



How to conduct remote consultations with girls

User consultations for the development of digital products have traditionally been done in-person. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced new ways of doing business, including consulting with stakeholders remotely. A remote approach to user testing can have benefits — it can reach geographically diverse users when travel is not possible due to time, mobility, or budget restrictions. A remote approach can also allow users to engage with digital content and products in a more natural setting and in their own time, without direct observation. While remote consultations may take considerably longer than in-person consultations (for example, one month), this is likely to produce insights that wouldn't emerge during short-term, in-person testing.

To develop digital platforms relevant for girls, girls must be at the center of the design process. Listening to girls' voices is the best way to ensure the product or service meets their needs and digital realities. Girls often face significant barriers to access and use of digital devices due to social norms and gender inequality. This includes caregivers restricting access due to online safety concerns, which is much more of a barrier to digital access and use for girls than for boys. Girls are also less likely than boys to get opportunities and practice to develop their digital skills. However, with careful planning, remote consultations can engage groups of girls safely, in their homes via digital platforms. Remote consultations can also be used in conjunction with in-person approaches. This can be particularly useful for girls under 13 who are too young to have social media accounts, or girls who lack regular access to phones or internet connections.

This guide supports teams to conduct remote user consultations with girls on digital platforms, in times or environments when face-to-face contact is not feasible. It provides practical tips for overcoming differences between in-person and online consultations as well as addressing challenges that affect girls' digital use and participation. While this tool is focused on addressing the specific needs of adolescent girls, some of the tips may also be helpful for other groups participating in remote consultations.



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01. Select your digital platform carefully

There are many digital communication channels to choose from, including WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Telegram, Zoom, or Google Meet. Some guiding questions to help you decide:

- What platform do girls already have access to, use regularly, and feel comfortable with in your context?
- Is the platform free of cost?
- Can the platform 'hide' your phone number and/or location?
- Is the platform encrypted?
- Does the platform conform to your organization's data protection policies?
- Do you need video functionality?
- Do you need breakout rooms?
- Is the platform accessible for girls with disabilities?

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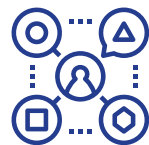
Conducting remote user testing for a period tracker application for adolescent girls in West Bengal, India

Based on Splash and UNICEF's experience conducting remote user testing for Oky, a period tracker application for girls in West Bengal, India, many adolescent girls already use WhatsApp to communicate with each other, which made it a straightforward choice for use in remote consultations. In other contexts where the use of WhatsApp is predominant, this may be the easiest digital platform to use for remote consultations, especially if the girls already know each other. However, as WhatsApp does not hide phone numbers or identities, there can be safeguarding risks. Group members could communicate inappropriately outside of the group or share participants' phone numbers without their permission. Since online safety is a top concern for girls and their caregivers, these risks are important to consider and mitigate.

Read more about [how Splash conducted their remote user testing for Oky India.](#)

These resources provide more guidance on how to select the best digital platform:

- Plan's [Safety on Online Platforms](#)
- AVA's [Digital Safeguarding Resource Pack](#)



02. Be mindful during the recruitment and training of facilitators

Remote consultations, like those in-person, require appropriate facilitators. Girls may feel more comfortable working with facilitators who are women, fostering a more candid and relaxed discussion. This is particularly so when the topics are sensitive, such as menstruation or sexuality. Parents and caregivers may have fewer safety concerns if facilitators are women. For safeguarding purposes, at least two facilitators should be present in each group. Including at least one facilitator already known to girls when possible, such as a teacher or a girls' club leader, may also make girls feel more comfortable. Facilitators should have experience with in-person facilitation and be confident in using digital platforms. Remote facilitator training should focus on digital facilitation skills, the digital consultation process, and digital safeguarding issues for girls in particular.

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03. Engage caregivers from the outset

This is particularly important for girls as caregivers may be gatekeepers for girls' access to mobile phones and internet, and may be more likely to have concerns about online safety of girls than boys. It is crucial to take sufficient time to explain the process to caregivers and describe the safeguarding measures to ensure that caregivers feel comfortable in supporting girls' participation; not doing so may even result in caregivers blocking participation. In general, when caregivers see the benefits of girls' use of technology, they will be more likely to support girls' ongoing access to technology as well as actively support girls to navigate online safety risks.

Informed consent from caregivers will be required for consultations. Follow your organization's consent policy and find creative ways to obtain it remotely. For example, if digital literacy is high, a consent form could be delivered as a PDF, a Word document, or a Google Form link via WhatsApp or email. Alternatively, consent could be recorded over a phone or video call when literacy and/or digital literacy is low.

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04. Consider remote participant recruitment

Remote, opt-in recruitment is when participants are invited to apply to join consultations. This may, for example, involve adverts in schools or on social media. Applications, which may include a brief task, are used to assess capacity and commitment to participation. Girls who opt-in may be more committed, but this method may not capture diverse users. On the other hand, when girls are chosen by others, such as teachers, they may be less motivated and there may be selection bias, e.g., choosing only “good” students. It is important that participant recruiters understand the selection criteria and the need to include a wide variety of participants to ensure the product meets the needs of all girls. For an example of ‘opt-in’ recruitment, check out this [how-to guide from Grassroot](#).

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05. Engage girls with disabilities

As with in-person testing, it is essential to use inclusive and accessible approaches for remote consultations to create meaningful engagement with girls with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, and it is important to recognize their unique experiences, barriers to participation, and needs during remote consultations. When girls with disabilities share their lived experiences, both the organization conducting the consultation and the individual benefit through learning, reducing stigma, and building capacity. Below are some recommendations for creating an inclusive experience for remote engagement with girls with disabilities:

- Identify and establish partnerships with organizations involved with girls with disabilities and their caregivers, including organizations led by persons with disabilities.
- Ensure consultation platforms and documents are accessible so girls with disabilities can participate remotely. For example, follow guidance on [creating accessible documents](#) such as using plain language, easy-to-read versions, describing images, and selecting larger font sizes and high-contrast colors. It may be necessary to ensure girls with disabilities or their caregivers know how to use accessibility features on digital devices such as screen readers and magnification for text and subtitles.

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- Train facilitators on ethical and inclusive practices. It is important to tailor approaches to the participants' needs: for example, a sign language interpreter may be needed for participants with hearing impairment. Also, always use positive terminology that does not perpetuate disability stigma and stereotypes.

For resources on engaging girls with disabilities, check out:

- [Guidance on disability inclusive data collection, monitoring and reporting \(UNICEF\)](#)
- [Tips on communicating with children and adolescents with disabilities \(UNICEF\)](#)
- [Phone accessibility settings \(Scope\)](#)

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06. Adapt timing to suit girls

Determine the best time of day to post questions or tasks to the group and give enough time for responses. For example, if girls are in school during the day, avoid posting new content until after school. Be aware that girls are more likely to do work in the home than boys (such as caring for siblings or helping with household tasks), and this may limit time for participation. Girls also may take longer to respond if their digital use is restricted or if they share phones, so make sure to give enough time for responses (for example, 1–3 days). The optimal timing and spacing of new posts should be discussed and decided directly with participants.

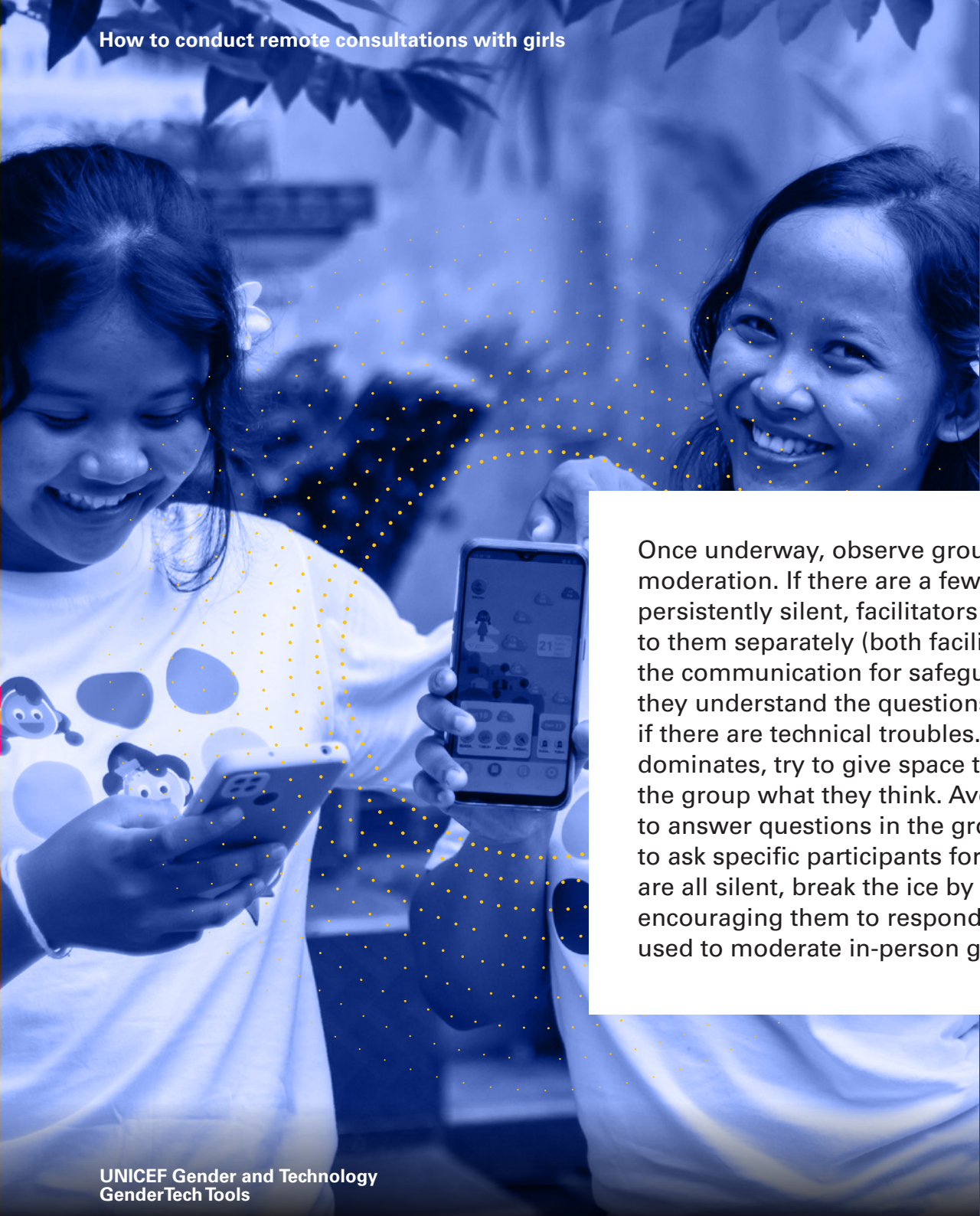


07. Pay attention to group dynamics

As with in-person consultations, it is preferable to avoid having mixed-sex groups. Gender norms may mean that girls are not as comfortable speaking up and sharing their opinions with boys present. Girl-only groups not only help girls feel more confident in participating but also reduce safety concerns for caregivers, who may worry about girls' safety online.

Recruiting small groups of girls who already know each other may be easier for safeguarding reasons (especially if using WhatsApp). Furthermore, this will ease the process of "breaking the ice." However, if groups are composed of girls who already know each other, this could also create or reinforce dynamics that are unknown to or unobserved by the facilitators which may impact the quality of responses, as well as the wellbeing of participants. For example, there could be participants who do not get along, or bullying that happened in school or online that is carried into the group. Decide during planning whether the group participants will be acquaintances or strangers — weigh the potential risks and benefits, and plan mitigating actions if issues arise.

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Once underway, observe group dynamics and provide moderation. If there are a few participants who are persistently silent, facilitators could consider reaching out to them separately (both facilitators should be involved in the communication for safeguarding purposes) to ensure they understand the questions and tasks, or determine if there are technical troubles. If one participant always dominates, try to give space to other participants by asking the group what they think. Avoid calling individuals out to answer questions in the group, e.g., using '@name' to ask specific participants for their input. If participants are all silent, break the ice by providing an example and encouraging them to respond. Some of the techniques used to moderate in-person groups can be used remotely.

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Flower petals

Draw a flower with 5 petals on the other side of the card. On each petal, answer one of the below questions:

1. My best quality is:
2. What I like to do in my free time is:
3. My dream/goal is:
4. What I do not like is:
5. I first heard about periods from:

Take a photo of your flower and post it in the group!



08. Use creative methods to put girls at ease

If participants haven't met before the consultations, spend time on icebreaking to ensure they feel comfortable. Digital icebreaking activities may take more time, particularly when girls can't see each other. Use activities that tap into creativity and the functionality of digital platforms. For an example of a digital-friendly icebreaking activity, see the task card used for remote user consultations about Oky, the period tracker application, figure 1.

Gender norms often discourage girls from speaking out, so encourage them to give feedback in different ways. Drawing, leaving voice notes, or even responding to a question with emojis or responding to a poll are options to facilitate participation. Consider using polls to prioritize ideas generated in consultations so the selection is anonymous and objective. For example, Oky Kenya partner LVCT Health used a Google Form survey to prioritize and select graphics to be used in the Oky Kenya application by asking girls to put them in order of preference.






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Figure 1: One of the task cards designed for remote icebreaking activity



09. Make it visual and fun!

Asking long questions with a lot of text can be intimidating and difficult to read on phones. In addition, girls may have lower digital literacy than boys. Instead of posing long questions, consider how to make questions more visual by designing ‘task cards’ (see figure 1 as an example). Use digital ‘language’ that girls are already using amongst themselves. For example, you can work with participants to create an ‘emoji legend’ such as the example below in order to elicit feedback.

Example emoji legend	
	Agree with what someone else has said.
	Disagree with someone’s opinion – please explain why.
	Happy.
	Not happy. If you feel uncomfortable, please explain why.
	Confused/don’t understand the task. Ask for help from a group member or the facilitator.
Other	Make up your own!

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10. Consider providing phone credit

It is recommended to give participants an appropriate amount of phone/data credit to cover costs and facilitate their participation as the cost of data may be a barrier for girls to participate in the consultations. Consider whether to deliver credit at the beginning, middle, or end of the process. While credit at the start may facilitate participation (as downloads require data), some girls may drop out and receive phone credit without participating.

Delivering phone credit direct to girls for remote consultations in India

During the onboarding process for remote consultations with girls, Splash used a Google Form to ask girls participating in the Oky India user testing to provide information such as their phone number, mobile operator, and whether they had a prepaid or postpaid account. They then used this information to deliver phone credit directly to girls' accounts to facilitate their participation.

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11. Provide tech support and coaching

Girls may have (or feel that they have) lower digital literacy than boys, and levels of digital literacy may vary among group members. In order to reduce this barrier, facilitators should be prepared to provide individual or group support on how to perform certain digital tasks, e.g., how to post a photo in the WhatsApp group. Support can be provided in several ways, e.g., through support calls, voice notes, and screenshots. Links to YouTube tutorials in local languages are a good way of providing support. Experiment with different approaches to see what works best!

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12. Ensure digital safeguarding

Participants must be aged 13 and older as social media companies in most countries restrict access of younger children to register for social media accounts (including WhatsApp). Informed consent from caregivers and informed assent from adolescent girls will be required for consultations. Be prepared to provide individual support to ensure caregivers and girls fully understand what is being asked. If girls need to be contacted individually by phone or digital platform for any reason, at least two facilitators should be on the call or message thread to ensure appropriate conduct.

Consider power dynamics when recruiting participants for small groups. Girls may be more likely than boys to experience and engage in psychological types of bullying. Some studies also indicate girls may experience more cyberbullying.¹ Pay careful attention to potential bullying and harassment from other group members and ensure that girls know how to report any issues that arise. Make sure the ground rules for participation in online groups are clear.

¹[UNESCO, Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying and Web Foundation, Why the Web Needs to Work for Women and Girls.](#)

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For example, reposting group content, e.g., forwarding or screenshots, should be strictly prohibited unless consent is obtained. If platforms do not hide phone numbers, sharing group members' numbers without their permission should be forbidden. At the end of the engagement period, all participants should delete other group members' phone numbers unless otherwise granted permission.

For more tips and details, check out these helpful resources on digital safeguarding:

- [Keeping Children Safe Online: a guide for organizations \(Keeping Children Safe\)](#)
- [Safety on Online Platforms \(Plan International\)](#)
- [Digital Safeguarding Resource Pack \(AVA\)](#)
- [Digital Safeguarding Tips and Guidance \(Girl Effect\)](#)
- [Risk Assessment, Top Tips for Engaging with Children and Young People Online \(UNICEF UK\)](#)

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13. Observe and collect feedback

In-person consultations usually allow the collection of rich data from observing facial expressions, body language, and other non-verbal cues. This may not be possible during remote digital consultations, especially when videos are not used. While you might not see how participants react to tasks or questions, you can still take note of silence, participant response rates, and any confusion in answering questions or performing tasks. One advantage of using a remote approach is the rich visual record you will automatically generate. Quotes from girls can be extracted from the text, and photos and screenshots can serve as examples. Be sure to cover the use of this material during the informed consent process.

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For more ideas on designing digital products for and with girls, check out the other UNICEF GenderTech tools

- [How to co-create digital solutions with girls](#)
- [How to do user testing with girls](#)
- [How to build digital solutions to girls' digital realities](#)

Do you have any additional tips for remote user consultations with girls? Can you share any interesting experiences or innovations to adapt your work with girls during the pandemic? Are you interested in being part of a community of practitioners working on digital products with and for girls?

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