Lessons Learned: Pivoting to online learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

Anik Gevers, Elizabeth Dartnall, Angelica Pino
Introduction

The Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) – loyal to its feminist value of promoting continuous and participatory two-way learning – places strong emphasis on facilitating the flow of ideas and exchange of expertise and experiences among its membership base and its grantees worldwide. One of our flagship initiatives is the SVRI Research Grant. The Grant supports researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to strengthen and expand evidence in the field of violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC). A key component of this grant is strengthening capacity of grantees on VAW and VAC research ethics, methods and tools as well as building relationships with and between each grantee team. Every year since the inception of the programme, project initiation meetings and capacity strengthening workshops have been held face to face. It has been a central activity in our calendar that both the SVRI staff and the new grantees await with anticipation and excitement. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic dictated a quick and significant pivot to an online workshop format. There was never an option to cancel the workshop or postpone it – it was just too important, and we had to adapt. In this resource, we are sharing the many lessons we learnt during this process of adaptation.

As we faced the necessary, rapid pivot to online learning, we were faced with some fundamental questions about the capacity, process, and content of an online workshop approach:

**Fundamentals:**

- Do we as a team have the skills to provide effective and engaging online training?
- Do grantees face any barriers to participating in a virtual training process?
- How do we establish a connected community and build relationships now that we are no longer meeting face to face?
- How do we ensure we integrate self-care, kindness and connection before, during and after the workshop series?
- What are the grantees’ priority learning areas for the workshop?
- How do we create bespoke support and respond to arising needs when no longer meeting face to face?
- How do we manage the time differences across grantee locations?

---

The authors are very grateful to the reviewers who contributed to strengthening this product: Lizle Loots, Morma Moremi, Yandisa Sikweyiya, Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic, and Majd Abdullah.

Upskilling the team

We recognise that facilitating an engaging and effective online workshop is very different from the in-person workshops we are accustomed to. Therefore, we invested in training for the SVRI team on how to plan, produce, and facilitate good, participatory online training sessions using a variety of techniques and tools.

We learned how to best use various interactive online tools such as: Zoom breakout rooms for small working groups; Zoom polls to get quick input on specific questions; Jamboards for brainstorming; and, a world map Padlet to get a visual sense of all the participants. We learned the value of detailed preparation, and the human element video and sound brings during calls and trainings. One limit we had for this workshop series was the inability to provide simultaneous translation; we overcame this challenge by welcoming informal, ad hoc translations within the participant group and providing small group spaces and brainstorming sessions where participant groups were free to choose their preferred language for discussion. In addition, we all agreed to speak slowly and write questions or comments in the chat window.

The SVRI facilitation and production team also took time to create detailed plans that included a schedule and description of activities and clearly indicated roles and responsibilities of every team member. These plans were reviewed and practice sessions were held prior to each event. Every session was carefully scheduled and planned in advance. It was essential and very helpful to have clearly defined roles. We found the following roles to be invaluable: Facilitator, Presenter, Note Taker, and Producer. The role of producer was new to us; it involves managing the technical aspects of the online workshop platform (e.g.: managing the waiting room, putting people into breakout rooms, creating polls etc.). Feedback from grantees as well as reflecting on our experiences provided ongoing opportunities to strengthen our skills in creating engaging and effective online workshop sessions.
What we learned:

• Preparation and practice is essential: organising all details before each session ensures that the core team are all clear on what is expected of them. The session production and facilitation notes were refined during core team rehearsals before every session and this preparation also means that back up plans flow seamlessly when required (e.g., if a core team member’s internet connection fails or someone falls sick, etc.).

• Clear roles are important: separate roles for facilitation, production, and note-taking ensure a smooth experience for all as it saves time by minimising delays due to technical issues, minimising errors because one person is trying to multi-task. This is a significant investment of staff time, but it is worthwhile.

• Where bandwidth allows, keep videos and microphones on: in a small workshop this practice is valuable because it facilitates connection and engagement and creates opportunities (though not perfect) to “read the room”. We found this practice significantly enhanced the quality of the workshop engagement and would highly recommend trying it for capacity strengthening and community building workshops. If funding allows, we recommend investing in additional data for the team and participants where needed to facilitate this wherever possible. In the absence of videos, encourage participants to upload pictures of themselves as their meeting profile image.

• Find and make use of multiple fun, interactive, and innovative tools: we found that no single tool can do it all. We used Zoom (with privacy protections) as our main platform and made use of the breakout rooms, polling, screen sharing, and chat functions. We used Jamboard for group brainstorming (similar to using post-it notes or flipcharts for group work during in-person workshops). We used Padlet to create a world map where participants could mark their location. We used Survey Monkey to facilitate team assessments and collect feedback and evaluation data. We used WhatsApp as an informal platform to get to know each other and to maintain the momentum of the participants. In other collaborative events we have used Mentimeter to create a real-time word cloud and we have used Google Docs for simultaneous co-creation efforts.

Share the online tools you have discovered and used successfully to facilitate interactive and engaging remote/online group work on this Padlet.

Understanding participant contexts

COVID-19 impacts everyone in different ways and online participatory workshops had not been the norm prior to the pandemic. We undertook a brief survey and ‘tech audit’ among participants to better understand the work context they found themselves in (e.g., balancing child care while working from home during lockdowns); the needs and gaps in terms of equipment and tech literacy; challenges around connectivity and data costs; and experience with various online platforms and tools they had used in the past. All participants had relatively good access to internet, though with differing bandwidth and stability. Some of their areas of concern included: uneven familiarity with online events, and potential disruptions while working from home.
The shift to an online workshop series meant that more team members could participate instead of the two people per team that we were able to accommodate at the planned in-person workshop. Several teams took advantage of this opportunity which offered inclusive community-building and capacity strengthening, more expertise and diverse contributions to each session. In some cases this opportunity meant that more junior researchers were able to participate in the workshop series. One team noted that they were able to include a team member who has a visual impairment and the shift to the online modality made participation more comfortable for this participant.

We provided a brief orientation session for all participants prior to starting the workshop series to ensure that everyone had skills to navigate the platform and tools once the workshops began; this helped participants feel more confident and comfortable prior to embarking on the workshop series.

A major hurdle we faced was the challenge of scheduling workshops with participants across multiple time zones. To address this challenge we repeated each session twice to accommodate all the participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Jordan</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Viet Nam</th>
<th>Singapore</th>
<th>Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9am - 12pm</td>
<td>10am - 1pm</td>
<td>12:30 - 3:30pm</td>
<td>2 - 5pm</td>
<td>3 - 6pm</td>
<td>5 - 8pm</td>
<td>7am - 10am</td>
<td>10am - 1pm</td>
<td>11am - 2pm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What we learned:

• Conducting brief questionnaires and self-assessments during the early planning stages provided important structured data to guide our planning and preparation. In addition, continuous informal check-ins and structured opportunities for participants to share (anonymous) feedback contributed to our ongoing planning and revision of workshop structure and content to ensure that we were best able to meet the needs of all involved.

• An orientation session for participants was helpful to improve everyone’s familiarity and confidence with online tools that would be utilised during the workshop sessions. This basic orientation made initial technical troubleshooting less stressful and participants knew what to expect.

• Although all participants had access to internet, uninterrupted and clear connectivity was uneven and could prove challenging and frustrating for some.

• Not all team members were in the same session (each session was conducted twice to accommodate all participants across time zones) which made teamwork activities more difficult.

• In the current pandemic, there were (and are) an overwhelming number of meetings happening online. The stress and fatigue of such a relentless schedule is increasingly weighing on people therefore it was important for us to create and deliver an interactive, engaging, fun, and useful workshop series in a way that was manageable for participants.

Facilitating connection, care, and kindness

A hallmark of SVRI’s grantee workshops – and SVRI events in general – is that we strive to create spaces and experiences that enable connection, care, and kindness. We tried various approaches to do the same in a virtual space with many people who did not know one another or have not had previous experience with SVRI events. We went beyond simply including self-care and kindness in our topic line up, and integrated connection, care, and kindness throughout our interactions and structure of the workshop. We allocated a space at the beginning of each session to do a quick check-in which created opportunities to get to know one another more personally and facilitate networking.

We also experimented with introducing short self-care activities such as chair yoga and screen breaks. We created a WhatsApp group for all participants and facilitators. WhatsApp helped to facilitate instant and informal communication including initial introductions in which each team member recorded a selfie video sharing the story of their name, their location and where they work. This platform also proved useful for some technical troubleshooting during sessions or reminding participants about starting sessions.

Online safety was a key concern given the prevalence of online meetings being “bombed” or “hacked”. Therefore, the SVRI production team set up several security measures within our Zoom spaces. We also co-created (with all participants) codes of conduct for WhatsApp and our online workshop space.
Key agreements in our code of conduct:
• Arrive on time (or 5 minutes early) so that we can respect everyone's schedules and get through the agenda for each session.
• SVRI to take safety precautions to prevent 'Zoombombing' [read our article on online safety here].
• Ensure the name on your Zoom account easily identifies you so that we know who is on the call.
• Where possible, keep video and audio on – this not only promotes human connection, but it is also suggested that this allows for safer online meeting spaces.
• Reality is OK! Come as you are. Interruptions – from e.g. children or even pets – will be met with joy, compassion and understanding.
• Respect and be kind to one another.
• All questions are worth asking so that we can all learn together.
• Share solution ideas when we share critiques.
• Remember that while the workshop sessions will be conducted in English, this is not everyone’s comfort, as English is not the first language of many participants. We will try to speak slowly and repeat/clarify where necessary; allow time for informal translation by colleagues as requested; repeat or summarise the ideas for each session; try to use visual/written slides. Participants will review and prepare, in advance, the readings and suggested articles to familiarise themselves with each topic area.
• Maintain confidentiality – please do not forward other people’s messages outside of this group.
• Stay focused on the purpose of this group – do not share memes, videos, forwarded messages, or news articles (unless they are about your project).
• Given that we are stretched across many timezones you may want to consider muting notifications for this WhatsApp group so that you don’t get alerts at inconvenient times.

We acknowledged that sitting in lengthy virtual meetings could be very taxing on people. In contrast to the 3-5 full consecutive days for in-person workshops, we held a series of shorter workshops over a longer period of time: we hosted 5 sessions of 2-3 hours each over a 10 week period. Within each session we focused on having short presentations, opportunities for various types of interaction, and regular breaks to help keep everyone comfortable and focused.

Typical Schedule:
Welcome and check in (10 minutes)
Feedback (5 minutes)
Guest speaker presentation (10 minutes)
Small group activity (10-15 minutes)
Group sharing / Q&A (15-20 minutes)
Screen Break (10-15 minutes)
Energiser (5 minutes)
Guest speaker presentation (10 minutes)
Small group activity (10-15 minutes)
Group sharing / Q&A (15-20 minutes)
Wrap up (10-15 minutes)
What we learned:

• The pace of online workshops is very different from that of in-person workshops. We found there was a need to design a format that provides swift and continuous engagement so shorter activities with prompts for interaction were preferred. We also planned and practiced carefully to avoid “down time” (e.g., silent periods, slow transitions, very long passive periods) which run the risk of alienating or losing participants’ attention.

• We had to carefully design interactive activities because the usual reliance on small group work or open discussion did not always work well in online sessions.

• It was essential to include regular, short breaks and a longer break between activities. During the longer breaks we invited participants to take a “screen break” and move around as a type of energiser (this would usually be accomplished through a tea break during in-person workshops).

• We had to be deliberate about including opportunities for connection, care, and kindness throughout the sessions because there would be little opportunity for these to grow organically as they do in our in-person workshops. We found it valuable to role model these values in the way we planned and conducted the workshop sessions.

• Hosting workshops at intervals of 2 weeks allowed time for teams to put learning into action, prevent workshop-fatigue, and create space for other meetings and work commitments.

• Networking through informal, unstructured time which happens easily during in-person events was missed and not everyone participates in the online, informal interactive spaces we tried to create. Therefore, more structured time and activities for networking should be included in the agenda.

Workshop content

In planning the online workshop series, similar to the face-to-face workshops, we wanted workshop content to be guided by the learning objectives of workshop participants, the core SVRI content (e.g., ethics, methods and tools, vicarious trauma), and gaps identified during the evaluation of projects by the review committee.

To best understand grantees’ needs, we asked them to share their learning and capacity strengthening priorities with us, including topics they would most like to cover during the workshop series. In addition, we developed an online self-assessment tool to assess key areas of VAW and VAC research capacities including: building on current research evidence; theory of change and research design; research methods and standardised tools; research ethics and safety; data analysis and interpretation; and, reporting findings and research uptake. Findings reflected the wealth and depth of experience and knowledge in the group. Key learning areas identified by the participants included: adapting to COVID-19, developing and using a theory of change, grant reporting expectations, quantitative and qualitative VAW and VAC measures and tools for their specific research questions, how to disseminate findings to key audiences, learning from one another and developing a community of practice, and ethical issues.
The SVRI endeavoured to be flexible and responsive throughout the workshop series, especially given the global context of uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the pre-workshop inputs from participants, reviewers, the SVRI and World Bank teams, we collected feedback from participants at the end of every session through an online evaluation questionnaire. We also welcomed feedback during the sessions, via email, or via the WhatsApp group. Feedback from the anonymous online evaluation surveys were shared at the beginning of each session to clarify how we would address arising issues and concerns.

Session agendas and reading resources were distributed before each session and after each session, the session notes, recordings and any additional recommended resources (including those shared by participants) were shared via an online shared drive.

The shift to an online modality meant that we were able to engage with many more international experts in the field of violence against women and violence against children research to join the sessions as guest speakers. The inclusion of guests helped to keep participants engaged and provide opportunities for dialogue with leaders from the field.

We are so grateful to all of our guest speakers for their contributions to the workshop series: Shruti Majumdar from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women; Sophie Namy from Raising Voices; Mary Ellsberg from the Global Women’s Institute at George Washington University; Kristin Dunkle and Yandisa Sikweyiya from the South African Medical Research Council; Ellen Bates-Jefferys from Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA); Leane Ramsoomar and Rebecca Ladbury from the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Global Programme and Lori Michau and Natsnet Gebrebrhan from Raising Voices.

**Workshop Series Outline**

**Session 1:** Welcome; Grant Overview; Adapting to COVID-19; Reporting Requirements

**Session 2:** Ethics and Safety in VAW and VAC Research and Programming including Radical Self-Care and Kindness

**Session 3:** Theory of Change; Research Methods and Tools

**Session 4:** Research Uptake

**Session 5:** Next Steps; Staying in Touch
What we learned:

• Take advantage of the flexibility of online formats to include more participants and more guest experts.

• We co-created the agenda with participants to ensure that we were responsive to their identified needs.

• Similar to in-person workshops, there wasn’t enough time to do everything, but some conversations felt especially short and others such as learning more about the details of individual projects – which would have happened more organically during an in-person workshop – were especially missed. We tried to encourage sharing outside of the sessions, but these were not regularly taken up. In future, we would experiment with Padlets or Jamboards (or other bulletin board type online tools) where teams share about their projects in an ongoing way and other people can interact through leaving questions and comments.

• It is helpful to curate resources/reading material for the participant group and to find a variety of multimedia resources (e.g., videos, blogs, etc.) where possible and not academic articles only. To increase engagement, it may be useful to explain why specific resources are recommended and which sections would be most beneficial to the group or to individual teams. Further, finding resources that are available in languages other than English or translating key resources for participants where possible is greatly valued to ensure a more inclusive process.

Our tips for engaging online capacity strengthening workshops

Preparation Phase

• Invest in training and skills development for various types of online meetings, workshops, and events that best suit your goals
• Ensure you have online safety measures in place
• Build a good understanding of participants’ contexts and needs to guide plans
• Co-create the workshop methods and agenda including accountability mechanisms for participation in and between the sessions
• Consider language differences and how to best address these before, during and after workshop sessions
• Define clear roles and responsibilities for the team including specific roles for facilitation, production, and note-taking

Delivery Phase

• Prepare each session in detail and practice the sessions with the facilitation and production teams prior to each event
• Share the agenda and reading resources with participants prior to the session
• Any plans should include backup plans and always stay flexible to be responsive to evolving contextual issues and participant needs
• Keep the agendas short – maximum 2-3 hours – and include a mix of brief activities and regular breaks
• Make use of participatory and interactive tools
• Have guest speakers that are engaging and engaged and will also try to include participatory exercises for the participants. Ensure that guests are aware of the core principles of the workshop approach and structure – including the code of conduct – as well as the specific agenda for the session they are joining.
• Promote peer to peer and multi-way knowledge exchanges during and between the sessions
• Include an anonymous evaluation after each session for participants to share their feedback – act on the feedback and share with participants how are you doing so
• Try to avoid silent periods unless they are facilitated (e.g., “Let’s all a few minutes of quiet to reflect”) and as soon as people arrive engage them in chatter to welcome them to the meeting; silence often leads people to think there are technical problems

Follow up Phase
• Send reminders of the upcoming online workshop sessions through e-mails and WhatsApp groups
• Create and update a workshop resources repository for participants to access workshop presentations, recordings, and relevant readings or other resources
• Depending on the nature and interest of the participants, organise follow up online sessions with deep dives into specific topics

Please share your tips for making online workshops fun, engaging, interactive, and effective by adding to this Padlet.

Concluding reflections and gratitude
The first online capacity strengthening workshop has been an interesting learning experience for the SVRI. We are grateful to all the participants who gave their inputs, actively participated in sessions, and were patient while our team learned and strengthened our skills. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis presented us with several challenges, but also with an opportunity to acquire new technical skills and the ability to create connection and sharing through an exclusively online platform. We look forward to engaging with all of you to continue to share lessons learned about how to create engaging, fun, innovative, and effective online events. Please remember to share your inputs in the links above or contact us directly to share your experiences, learnings, tips, and resources.

Find us online:
www.svri.org
TheSVRI
@thesvri
@TheSVRI
svri@svri.org