St. PAUL INSTITUTE
FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS

CONCEPT NOTE SUBMISSION GUIDE FOR RESEARCH PROJECTS

St Paul Institute for Reproductive Health and Rights (SPIRHR)

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1. Introduction

This guide is designed to help you prepare a compelling research concept note that clearly communicates your proposed research project. SPIRHR is committed to supporting high-quality, innovative research that advances reproductive health and rights through evidence-based interventions and policy impact.

1.1. Characteristics of the research projects?

The research projects should be rigorous, multi-site research initiatives that address critical gaps in reproductive health knowledge, practice, or policy. These projects typically involve:

- Multi-center collaboration
- Significant sample sizes
- Potential for national or regional policy impact
- Innovative methodologies or interventions
- Capacity building components (involving resident or master students' thesis works)

1.2. Purpose and scope of the concept note

The concept note is intended to help applicants present a concise but compelling overview of a proposed research project. It allows SPIRHR to assess:

- Relevance to priorities: should be only in the areas of **family planning and comprehensive abortion care**
- Scientific merit: Methodological rigor and theoretical grounding
- Innovation: Novel approaches, interventions, or evidence generation
- Feasibility: Realistic timelines, resources, and team capacity
- Team capacity: Expertise and track record of investigators
- Scalability and policy impact: Potential for real-world application and influence

Selected concept notes will be invited to full proposal development. Not all concept notes will advance to the full proposal stage. The concept note is your opportunity to make a strong first impression.

2. General requirements

Format specifications

- Maximum Length: 5–7 pages (excluding annexes)
- Font: Arial or Times New Roman, 12 points
- Margins: 1 inch (2.54 cm) on all sides
- Line Spacing: 1.5 or double-spaced
- Page Numbers: Include on all pages except the title page
- File Format: Word (.docx) preferred, PDF accepted

Annexes (not counted in page limit)

You may include the following as annexes:

- CVs of key investigators (2 pages maximum per person)
- Overview of the budget plan
- Gantt chart or detailed timeline

3. Detailed section guidelines

3.1. Title of proposed study

- Use a descriptive structure: Include the intervention/exposure, population, and outcome
- Mention the design if appropriate
- Be specific about the setting
- Keep it concise: Aim for 15–25 words

3.2. Investigators and institutions

- Principal Investigator (PI): Name, title, institution, email
- Co-Principal Investigators (Co-PIs): If applicable
- Co-investigators: other researchers
- Institutions: All participating organizations
- Roles and expertise: Brief description of each person's role and relevant expertise

3.3. *Background and rationale*

- Word count: should be between 300–500 words

- Start broad, then narrow: Begin with the global or national context, then focus on the specific gap your study addresses
- Use data: Cite statistics on prevalence, incidence, or burden
- Cite recent literature: Show you're up-to-date (last 5 years preferred)
- Build a logical case: Each paragraph should lead naturally to the next
- End with a clear statement of the gap: “Despite these advances, there remains a critical need to...”.
- Do not overstate the novelty of your work. Acknowledge what has been done and clearly articulate what is new about your approach.

3.4. Problem statement

- Word count: should be around 300 words
- Be specific and focused: One clear problem, not multiple unrelated issues
- Use the “So what?” test: Why should anyone care about this problem?
- Quantify when possible: Use data to show the magnitude
- Connect to real-world impact: How does this problem affect people's lives, health systems, or policies?
- The problem statement should make it obvious why your study is needed. If a reviewer finishes reading and thinks “So what?”, you need to revise.

3.5. Objectives

- **General objective:** Should be a high-level statement of what you want to achieve
- **Specific Objectives**: Should be **SMART** (Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound)

3.6.Research questions /hypotheses

Research question

- Should be clear, focused, and answerable with your proposed methods

- Each objective should have corresponding research questions
- Include descriptive, comparative, and/or exploratory questions as appropriate

Research hypotheses

- Should be testable, directional (if appropriate), and based on theory or prior evidence

3.7. Proposed methods

3.7.1. Study design

- Clearly state the design (e.g., quasi-experimental, cohort, cross-sectional, mixed methods, implementation science, etc.)
- Justify why this design is appropriate for your research questions
- Mention any specific frameworks (e.g., RE-AIM, CFIR for implementation science)

3.7.2. Study setting

- Specify locations (regions, districts, facilities)
- Justify site selection (e.g., high burden, representative population, existing infrastructure)
- Mention any multi-center aspects

3.7.3. Study population and inclusion and exclusion criteria

- Specify target population characteristics (age, sex, health status, etc.)
- Define inclusion and exclusion criteria clearly
- Justify any restrictions

3.7.4. Sample size

- Provide an estimated sample size with justification
- Mention key assumptions (effect size, power, significance level, attrition)
- Cite sample size calculation method or software

3.7.5. Sampling method

- Describe how you will select clusters, facilities, or individuals

- Mention randomization procedures (if applicable)
- Explain stratification or matching if used

3.7.6. Data collection tools

- List all instruments (questionnaires, interview guides, observation checklists, etc.)
- Mention if tools are validated or adapted
- Specify data sources (self-report, medical records, observation, etc.)

3.7.7. Quality assurance measures

- Describe training procedures for data collectors
- Mention supervision and monitoring plans
- Explain data quality checks (e.g., double data entry, range checks, logic checks)
- Address intervention fidelity (for trials)

3.7.8. Data analysis plan

- Specify software for quantitative and qualitative analysis
- Describe main statistical methods (e.g. regression models, survival analysis, etc.)
- Mention how you will handle missing data, clustering, confounding
- For qualitative data, describe coding and thematic analysis approach
- For mixed methods, explain integration strategy
- Be specific about statistical tests but avoid excessive technical detail
- Mention adjustment for multiple comparisons if conducting many tests
- For qualitative analysis, mention inter-coder reliability or consensus procedures
- Your analysis plan must match your research questions and study design. Reviewers will check for alignment.

3.8.Ethical considerations

- Demonstrate ethical rigor: Show that you have thought through all ethical issues
- Address vulnerability: Adolescents are a vulnerable population—explain safeguards
- Be specific about consent: Describe the process, not just “we will obtain consent”

- Mention approvals: State which IRBs will review and current status
- Address the specific ethical challenges of your study, not generic statements
- Mention community engagement or stakeholder involvement (if applicable)
- Note that ethics is not a formality. Reviewers will scrutinize this section carefully, especially for studies involving vulnerable populations or sensitive topics.

3.9.Work plan / timeline

- Be realistic: Allow adequate time for each phase, especially ethics approvals and recruitment
- Include all phases: Preparation, ethics, training, pilot, data collection, analysis, dissemination
- Show dependencies: What must be completed before the next phase begins?
- Build in buffer time: Expect delays
- Use Gantt charts to present the activities and timeline

3.10. Estimated budget summary

- Provide a high-level budget estimate and the detailed budget will be requested along with the full proposal submission
- Provide enough detail for concept note stage

3.11. Expected outputs and impact

- Be specific and realistic
- Think beyond publications: Policy briefs, guidelines, training materials, advocacy tools
- Describe dissemination strategy: Who is your audience? How will you reach them?
- Mention sustainability: How will findings be used after the project ends?

3.12. References

- Choose a style and stick to it: SPIRHR accepts Vancouver (numbered) or APA (author-year)
- Include 15–25 references: Enough to show thorough literature review, not so many that it's overwhelming

4. Final submission checklist

- Use this checklist to ensure your concept note is complete and ready for submission.

4.1.Content Completeness

- Title: Clear, specific, informative (15–25 words)
- Investigators and Institutions: All key personnel listed with roles and expertise
- Background and Rationale: 300–500 words, well-cited, builds a logical case
- Problem Statement: ~300 words, specific, compelling, quantified
- Objectives: General objective + 3–5 SMART specific objectives
- Research Questions/Hypotheses: Clear, aligned with objectives, testable
- Methods: All 8 sub-sections included (design, sites, population, sample size, sampling, tools, QA, analysis)
- Ethical considerations: Comprehensive, addresses vulnerable populations, IRB plans stated
- Work Plan/Timeline: Realistic, includes all phases, Gantt chart or table included
- Budget Summary
- Expected Outputs and Impact: Specific, realistic, includes dissemination plan
- References: Complete, consistent style (Vancouver or APA), 15–25 references

4.2.Format and presentation

- Page limit: 5-7 pages (excluding annexes)
- Font and spacing: Arial or Times New Roman, 11–12 pt, 1.5 or double-spaced
- Margins: 1 inch on all sides
- Page numbers: Included on all pages
- File format: PDF or Word (.docx)
- File name: Descriptive (e.g. “SPIRHR_ConceptNote_LastName_2026.pdf”)
- Headings: Clear, numbered, match the required structure
- Tables and figures: Clearly labeled, referenced in text
- No typos or grammatical errors: Proofread multiple times

4.3.Annexes

- CVs: Key investigators (2 pages max each)

5. General notes

Please read these important notes carefully before preparing your concept note:

5.1.Submission requirements

- Completeness: Incomplete submissions will not be reviewed. Ensure all required sections are included and all questions are answered.
- Deadlines: Late submissions will not be accepted under any circumstances. Plan to submit at least 24 hours before the deadline to account for technical issues.
- Format: Submit as a single PDF file or Word document. File name should include your last name and year (e.g. "SPIRHR_ConceptNote_Name of PI_2026.doc").

5.2.Review process

- Timeline: Concept notes will be reviewed within 2-3 weeks of the submission deadline.
- Clarifications: SPIRHR may request clarifications or additional information during the review process. Applicants will have 1 week to respond.
- Feedback: All applicants will receive notification of the outcome. Those not selected will receive brief feedback.
- Confidentiality: All submissions are treated as confidential.

5.3.Funding decisions

- Competitive process: Funding is competitive and not guaranteed. Selection is based on scientific merit, alignment with priorities, and available budget.
- Full proposal invitation: Selected concept notes will be invited to submit a full proposal (typically 15–20 pages with detailed protocols and budgets).
- Full proposal review: Invitation to submit a full proposal does not guarantee funding. Full proposals undergo additional peer review.

5.4.Post-award requirements

If your concept note is selected and you receive funding, the following are required:

- Ethical approval: Must be obtained before any data collection begins

- Reporting: Quarterly progress reports
- Acknowledgment: All publications and outputs must acknowledge SPIRHR funding
- Data sharing: De-identified data must be made available in a public repository upon publication (unless ethical restrictions apply).

6. Modifications and amendments

- Timeline changes: SPIRHR may request modifications to timelines, if necessary, due to funding cycles or other constraints.
- Scope changes: Major changes to study design, objectives, or budget after award require SPIRHR approval.
- No-cost extensions: May be granted on a case-by-case basis with adequate justification.

7. Contact and support

- Pre-submission questions: Applicants are encouraged to contact SPIRHR with questions before submission (see Section 8 for contact information).
- Technical assistance: SPIRHR may offer office hours for applicants
- Eligibility questions: If you are unsure whether your project is eligible or aligned with SPIRHR priorities, contact us early.

8. Contact information

- St. Paul Institute for Reproductive Health and Rights (SPIRHR)
  - Email:
    - General inquiries: research@spirhr.org
  - Phone: +251953142090

9. Submission method

- Concept notes should be submitted via SPIRHR's conference management system