Gender-Just Co-Design Toolkit

This toolkit provides guidance on what to consider when planning gender-just co-design for community development. It focuses on process planning and designing engagement tailored to the particular community development issue.

What is Co-Design?

Often in research and practice, we see the end users as **informants** and **evaluators** of our innovation. Participatory Design research calls for **partnership** with users and other stakeholders as part of the **iterative** development process. Co-design takes this a step further – recognizing that **everyone** has a **creative capacity** and **expertise** in their own **contexts**, **needs**, and **constraints**. Co-design research attempts to bring all stakeholders to the table as **equal participants throughout** the development of interventions.

Burdens of Participation

Co-design often takes **several iterations** to get to a working product. We should be aware of what we promise and the **costs** — e.g. time — to our **collaborators** (Dourish et al, 2020).

What Sort of Co-Design Approach?
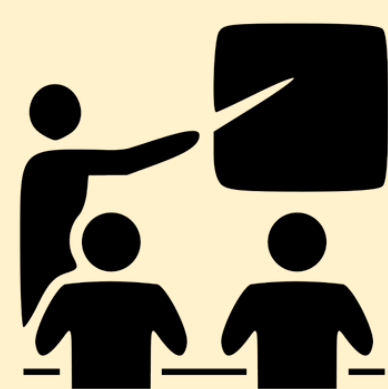
Single Workshop

Papers often reflect the outcomes of a **single workshop** or set of workshops. It is difficult to measure the **long-term impact** of these investigations.
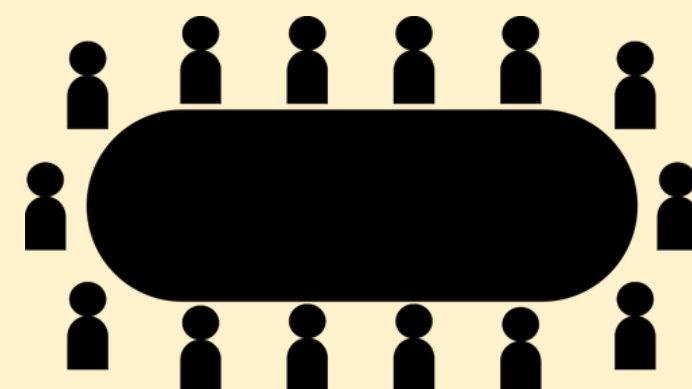
Multi-Stakeholder

The **mix of stakeholders** present is an important balance to strike. Working with **existing community networks** can help you ensure that all interests are represented **fairly**.

Ongoing Partnership

Ongoing partnerships let you **integrate** into established projects. **Local gatekeepers** can provide entry, but they can also have their own **biases** and **conflicting goals**.

Gender Injustice: Linked Issues

Burdens of Care

The **triple role** often shouldered by women of production, reproduction and community can affect **participation**.
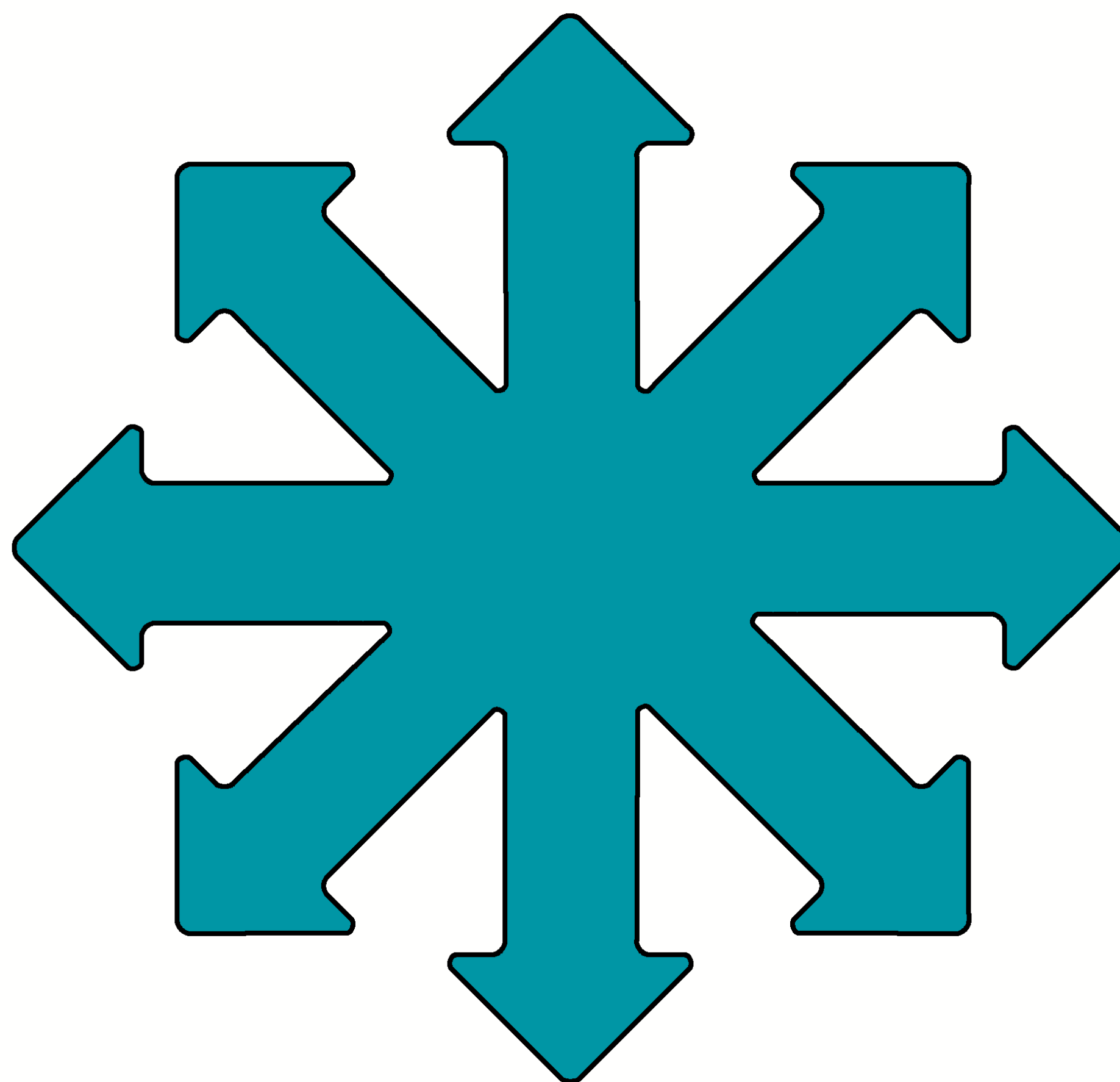
Culture

Cultural **norms** around gender lead to **assumptions** about women that can **limit their participation**.

Legal Structures

A country's laws can **implicitly or explicitly discriminate** against women.

Methodology

Methodologies might not be **applicable** outside of a certain **context**, or contain **gendered assumptions**.

Exclusive Language

Workshop materials may **reinforce gender assumptions** or may be **inaccessible**.

Unsafe Spaces

Existing or emergent **power dynamics** and the absence of agreed **ground rules** can **disempower** women to share their **views**.

Timing

Due to **gendered division of labour**, women might not be **available** to participate at certain times.

Patriarchal Relationships

Women may be **prevented** from attending due to the **control** somebody has over them.

Considerations for Gender Inclusion

Gender Roles
Gender roles are not **static** or **neutral**. Their **impact** on participants should be taken into account when **planning** a co-design intervention.

Intersectionality
It is important to have women with **diverse identities** and **backgrounds** present, so that you do not **reinforce** other **structural inequalities**.

Male Allies
Male allies are valuable, but their **presence** may have to be **balanced** with women's need for a **safe space**.

Empowerment
Disempowered women lack **access** to the necessary **resources** to co-design **effectively** and are often stuck in "**survival mode**".

Gatekeepers
Gatekeepers provide an **entry point** into a **community**, but may still bring their own **biases** and **preconceptions** of the intervention.

Diversity
Recognize the **diversity** of participants' **contexts**, **needs**, and **perspectives** so that you do not **tokenize***** them.

Co-Design Readiness
For participants to **meaningfully contribute**, they must first be equipped with some foundational **knowledge** and **confidence** (Till et al, 2025).

Inclusivity
There needs to be a **welcoming**, **compassionate**, and **non-judgemental** atmosphere for participants to feel truly **included**.

Participation
Participants' capacity for participation may be determined by:

- digital infrastructure
- level of digital literacy
- geographical isolation
- care responsibilities
- conflicting demands
- disabilities or support needs
- location-dependent factors
- accessibility of the intervention

*****Tokenism** is the practice of **symbolically including people** of minoritised groups (such as women, people of colour, etc.) to meet a quota or obligation. This surface-level inclusion is dehumanising, because it reduces such people to **one-dimensional tokens**, rather than engaging with them as **unique individuals**.

How to Co-Design with Women

Start Small

One-to-one **interviews** or even **focus groups** can be a useful way to establish **rapport** with your co-designers. We recommend starting any co-design engagement by **interviewing** potential **participants** – not to evaluate them, but to **understand** their context in a **safe space** and to actively **seek their input** into how future engagements can be structured. This includes asking logistical questions, such as what **timing**, **venue**, and **language** they would prefer and what care responsibilities they have.

Bridge Barriers

Invisible resource needs can be identified **early** by engaging with **local gatekeepers** and **community networks**, or during your initial **interviews**. As women often bear greater **care responsibilities** (including childcare, housework, and administration), accommodating them is essential. Having childcare **on site** is often easier for **nursing** mothers or when the child is old enough to **play independently**. Alternately, you can **cover the costs** of an at-home **babysitter** as a workshop expense. (Wardle et al, 2016)

Create a Safe Space

A **diversity of people** should feel **safe** to share. To achieve this, the space should be **welcoming** and allow for **free expression**. Where requested, a degree of confidentiality should be ensured. **Consent mechanisms** and group-developed **ground rules** can be important for establishing this baseline. Be aware that who is **present** in the room can make a space safe or unsafe. It is often necessary to separate women from men **initially**, to build **confidence** and foster **independence**.
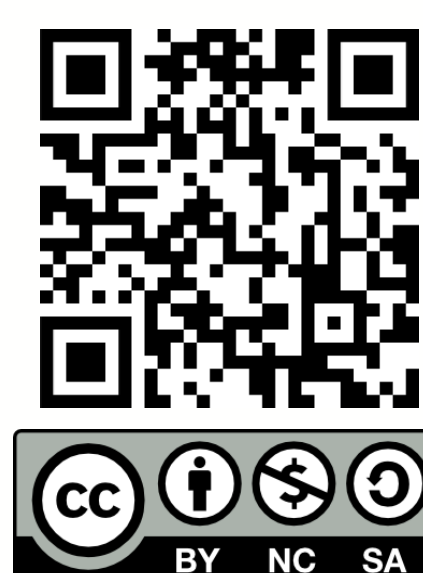
Encourage Participation

Where possible, content materials should be free of technical **jargon** (and provided in an **accessible language**). Some effective tools for facilitating participation are having **ice-breakers**, breaking into **smaller groups**, and using **practical design techniques** such as storyboards or personae.

Iterate
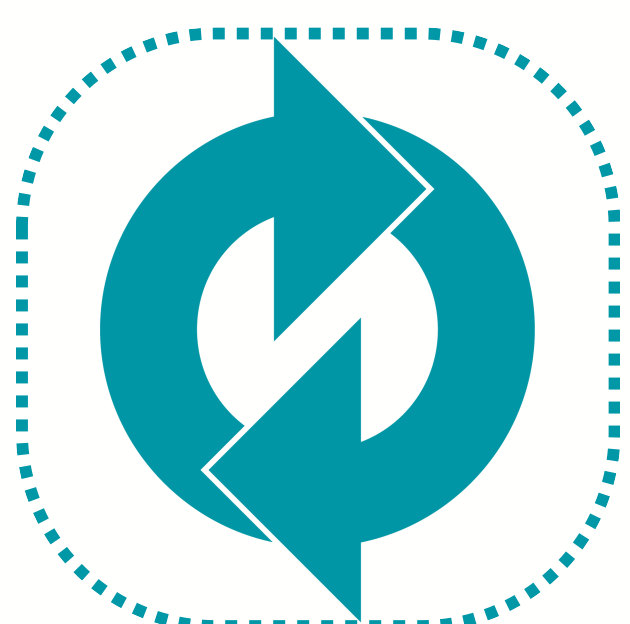
Good co-design usually builds on **previous projects**. **Talk to your participants** about how they **currently** solve the problem you are designing for. To ensure your designs remain **useful** and **useable**, regularly use **participatory methodology** to **analyse** and **update** them, taking feedback from **all stakeholders**.