

## **Focus group guidance for assessing barriers related to access to HIV and STI services among vulnerable groups**

### **General information on conducting a focus group**

Focus group is a type of group interview. Focus groups are considered to be a good method to generate ideas for new initiatives/programs/projects.

### **Aim of the focus group**

The aim of the focus group is to describe the problems related to access to HIV and STI services among vulnerable groups and to ask the representatives of vulnerable groups on how to improve the access to these services. Based on the information new models of service provision will be piloted in order to improve the access.

### **Participants**

Participants should be chosen carefully. They must be people who know about the subject of the focus group, have personal experiences and are able and willing to provide us with information and insight.

One group should consist of people who are alike because composing a group with highly different people will decrease the quality of the information we get. People tend to censor their ideas in the presence of people who differ greatly from them in power, status, income, or personal characteristics. For example one group should consist only of sex workers who work in the streets or inject drugs, because if there are also sex workers who work in elite brothels or escort agencies then they may not feel comfortable around each other.

Ideally participants in a focus group should be unfamiliar to each other. Another option is to choose people who know each other well or are friends. In this case it is important to make sure that there is no power imbalance and that every participant gets a chance to speak. For example if the group consists of sex workers from one brothel and you also invite the “madam” from the same brothel, then make sure that the madam is not the only one who speaks but that the girls are also actively participating.

In general we do not recommend to invite pimps or drug dealers (who themselves do not inject) to the focus group.

Make sure that:

- The people participate voluntarily and that nobody is forced to participation; if somebody refuses to participate make sure that they understand that this does not influence further service provision to them in your organization (that they are still welcome to come anytime and nobody is angry with them because they did not participate);
- The participants know that their privacy will be respected and that they won't be identifiable in any report. There is no need to ask for the real names of the participants.

### **Size**

A focus group should be small enough to allow every participant to express a viewpoint and large enough to capture a diverse range of perspectives. A typical focus group usually includes 7 to 12 people. We recommend conducting 3 small focus groups with 5–7 participants.

### **Length**

A single focus group session usually lasts the maximum 2 hours. We recommend to keep it no longer than an hour or 1.5 hours.

### **Compensation**

Focus group participants are often compensated for their time. We recommend providing coffee/tea/water and cookies during the focus group and also giving a package of condoms/information materials/syringes and/or anything else available to the participants at the end of the focus group.

### **Moderating the focus group**

Moderator leads the discussion but must remain neutral and not give any personal opinions. Moderator must ensure that every participant has a chance to say what they wish and that the discussion is not dominated by one person who coerces the group. The moderator may need an assistant who will take notes.

A good focus group is like a good conversation. People may laugh, tell personal stories, disagree, interrupt each other etc. The moderator just has to make sure that the participants stay focused on the topic and not start discussing other things which are not related to the topic.

### **Recording**

Audio-tape, if possible (then the discussion can be listened again). Otherwise an assistant moderator should take notes. Consent of the people to participate should also be audio-taped.

### **Process of the focus group**

1. Introduction – moderator introduces himself/herself and the assistant moderator and explains the aims of the focus group. Moderator explains that the privacy of the participants will be respected and that they won't be identifiable in any report.
2. Moderator asks participants to introduce themselves – there is no need to say the real names, participants can use alias names. Alias names, ages and background of the participants (for example how long they have worked in sex business or how long they have injected drugs) should be recorded or written.
3. Questions and discussion. Questions are more like broader themes to guide the discussion.
4. Short conclusion – at the end of the focus group the moderator summarizes the main points of the discussion (for example what were the main barriers to the services the group identified and what were the main recommendations of the

- participants on how to improve the access to the services) to make sure that everything was correctly understood.
5. Final “thank you” and giving the incentives to the participants.

### **Report**

We recommend to draft the report right after the focus group – then everything is remembered freshly and well. The report should not be longer than 2–3 pages and should include the following:

- information on the participants – by age, gender, background (for example how long they have worked in sex business or how long they have injected drugs)
- short summaries of the discussion related to all 8 questions. The barriers, problems and solutions should be listed in order of importance. For example if all participants agreed that the distance to the services is the most important barrier and opening hours of the clinic the least important barrier, then this should be written in the report.

### **Questions**

1. Do you feel that you have enough information on HIV and STIs? Why do you think so (that you have good or bad information)?
2. What kind of information on STIs and HIV would you like to have?
3. Do you feel that you are in danger of contracting HIV or any other STI? Why do you think so?
4. Have you ever had a need to go to HIV or STI testing?
5. Do you know where to go in order to get HIV and STI testing?
6. Was it easy or difficult for you to get HIV and STI testing when you need it? Why was it easy/difficult?
7. Is there any treatment available for you in case you contract HIV or STIs? Why so?
8. What would make it easier for you to get HIV and STI testing and treatment? What would you change with these services and what is already very good?