**Call for Tenders (GIRL-H Evaluation Team/Firm)**

***THIS CALL IS OPEN TO BOTH INDIVIDUAL CONSULTANTS AND/OR EVALUATION FIRMS/COMPANIES***

**1. Project background**

Mercy Corps seeks the services of an Independent Evaluation Team/Firm to conduct a series of evaluation studies (baseline study, midline assessment, and end of project evaluation) of the Girls Improving Resilience through Livelihood and Health (GIRL-H) program. GIRL-H aims to improve well-being and increase access to education, economic and civic engagement opportunities that contribute to individual resilience, especially among adolescents and young women and men aged 10 to 24 years. The program, which commenced in October 2020, will run through September 2023, will be in Kenya, Uganda (East Africa), and Haiti (Caribbean), targeting 70,000 participants in 8 counties (Kenya 3, Uganda 3, and Haiti 2). The actual beneficiary level implementation will begin after the baseline study.

GIRL-H seeks to transform the future of over 70,000 adolescent girls, young women, and boys who are aged between 10 and 24 years old by fulfilling their potential. The program is to be implemented by Mercy Corps directly in Haiti and through local partner organizations in Kenya and Uganda.

Once engaged, the Evaluation Team/Firm will provide an independent and rigorous evaluation function by designing and implementing an evaluation framework to assess the program comprehensively. In summary, the framework should cover the following components:

1. Baseline Study in the three countries
2. Midline operational assessment (preferably adopting an implementation fidelity approach)
3. End of Project Study including an explanatory qualitative component

Against this background, bidders (evaluation firms) should submit a proposal to evaluate GIRL-H following the guidelines outlined below. The deadline for submitting bids is Thursday 8th of July 2021, the end of business day PST.

**1.1 Recipient of the Service**

The recipient of the service is Mercy Corps.

**2. Deliverables**

**2.1 Program deliverables:** The main anticipated evaluation deliverables for this program are as follows:

1. **Inception report:** The design of the evaluation studies (including gender and market opportunity analysis), sample size estimation, sampling strategy, associated planning, logistics, quality assurance, child protection measures, and risk management information. This inception report should meet the requirements for ethical approval.
2. **Detailed budget** (see section 2.3 Budget, below for more detail)
3. **Data and information systems capable of handling large datasets for M&E purposes:** The contracted firm will work with Mercy Corps to design and decide upon technology and methods for this work.
4. **Detailed work plan and milestones:** provide a detailed work plan incorporating all relevant tasks and milestones from start to finish of the baseline evaluation study.
5. **Data Collection Tools:** Detailed data collection tools to cover all the components of the assignment
6. **Data Management Plan:** A data management plan and recommendations on how data will be physically and electronically stored and disposed of to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of all program participants. The plan should also provide safeguards for the integrity, reliability, and cross-checking of all data. The GIRL-H Director of Research and Evidence has the right to request and review the data collected from the field and report on approaches to maintain data integrity.
7. **Quality Control / Assurance plan:** Firms will be expected to co-create, along with Mercy Corps staff, Quality control approaches, and processes for all stages of the evaluation process, including anticipated challenges and a detailed mitigation plan. Please see section 3.10, Data Quality Assurance, for more detail.
8. **Risk Management Plan:** Connected to the deliverable above, firms will be expected to create a Risk Management Plan detailing all reasonable measures that will be taken to mitigate any potential risk to delivering the required outputs for this Evaluation (see section 3.9.1 Risk Management Plan below).
9. **Research Ethics Plan:** Considerations from the above Quality Control Plan and Risk Management Plan and other considerations (noted in section 3.8.2 Research Ethics Plan) will be consolidated into an overarching Research Ethics Plan. This may also include details regarding the firm's child protection plan (or that may be a separate item if the firm already has a plan or policy in place).
10. **Attendance** at all Evaluation Steering Group Committee meetings
11. **Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals of the evaluation design**
12. **Baseline study report:** A detailed baseline report setting the base for answering the evaluation questions and indicating the baseline values for continuous program assessment. (in word and PPT).
13. **Midline assessment report:** A detailed midline assessment report covering all aspects of the implementation assessment and status of various indicators (in word and PPT)
14. **End of project evaluation report:** A comprehensive end-of-project evaluation report that looks at the impact assessment of the GIRL-H program and the explanatory component. This report should also answer the endline status of various indicators (in word and PPT).
15. **All raw data:** The Evaluation Team/Firm will provide a fully 'cleaned-up quantitative dataset in SPSS file format accompanied by the code used to carry out analysis and a variable codebook. The Evaluation team/firm should also provide transcripts from all the qualitative interviews and their coding in NVivo. This data should also be sex, age (and possibly disability, please see section 3.6 Overall Study Design below) disaggregated.

**Note: all deliverables must be in English languages.**

**2.2 Additional requirements**

The Evaluation Team/Firm will identify an Evaluation Team Leader for communication and reporting purposes. At the inception meeting, the Evaluation Team Leader will submit all staff involved in the Evaluation. This list includes their contact information and possibly the regions they will be covering.

The Evaluation Team/Firm will be expected to report to the Evaluation Steering Group and attend all meetings agreed with Mercy Corps' GIRL-H Program Director. In addition, the team will be required to submit to the Director of Research bi-weekly progress reports (by email) during the study periods summarizing activities/tasks completed to date (percentage achievement), time spent, etc.

**2.3 Budget**

As part of the bidding package, firms should submit an overview budget reflecting anticipated overall costs, with costs broken down into high-level categories (such as anticipated LOE, additional costs, etc.). If possible, bidding firms may provide additional detail (as noted below) in the original bid, though this will not be required. This bid should be in USD and should reflect anticipated costs for conducting the studies noted in the scope. This high-level budget should be no more than two pages and may be submitted separately from the cost sections noted in the Concept Note template. Bidders should also propose a payment schedule based on the milestones measured as successful delivery of each deliverable.

As noted above in the list of deliverables, firms will be expected to provide a detailed budget as one of the initial deliverables. The total detailed budget for this Evaluation should be in dollars (USD) and should reflect proposed costs incurred in conducting the studies across the three countries. The budget should include all unit costs covering the bidders' staff remuneration costs, travel, research costs and any other costs associated with the completion of the evaluations (including the cost of hiring and training enumerators for data collection, etc.). Bidders are required to organize and fund their duty of care arrangements as needed. Bidders are required to provide a detailed budget that reflects total costs in the form of a price schedule that, as a minimum, should include:

* Sub-total of fees for the delivery of any task or deliverable
* Detailed Level of Effort per activity (e.g., study design, questionnaire development, etc.) for each team member proposed in the assignment.
* Expenses and overheads broken down by the program cost categories; 1) fees/salaries, 2) travel and accommodation, 3) training costs, 4) supplies, 5) equipment, 6) communication costs, 7) other direct costs, 8) overhead and 9) by countries.
* Evaluators should present study costs by type of study, i.e., baseline, midline, endline, and separated for qualitative and quantitative by country.
* Total costs before and after any taxes that are applicable

**3. Technical Application**

The proposed Evaluation Team/Firm should include the technical expertise and practical experience required to deliver the scope of work and evaluation outcomes, in particular, with regards to:

Evaluation design: Design and plan the evaluation approaches and research methodologies, including quantitative and qualitative research methods – the team should include skills and expertise required to design, plan and conduct impact evaluation with a counterfactual;

The relevant subject matter, knowledge, and experience: Knowledge and experience required (e.g., education sector, adolescent girls, gender, sexual reproductive health, and private sector education) to ensure that the evaluation design and research methods are as relevant and meaningful as possible given the aims and objectives of the program and the context in which it is delivered.

**3.1 Evaluation criteria and weighting**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **S/no** | **Thematic areas** | **Weighting** |
| 1 | Technical proposal, including methodology and its responsiveness to the SOW, outlined (Based on: Proposed methodology, IRB process outline, quality control plan summary) | 40% |
| 2 | Technical expertise and experience of assessment team (Based on: proposed team CVs, proposed organogram, Corporate Capabilities document) | 20% |
| 3 | Project timeline and work plan (Based on: Project Plan) | 10% |
| 4 | Quality assurance plan (Based on: summary quality control plan) | 10% |
| 5 | Price/cost (Based on: summary budget) | 20% |
|  | **Total** | 100% |

**3.2 Documents Comprising the Proposal:**

* A 3-page document outlining the proposed approach and methodology; Please include detail regarding the statistical analysis software the firm intends to use.
* Overview document / Corporate Capabilities summary detailing the background of firm experience (2-page document)
* CVs of proposed staff/team members noting identified roles and team lead (including a clear organogram of the staff structure that will be operational for the program in each country, as noted in section 5.1 Qualifications below). Please also provide information on the number of individuals (staff, enumerators, and field supervisors with proof of competence) designated to evaluate GIRL-H. Staff engaged in the Evaluation for Haiti must be fluent in French and Creole.
* Summary budget, as described above in section 2.3 Budget
* Project plan (summary work plan) of activities to be delivered (high level)
* An outline of the process the firm intends to use to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals of the baseline evaluation design
* Summary Quality Control Plan: Bidders must submit a summary or overview quality assurance plan that sets out the systems and processes for quality, assuring the evaluation and research process and deliverables from start to finish of the project. (See Section 3.10.1 Quality Control / Assurance Plan for more information.)

**4. Submissions**

All proposals, high-level work plans covering the inception and final reports, summary budget, and supporting documents should be submitted via the MER-MSA firm portals no later than close of business PST on **Thursday, 8th of July 2021.**

Mercy Corps will not consider any submissions after the deadline.

**GIRL-H Evaluation Team/Firm - Terms of Reference (ToR)**

**1. Background to the GIRL-H Program**

**1.1 Project Background:**

Mercy Corps' Girls Improving Resilience through Livestock and Health (GIRL-H) program funded through an anonymous donor will run through September 2023.

The program will help girls transition through crucial education, training, and employment stages to contribute to their individual and household resilience.

GIRL-H seeks to transform the future of over 70,000 adolescents and young girls and boys aged between 10 and 19 years old. The program is to be implemented by national partners in Kenya and Uganda and direct implementation in Haiti.

**2. The rationale for the Evaluation**

The overall aim of the study findings from the Evaluation will primarily be used:

* by the project management team, project partners and stakeholders to inform design and delivery of the project;
* by the project management team to leverage additional resources from existing and new partners and stakeholders to scale up and sustain the activities/benefits delivered by the project;
* by the project management team to support the ongoing development and implementation of the project's sustainability and succession strategies;
* by partners, stakeholders, and the Government to learn lessons from the project to replicate what works elsewhere and take up approaches and activities that have proven to work to scale up the project.

**3. Overall Evaluation Approach**

The overall evaluation approach requires the Evaluation Team/Firm to design, plan and conduct a comprehensive evaluation design and additional exploratory and explanatory research at baseline, midline, and endline. The Mercy Corps team will support the co-creation of these pieces. The Evaluation Team/Firm will need to consider the following:

* The program's evaluation objectives and evaluation questions;
* The complexity and clarity of the program's log frame, design, evaluation questions and the measurability of the intended outcomes and the effect this has on its long-term Evaluation;
* Availability and quality of existing evidence and data sources; and
* Availability of opportunities for adolescents and young people
* Program evolution and design modification (tactical, strategic, and conceptual modifications)

**3.1 Evaluation Objective**

GIRL-H shall conduct a mixed-method, gender-sensitive evaluation that includes persons with disabilities and marginalized targeted by the program.

**3.2 Evaluation Questions**

The Evaluation Team/Firm will be required to develop an evaluation approach that answers the following overarching questions:

1. How effective are adolescents' and young people's life skills and financial literacy in improving their individual and household resilience?
2. What is the effectiveness and impact of specific components of the safe space sessions in delivering individual and household resilience?
	1. What are the critical contents of the sessions that affect life skills and financial literacy?
	2. What modules (and models) in the curriculum are essential to increase participant's efficacy and empowerment?
	3. How do the differences in number and mode of session attendance affect the participants' life skills and financial literacy skills?
	4. How practical are the various technological innovations in enhancing life skills and eventually resilience?
3. Which transition pathways are most accessible, and which ones are most effective in improving the participants' well-being?
4. Which individual (participants') and household characteristics are associated with higher levels of resilience among the beneficiaries?
5. What are the protective factors and capacities within an enabling environment that contribute to girls' resilience?
6. Which points of the various value chains are most available and viable economic opportunities for adolescent and young people – aged 10-14, 15-19, and 20-24 years?
7. What are the levers that allow girls to have access and control over economic opportunities?
8. How effective was the health component in complimenting the overall participant's resilience? [Kenya Only]

***NB: Not all questions require a quantitative approach towards data collection, analysis, and reporting. Bidders are encouraged to recommend alternative methods for most of the questions.***

**3.3 Program Evaluation Strategy**

The Evaluation Team/Firm, in partnership with the GIRL-H program team, will revise and finalize an evaluation and associated studies approach. These approaches should complement the program's implementation approach using a representative population household survey and other sampling approaches to answer the identified research questions.

**3.4 Project Sampling Framework**

The Evaluation Team/Firm, working with the project implementation team, will be required to review and finalize the sampling frameworks for both qualitative and quantitative samples.

These should be of sufficient size and representativeness to allow:

* reasonable levels of certainty that the findings are representative for the target population;
* reasonable ability to generalize the market opportunities are representative for different groups – boys and girls, country.

The Evaluation Team/Firm will be required to manage and work within a sampling framework that allows individual-level (girl and boy level) and household level measurements.

**3.5 Monitoring Strategy**

The Evaluation Team/Firm will be required to support the Program Management Team to design, establish and implement a comprehensive monitoring strategy for the evaluation series, including a data collection strategy to support the Evaluation.

**3.6 Overall Study Design**

The Evaluation Team/Firm will develop an appropriate design that addresses the age and gender sensitivity of the target population. GIRL-H, however, recommends the following

* For the Evaluation, the Evaluation Team/Firm should propose all the following options:
	+ Option 1:
		- In all three countries, an impact evaluation with counterfactual for the baseline and endline with additional qualitative exploratory research at baseline and a qualitative explanatory approach at the endline.
	+ Option 2
		- In Kenya & Uganda only, an impact evaluation with counterfactual for the baseline and endline with additional qualitative exploratory research at baseline and a qualitative explanatory approach at the endline.
		- In Haiti, an outcome evaluation for the baseline and endline with additional qualitative exploratory research at baseline and a qualitative explanatory approach at the endline.
	+ Option 3:
		- In Kenya only, an impact evaluation for the baseline and endline with additional qualitative exploratory research at baseline and a qualitative explanatory approach at the endline.
		- In Uganda and Haiti, an outcome evaluation for the baseline and endline with additional qualitative exploratory research at baseline and a qualitative explanatory approach at the endline.
* An implementation fidelity operational assessment approach and a cross-sectional prevalence study for the status of the indicators during the midline assessment. (The midline assessment **should not have a counterfactual**, regardless of the options above, but should be comparable to the baseline and endline)
* Each study should be statistically representative at the country level and allow for disaggregation by gender.

The Evaluation should identify or recommend an approach to determine the number of beneficiaries with disabilities and the type and severity of their disability, following any globally accepted approach.

*NB: When budgeting, bidders should clearly distinguish costs related to each of the above components*

**3.7 Evaluation and Associated Research Framework**

The GIRL-H program uses a Theory of Change approach to the implementation of the program. Thus, the evaluation team should examine the program's theory of change and intervention logic to understand and confirm the processes measured through quantitative research.

**3.8 Ethical Protocols**

**3.8.1 Child Protection**

The evaluation approach must consider the safety of participants and especially children at all stages of the Evaluation. Therefore, the successful Evaluation Team/Firm will need to demonstrate how they have considered the protection of children through the different assessment stages, including recruitment and training of research staff, data collection, data analysis, and report writing. This may be included in the Research Ethics Plan below and require evidence of the firm's child protection policy/plan.

**3.8.2 Research Ethics Plan**

The successful firm will be required to set out its approach to ensuring complete compliance with good international practice regarding research ethics and protocols, particularly regarding safeguarding children, vulnerable groups (including people with disabilities), and those in fragile and conflict-affected states. This will be outlined in a Research Ethics plan (noted in the deliverable list above). This plan will be connected to the Quality Control Plan and the Risk Management Plan noted above. It will also include ethical approval steps and other considerations such as the below:

3.8.2.1 Administrative, technical and physical safeguards to protect the confidentiality of those participating in research;

3.8.2.2 Physical safeguards for those conducting research;

3.8.2.3 Data protection and secure maintenance procedures for personal information;

3.8.2.4 Parental consent concerning data collection from children or collation of data about children;

3.8.2.5 Age- and ability-appropriate assent processes based on reasonable assumptions about comprehension for the ages of children and the disabilities they intend to involve in the research;

3.8.2.6 Age-appropriate participation of children, including in the development of data collection tools

3.8.2.7 The Evaluation Team/Firm will need to seek Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals of the baseline evaluation design. **Bidders are required to stipulate this process in their bids.**

**3.9 Risk and Risk Management**

**3.9.1 Risk Management Plan**

The winning firm must take all reasonable measures to mitigate any potential risk to delivering the required outputs for this Evaluation. Therefore, the winning firm will be expected to produce a comprehensive risk management plan covering:

3.9.1.1 The assumptions underpinning the successful completion of the proposals submitted and the anticipated challenges;

3.9.1.2 Estimates of the level of risk for each risk identified;

3.9.1.3 Proposed contingency plans that the bidder will put in place to mitigate against any occurrence of each risk identified;

3.9.1.4 Specific child protection risks and mitigating strategies, including reference to the child protection policy and procedures that will be in place;

3.9.1.5 Health and safety issues that may require significant duty of care precautions.

**3.10 Data Quality Assurance**

**3.10.1 Quality Control / Assurance Plan**

Bidders must submit a summary or overview quality assurance plan that sets out the systems and processes for quality, assuring the evaluation and research process and deliverables from start to finish of the project. In addition, a detailed quality control plan will be an anticipated deliverable of this work, building on the summary plan and adding additional detail to the summary plan submitted (and connected to the Risk Management Plan deliverable outlined above). This summary plan should include an overview of the proposed approaches to:

3.10.1.1 Piloting of all research activities;

3.10.1.2 Training of enumerators and researchers conducting the mixed-methods primary research, including training in research ethics;

3.10.1.3 Logistical and management planning;

3.10.1.4 Fieldwork protocols and data verification, including back-checking and quality control by supervisors; and

3.10.1.5 Data cleaning and editing before any analysis

**4 Existing Information Sources**

The successful bidder would be required to review the following documentation specific to GIRL-H:

* Program's Theory of Change
* Program's MEL framework.

**5 Professional Skills and Qualifications**

**5.1 Qualifications**

Bidders must identify and provide CVs for key staff proposed in the Evaluation Team/Firm, clearly stating their roles and responsibilities for this Evaluation. Submit a clear organogram of the staff structure that will be operational for the program in each country. All staff should have the requisite experience in research, fieldwork, and report writing (Bidders should include evidence in the application). Bidding firms should provide information on the number of individuals (staff, enumerators, and field supervisors with proof of competence) designated to evaluate GIRL-H.

Additionally (as noted in Documents Comprising the proposal above), bidders should give examples of projects with CommCare or Electronic based data collection and management solutions.

The proposed Evaluation Team/Firm should include the technical expertise and practical experience required to deliver on the scope of work and evaluation outputs, in particular, with regards to:

5.1.1 Evaluation design: The team should include the skills and expertise required to design, plan, and conduct a mixed-methods impact evaluation with a counterfactual. Previous experience with similar impact evaluations is preferred. Firms and individuals proposed should have experience in the provision of similar evaluation services and the design and implementation of similar evaluation activities (experience in East Africa and the Caribbean preferred)

5.1.2 Skills in quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, triangulation of findings from multiple sources, and potential handling contradictions between data sets

5.1.3 Relevant subject matter knowledge and experience: Knowledge and experience required on researching with children, disability and gender, market assessment to ensure that the evaluation design and research methods are as relevant and meaningful as possible given the aims and objectives of the project and the context of delivery;

5.1.4 Evaluation management: manage a large-scale and complex evaluation and research process from conducting and reporting a baseline assessment report; ability to meet all evaluation requirements during short time windows; **experience working with an Evaluation Steering Committee is desired**

5.1.5 Primary research: gender-sensitive design, management and implementation of primary quantitative and qualitative research in 3 countries, some of which may have potentially challenging project environments;

5.1.6 Country experience: The Evaluation Team/Firm must have the appropriate knowledge/experience of East Africa and the Caribbean. The team should also have reasonable language proficiency to research the different geographical areas (staff engaged in the Evaluation for Haiti must be fluent in French and Creole).

5.1.7 Information and data management: capacity to design and manage sex and disability disaggregated data and information systems capable of handling large datasets for MEL purposes; experience in managing data (storage, disposal, data privacy, and protection, etc.); **experience using CommCare or Electronic based data collection and management solutions**. Additionally, bidders should ideally possess experience in using effective data collection and storage technology with a robust backup system to prevent data loss. The successful Evaluation Team/Firm shall work with Mercy Corps to design and manage data and information systems capable of handling large datasets for M&E purposes.

5.1.8 Statistical analysis: a range of statistical modeling and analysis of impact data; highly proficient user(s) of SPSS (or any relevant data analytics and visualization packages); and qualitative data analysis techniques, including the use of software, e.g., NVivo or equivalent where needed. Bidders must mention the statistical software they intend to use.

5.1.9 Safety considerations: Ensuring the whole evaluation process adheres to best practices for research with children, including implementing child protection policy and procedures to ensure the safety of participants. **Note that all bidders should show that they have a child protection policy to safeguard children that the research team would contact through the research activities.**

5.1.10 Reporting Management: The selected bidder shall work with Mercy Corps to review various data collection tools.

**6 Overview of the project's implementation timeframe**

Bidders may propose alternate dates for the completion of items/deliverables listed. During the Evaluation of all bids, preference will be given to firms whose timelines align better with the desired/preferred dates below, but alternative timelines will be considered.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Expected GIRL-H Evaluation Timeframe and Sequencing Program Milestones/Outputs**  | **Estimated Deadline** |
| Invitation to tender sent out | 26th of June 2021 |
| Deadline for receipt of tenders | 8th of July 2021 |
| Evaluation of tenders and shortlisting complete | 12th of July 2021 |
| Evaluation Firm Appointed | 14th of July 2021 |
| **Inception Phase** |  |
| Onboarding/Inception meeting held | 15th of July 2021 |
| Draft Inception Report & Data Collection Tools created |  25th of July 2021 |
| Review of inception & data tools by Mercy Corps completed  | 28th of July 2021 |
| Final Inception and data collection tools submitted | 1st of August 2021 |
| **Implementation Phase** |  |
| Baseline |  |
| Questionnaire Scripting Developed, Reviewed & Completed | 6th of August 2021 |
| Training of enumerators completed by | 13th of August 2021  |
| Selection of control sites (GIRL-H) | 27th of June 2021 |
| Fieldwork and data collection (conducted by)  | 31st of August 2021 |
| Final data cleaning and analysis completed by | 8th of September 2021 |
| **Topline report highlighting baseline values of various indicators**  | **10th of September 2021** |
| The first draft of the detailed report shared with Mercy Corps  | 17th of September 2021 |
| Review of detailed report and feedback by Mercy Corps  | 24th of September 2021 |
| Revision of detailed report and submission by the firm | 30th of September 2021 |
| Report presentation to project team by evaluation firm  | 2nd of October 2021 |
| **Midline Assessment** | **June to August 2022** |
| **Endline Evaluation**  | **June to August 2023** |

**8. Evaluation Governance Arrangements**

**a. Program Evaluation Steering Group**

The evaluation process will be guided by a dedicated Evaluation Steering Group from the start to finish of the baseline assessment. The Evaluation Steering Group will play a critical role in the coordination between the independent Evaluation Team/Firm and the Program Team and the process of implementation. The Group will:

* + 1. Regularly assess and assure the quality of the design, research, and deliverables;
		2. Provide a source of validation for the findings emerging from the Evaluation; and

The Evaluation Steering Group will meet regularly (timetable to be confirmed), particularly at stages in the evaluation process when deliverables are produced, including (at the very minimum):

* + 1. Submission of an Inception Report;
		2. Submission of a Baseline Study Report
		3. Submission of the midline assessment report
		4. Submission of the end of project evaluation report

The steering group will include:

* + 1. Program Director GIRL-H
		2. Director of Research and Evidence - Mercy Corps GIRL-H
		3. Regional MEL Advisor Africa Mercy Corps
		4. MEL representative from HQ
		5. Representative from Haiti
		6. Representative from Uganda
		7. Representative from Kenya
		8. Program Director or Manager of the evaluation firm