Virtual Programs to Advance Gender Equality:
A Checklist for Adaptation

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The social and economic challenges created and exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic makes it harder, and even more critical to engage individuals in programs designed to advance gender equality and prevent violence. The current global pandemic is causing a dramatic shift in the way practitioners design these programs – motivated by the desire to deliver services even amidst restrictions on mobility and in-person gatherings due to the pandemic, as well as the longer-term and growing interest in exploring how effective in-person training can be adapted to virtual settings, to reach more individuals. We have the opportunity to innovate beyond traditional in-person, community-based interventions, but we must do so with care, caution, and thoughtfulness.

While the use of online learning and technology is not a new area, community and school-based interventions that require in-person human interaction have been far more common – and far more evaluated than online learning. This new dynamic reality requires practitioners to design modalities to reach program participants remotely while also recreating some of the conditions and key ingredients of effective, in-person experiential learning.

To be responsive to this reality – we set out to explore how digital technology and virtual spaces can be used to facilitate programs that advance gender equality. Based on existing literature, specialist webinars, and interviews with experts in this field (including with InclusionVentures, Girl Effect, and YLabs) from April – July 2020, below is a summary checklist of the best practices and recommendations for designing, implementing, and evaluating virtual interventions. This tool can serve as a starting point, to guide an organization to effectively plan for a new program or to adapt an existing intervention.

Designing a Virtual Program

1   **Conduct design research** to determine what is the best delivery channel, content, and format for the intervention. This should include the needs of the user, what kind of problem they themselves see in their lives, the barriers they face to addressing this problem, and what would make them more likely to use a digital intervention.

2   **Assess staff and local partner** capacity to implement the planned virtual programming and determine if and how more training will be provided (e.g. to highlight the specific risks for women and girls during COVID-19, self-care practices, how to effectively use online platforms, etc.) as needed and/or consider having a team "on standby" to provide ongoing support to less experienced or overwhelmed moderators.

3   **Do the research and create appropriate protocols to do no harm.** If the program encourages access to digital resources, it is important to determine if that inherently puts the person at risk (e.g. Does the participant have a safe and private space to access your program? Are they going to be surrounded by adults or peers who will listen in on their private conversations? Do they have their own devices or do they share them with parents or partners?) and what to do about it.

4   **Involve necessary local review boards.** In some countries, any piece of content that is disseminated online or by broadcast needs to go through ministry review boards to ensure it is in line with local strategy and context.

5   **Ensure a participant-driven design and engage local talent to author/frame the program.** When the educational activities are performed by professionals from external organizations, they may come to an end when the 'outsiders' leave.

6   **It is important to decide what is the cost to the user** to access your programming, and if that cost is affordable and/or can be covered by your organization.

7   **Determine the length of sessions/program** and aim to test that as part of the intervention's evaluation framework. Consider factors such as: how long it will take the group to build trust – which is essential for the program to be impactful.

8   **Plan for limited internet connectivity challenges, and plan not to rely on high-bandwidth, online formats.** Design a platform that can accommodate low bandwidth capabilities; think about designing shorter online sessions or working with IVR (interactive voice response) – an automated system that works through voice recordings and telephone keys (e.g. think of telephone menus when calling customer service) or USSD (Unstructured Supplementary Service Data). With USSD, users interact directly from their mobile phones by making selections from various menus. It enables two-way communication of information. Consider an upfront investment in tablets that can be delivered to facilitators or participants, which are pre-loaded with content.

9   **Where possible and safe, design for groups** so that only one computer or mobile phone is required for several individuals, and consider developing questions for conversations that can be discussed after interacting with online content. To note, an exception to this may be when content focuses on particularly sensitive issues around gender, sexuality, and/or violence; and/or when gathering in groups or sharing devices may compromise someone's feeling of safety.

Implementing Virtual Content

1 **Plan thoughtfully how to translate in-person programming online.** There is no easy "how to" on translating offline activities into an online space as every program has its own unique outcomes and goals, is specific to the needs of the community, and is dealing with its own connectivity challenges. Tips include: have fewer, shorter sessions; be aware of how discussing sensitive subjects such as power in an already-stressed environment can exacerbate challenges in a home: prioritize messaging and skills-building activities centered on healthy relationships, communication, and non-violent conflict resolution.

2 **Be aware of, document, and address the gender and social norms and dynamics around access to technology.** A participant may be borrowing a phone from a parent or a friend or a boy may borrow his girlfriend's phone (or vice versa); it is important to be considerate of, if using cell phone technology, when and how you send reminders and push notifications.

3 **Be considerate of the environment and create ground rules** as online engagement can make inequalities more visible (e.g. provide stock backgrounds, and be conscious of asking participants to showcase their homes/spaces).

4 **Follow guidelines on how to thoughtfully run a virtual group session from beginning to end.** These include: send reminders in advance on the session, log on early to troubleshoot tech issues, don't record, make a plan for responding to questions in the chat box (and provide different channels through which participants can express their ideas and share experiences (i.e: chat, speaking, anonymously through characters in jamboard, etc.)), send visuals/presentations in advance; be clear with participants on the purpose and intention of the session, establish working agreements, consider using breakout rooms and other methods to facilitate frequent engagement, and take breaks.

5 **Make it a priority to build and maintain trust with participants, which includes data transparency. If collecting online user data,** determine how much control users will have over their information and how it will be used by the organization. **Communicate that to your participants.**

6 **Treat virtual activities and initiative-messaging in-session as a complement to other types of outreach,** using outlets and media such as magazines, radio, and SMS.

7 **Engage local partners and conduct community sensitization.** Digital technology can be off-putting to those who are more used to traditional interventions, and getting local buy-in is critical. This could include meetings to introduce the intervention and provide adults and trusted local leaders the opportunity to use it and explore it.

8 **Design a "participant experience" that includes both synchronous as well as asynchronous engagement on and offline.** Provide various opportunities to reflect and contribute to discussions in between sessions. For example: prompt critical reflections via forums or WhatsApp groups with a set of one or two questions related to the content addressed in the session, give assignments such as selecting an existing ad or video that represents a concept and ask participants to share it, produce their own one minute video, or to watch a specific video and come ready to discuss. Not everything needs to happen in the live session.

Evaluation of Virtual Programming

1 **Determine whether there are gender-based differences in how content is accessed, understood and received by participants** (for example, boys may be more likely to have greater access to technology in general given that they tend to have more free time than girls). According to experts, this is an under-researched area.

2 **Create feedback loops such as** user group interviews and look for other opportunities to perfect the current approach, so that the program creates spaces that they can trust and has the desired impact.