 - Ensuring continuity of essential health services for GBV survivors during the COVID-19 crisis." World Health Organization.

<https://www.who.int/health-cluster/about/work/other-collaborations/GBV-AoR-Webinar-3-COVID-GBV-Health-Sector-EN.pdf>

¹⁷ Huve, Sophie. "The Use of UN Sanctions to Address Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security."

<https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Use-of-UN-Sanctions-to-Address-Conflict-related-Sexual-Violence.pdf>

In particular, there are concerns that environments where the political space is closing or shrinking such as authoritarian, conflict or crisis contexts, governments and other forces could hack into NDI's system or platforms to gain access to sensitive information regarding participants and experts. Additionally, it is important to be aware of the possibility that disinformation campaigns about NDI, VAW, and/or the participants could occur. Women's identities and experiences could then be used against them and create a greater risk to their safety.

2. Online violence against women¹⁸

Additionally, online VAW has risen since COVID-19 due to the rise in people being online for extended periods of time. Online VAW has many forms and can include harassment, blackmail, stalking, and cyberbullying (e.g. doxing and swatting). This rise in online violence may also impact women's willingness and/or ability to participate in online activities. It is important to ensure that the programs do not exacerbate these issues and to include sections in the program on ways to mitigate them. For immediate, ad-hoc concerns, the Digital Security Helpline can offer assistance in a number of different languages. However, for more systematic and more persistent attacks the NDI Technology & Innovation team should be contacted for assistance in the first instance.

3. Participants' digital footprint

With VAW work, **participants' personal safety** - in person or online - is a key area of concern. All types of communication software have vulnerabilities that can compromise women's safety which must be assessed and understood so that they can be mitigated. For example, digital written communications (e.g. online messaging or email) leave a trail and could detail personal information putting a participant at risk if seen by others. Video call software and phone calls often have logs that need to be manually deleted. It is important to consider that a participant's abuser could have access to the participant's various online accounts or be using software to track their communication. It is therefore imperative that the platforms chosen provide participants **the right to be forgotten** and allow you to delete/turn off incidental data collection (the person's location/phone number/device type, etc.) or that collect minimal information about the conversation to begin with.

¹⁸ "A Survival Guide to Being a Woman (On the Internet): Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet."
<https://medium.com/policy/a-survival-guide-to-being-a-woman-on-the-internet-feminist-research-for-a-feminist-internet-e8e76e4ed20f>

STEPS TO ENHANCE DIGITAL SAFETY^{19,20}

These steps will help to minimize risks to participants and to NDI:

1. Ensure that the facilitators and participants sign out of their accounts and/or close the program every time they step away from their device.
2. Avoid standard cell phone text messaging with participants as it is more vulnerable to paper trails and security concerns.
3. Social media chat systems like Facebook Messenger should also be avoided.
4. Platforms that offer safety features like end-to-end encryption, “zero knowledge” encryption, and/or two-factor authentication should be used.
5. Programs should use platforms that do not require the participants to create an account or profile if possible. This decreases the amount of paper trails that can be traced between the program and the participant.

If participants do need to create accounts, then both the implementer and the participants should be aware of strong password guidelines as explained in the NDI [Password Policy](#).

This includes: not using the same password for multiple accounts; not sharing password information with other people; not using personal information within the password; and updating passwords regularly.

Additionally, passwords should be at least ten characters, and include at least three of the following:

- Uppercase letters (A - Z)
- Lowercase letters (a - z)
- Numbers (0 - 9)
- Symbols (~@#\$\$%^&*()-_+=+[{]}|\;:“ ’<.>/?)

WHAT TO DO FOR...²¹

A Voice Call:

- Do not cold call but first ensure the person is in a safe space ready to proceed.
- Develop systems like various code words to be used if a participant feels unable to speak freely that will allow the facilitator/implementer to know what is happening. Delete the call from the call log after it happens.

¹⁹ “Video Conferencing Best Practices.” NDI Technology Team.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Kc9GR9zwDkQOs-m2pLIWcUHsNCZMlCdJKP4DT1Cd-TU/edit#heading=h.mr92uhqkh0r3>

²⁰ “Case Management, GBVIMS/GBVIMS+ and the COVID-19 pandemic.”

<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/GBV-Case-Management-GBVIMS-GBVIMS-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-GBVIMS-March-2020.pdf>

²¹ “Technology Safety.” National Network to End Domestic Violence.

<https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-toolkit>

- Offer participants the option to have the number saved under an alias, if they are concerned that deleting the call would not work. The facilitator should be aware of the alias before the start of the call.
- Establish methods to verify identity (codewords, phrases) If concerned about impersonation, establish methods to verify identity (codeword/phrase), continue to check in to ensure line of communication is still safe.

Put safety procedures in place in the event that a participant abruptly hangs up *and a different person calls back from that same number*. The safety procedures should include creating a plan ahead of time for why the number had been used and an agreed upon alibi for both the participant and facilitator; and ensuring that **you** do not offer the caller specific details about the original participant or the original conversation.

If there is a trained conflict resolution expert at hand, they may be able to de-escalate a violent situation that is taking place. However, this should only be used if it has already been discussed with the participant, they have provided consent and ask for it to happen.

Online Chat Messaging:

- Turn off options to save or copy messaging history
- Determine how the chat service will show up on the participants web browser and adjust to minimize risk of someone else being able to identify it.
- Do not save contact information or if it is saved, use an unassuming name.
- Establish a method to verify identity via codeword/phrase and continue to check in to ensure line of communication is still safe
- Develop protocol for if a person takes multiple hours to respond to ensure the person is safe and that the line of communication is still secure

Online Video:

- Do not use platforms/turn off the feature of platforms that record video or log call details
- Use passwords to join meetings and lock the meeting after everyone has joined
- Everyone on the video call must be following safety guidance
- Try to mitigate noise from the conversation by using lower levels of volume or headphones. However, if using headphones, make sure it is still possible for participants to hear outside noise and be aware of their surroundings. This is especially important if an individual is concerned that they will need to quickly change screens if someone approaches them.

AFTER STAY AT HOME ORDERS SUBSIDE²²

When movement restrictions ease and people are allowed to meet in person again, survivors who are deemed at high risk of GBV should be scheduled first to meet in person, those who are at low and medium risk should still be engaged remotely or at a distance. However, all the criteria for best practice in-person engagement on VAW should be met.

Gender, Women and Democracy Team
National Democratic Institute
June 24, 2020

Resources

- “Technology Safety.” National Network to End Domestic Violence.
<https://www.techsafety.org/digital-services-toolkit>
- “COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.” UN Women.
<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>
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<https://www.who.int/health-cluster/about/work/other-collaborations/GBV-AoR-Webinar-3-COVID-GBV-Health-Sector-EN.pdf>
- Global Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19.” CARE and IRC.
http://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Global_RGA_COVID_RDM_3_31_20_FINAL.pdf
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<http://www.gbvims.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/GBV-Case-Management-GBVIMS-GBVIMS-and-the-Covid-19-Pandemic-GBVIMS-March-2020.pdf>
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²² “Our Response to GBV During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Abaad.
<https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1590737262.pdf>

- “Guidance on Establishing Remote Monitoring and Management of GBV Programming in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Women’s Refugee Commission.
<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/guidance-establishing-remote-monitoring-management-gender-based-violence-programming-covid-19-pandemic/>
- “Our Response to GBV During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Abaad.
<https://www.abaadmena.org/documents/ebook.1590737262.pdf>
- “Video Conferencing Best Practices.” NDI Technology Team.
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Kc9GR9zwDkQOs-m2pLIWcUHsNCZMlCdJKP4DT1Cd-TU/edit#heading=h.mr92uhqkh0r3>
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<https://aspirationtech.org/blog/virtualmeetingpowerdynamics>
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<https://medium.com/policy/a-survival-guide-to-being-a-woman-on-the-internet-feminist-research-for-a-feminist-internet-e8e76e4ed20f>
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https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51dc541ce4b03ebab8c5c88c/t/5e7e62a25ed80a4219adad77/1585341091261/NNEDV_Communication+Tools_Handout.pdf