

### **IFPRI *Research Talks* Podcast Series**

#### **Episode 12- The Challenges of Phone Surveys with Women in India during COVID**

**Sivan:** Hi and welcome to “Research Talks”, a podcast series that explores how research is making an impact on people and policies (with a focus on the ‘how’), brought to you by the International Food Policy Research Institute, IFPRI. I am your host, Sivan Yosef. In this episode, we’re talking about how COVID has changed the way researchers do their work – especially when it comes to conducting primary surveys. In the state of Gujarat in India, one team of researchers has shifted from doing interviews with women in person to doing them over the phone.

**Shweta:** If you have a speakerphone on, then more women report that their husband or any of the primary male member is the one who decides how to spend her income or his income. But if your phone speaker is off, then she reports herself as the major decision maker with regards to that.

**Sivan:** That is Shweta Gupta, and she’s a research analyst at IFPRI, based in New Delhi, India.

**Shweta:** I'm mostly working under the project called CSISA, or Cereal Systems Initiative in South Asia, which aims to develop agriculture intensification technologies, and improve the policy environment to facilitate the same thing.

**Sivan:** A big part of Shweta’s job is going to the field and collecting—or training enumerators to collect-- household data. That is how they get a snapshot of how people survive in poor environments: whether they have access to healthy foods, have stable livelihoods, and other things that make up human wellbeing.

**Sivan:** Do you do a lot of surveys in your work?

**Shweta:** Yes. So, all of our studies that we have been doing so far have been primary surveys, and most of them have been the primary surveys of farmers. I mostly make sure that the questionnaire is well tested, well written up, easier to understand, that's how we begin and go on field.

**Sivan:** In March of 2020, when COVID hit, Shweta’s research portfolio completely changed.

**Shweta:** Right from fertilizers to micronutrients and agriculture, which had been mostly my area of research in which I had been working. Now I am working in a project which is totally different and looks at how the

pandemic is affecting women, and especially women who are not just farmers, but those who are employed in various kinds of occupations, like those who are working at home, those who are working as laborers, and so on.

**Sivan:** To get access to rural women, Shweta and her colleagues reached out to the Self Employed Women's Association, which is a non governmental organization, an NGO, based in Gujarat, India. The Association acts as a trade union for women in all different types of occupations all over the country.

**Shweta:** This is my first project in which I have been working directly with them, which started in May, this year. The aim of the project was to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of these women who are members of the Self-Employed Women's Association. And Self-Employed Women's Association provides a lot of other kinds of benefits to these women, for instance, providing them saving and other kinds of employment opportunities, educational opportunities. They also manage the compensation for these women. For instance, in our surveys we had been giving women who are being surveyed a compensation for participation, which is the food kit, which is a small kit comprising of essential food items. So, the association itself is managing the distribution of these kits.

So, we simply reached out to them, to give us a list of respondents who would be interested in getting surveyed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. That was our first starting point. And what Self Employed Women's Association did for us was that it simply took out the list of members that they have, and reached out to them personally, to inquire about such kind of, you know, surveys. And we were actually in a very happy place at that moment. In face to face interviews, there is a lot of planning required, because you have to go on field and try to obtain the list of numbers, make sure that they are working, screen them, and there are a lot of other issues involved. Sometimes we don't even obtain the list of the population living in the villages, because we have to do randomizations and sampling. Whereas in phone surveys, we were quite happy in the beginning, because we thought that we would have a ready-made a list of phone numbers, which you can simply go ahead and call. That was the first impression.

**Sivan:** Unfortunately, Shweta and her team soon ran into many challenges with trying to run a phone survey in the middle of a pandemic.

**Shweta:** When Self Employed Women's Association tried to contact their members for the survey, an interesting thing happened was that husbands or other members of the household, were asking them to put the phone on speaker to know exactly who is calling them, and for what reasons. And they were all suspicious for participation.

They initially began with a list of around thousand or 900 numbers, but they were, and they gave us a list of around 800 numbers, confirmed fully spoken to already, who agreed to take part in the survey. And that's what we began with. But, to our surprise, out of these nearly 800 numbers, we were able to contact just 627 in the first round, which is like an attrition rate of nearly 27%.

**Sivan:** Why is that?

**Shweta:** It is possible that the pandemic has infused so much confusion and chaos in their lives already that they do not want to take part in the surveys or something. We lost so many numbers because they were incorrect or invalid, something which we hadn't expected to come up.

**Sivan:** Shweta's team looked deeper into why the participation rate was so low.

**Shweta:** For instance it depends on women empowerment, for example, that, you know, because some of the women might not be included in important decision making processes, they are discouraged to speak, or to discuss their issues with someone else. Or because of naive reasons, like distrust, you know, distrust with the enumerators. Simply they do not trust who is calling them and for what reasons and which is why they don't participate. But for other things, which is like invalid numbers, this is something which is totally out of control. It is 100% possible that it was because of some technical error. But we also found that most women were not recharging their phones. We asked them, and majority of the women also responded that they had reduced expenditure on mobile phones, because they consider them as unnecessary as compared to other essential expenses like food and water. And in India, you also have this service in which if you are not able to reach a phone number, and it's coming out to be switched off or not reachable for some reason, if it is because the phone is not recharged, or does not have a talk time balance, then the automatic voice also tells you that it is because of that reason.

**Sivan:** Can you talk a little bit more about the other challenges that you faced during the phone survey?

**Shweta:** So, most importantly, as I mentioned, there was a challenge in addressing the enumerators, and doing the training exercises, because when you have face to face surveys you can simply explain the enumerators before you even go out on field, you have to train your team well in the questionnaire, and there's a lot of input that even the survey team can provide you in designing your questions better. So, this was one challenge that I faced in conducting this exercise of training enumerators. We had about 30 enumerators, and now they were all to be trained virtually. Most of them did not have a proper internet access at the time of training. I had to cut down my training exercise; one simple exercise into four, you know, training exercises in the sense that, instead of training all of the enumerators together, I had to train them in groups of three to four. So that was one challenge. Secondly, as I mentioned, there were issues in reaching out to respondents, because a lot of them were found to be incorrect or invalid.

So the third point that we learned, which I will say learning and not a challenge, but something to keep in mind for in future surveys, especially when you're doing them over phone is, as I mentioned, that the Association informed us that the participants were putting their phones on speaker before they even participate in a survey. So, when we learned about this, we immediately incorporated this question in our surveys to find out, with the sole aim of, you know, excluding women about asking questions, which were sensitive. So, we asked the respondents if the phones were on speaker in a very naive way. And if they said that they were, we simply did not ask them the sensitive questions such as intra household conflict, because these questions are sensitive, and we want to ensure the respondent is in a private space before they even answer them to avoid any household conflict or issues from their end. But eventually, when we started analyzing the data, we get to realize that the speakerphone also impacts responses in some way.

**Sivan:** Can you talk a little bit about your findings from the speaker, how speakerphones affect women's responses?

**Shweta:** With regards to speakerphone, what we found was that the most visible impact which is even tested by analysis is that there is a difference in the way women respond to intra household decision making questions. For instance, if you have a speakerphone on, then more women report that their husband or any of the primary male member is the one who decides how to spend her income or his income. But if the phone speaker is off,

then she reports herself as the major decision maker with regards to that. It shows how privacy can impact the responses of women to questions which cover empowerment.

**Sivan:** That's fascinating. Is that an unexpected finding?

**Shweta:** We didn't even have the question about speakerphone or privacy in our original research question. We began with how COVID-19 and pandemic affect the livelihoods of women. But now we are writing a paper about how speakerphone can impact, or bias, which is something we have to prove, the responses to these types of questions.

**Sivan:** And I'm sure that's going to be so useful, as the pandemic goes on, and more and more researchers continue to do phone surveys.

**Shweta:** Exactly this is what it makes more interesting; and also another reason why my portfolio has changed, because now I'm interested in studying the methodology of conducting surveys and how change in mode of administration can impact your data quality. And yes, this is going to be very useful. And several organizations have even started including a question on speakerphone, because it prompts you that you should look or analyze your data from a different perspective. It's possible that women are, you know, suspicious about everything that you ask, which is not very likely. But still, it at least points you out that this is something which has not been controlled for, or this has not been something which is fixed by previous studies.

There's a lot of research which has gone into how to ensure privacy of the respondent and how lack of privacy or presence of a third party can impact the answers, especially to sensitive questions. But this is very peculiar. Nobody has thought how a naive action of using the phone on speaker because in India, several people do that, like we have seen older people, for instance, those who are not able to hear properly, they put the phone on speaker and talk to their relatives or friends. But how in research world this can impact; I think this is something which hasn't been thought about previously. And definitely many organizations are going to benefit from this, which is why we are documenting it and writing about it and even researching more, probably may do some more rigorous analysis in the future as well about it.

**Sivan:** The actual results of Shweta and her colleagues' phone survey—the first round of several-- has turned out to be just as interesting as the challenges they found along the way.

**Shweta:** So around 90% of respondents said that they were affected in terms of income loss. They face an income loss because of the resulting pandemic and the lockdown, to which nearly 80% responded that they had responded by reducing the consumption which is very significant. Most importantly, we found, you know, differential impacts across occupation and regions. For instance, women who were employed as vendors - street vendors and are living in urban areas, so street vendors are mostly the urban population, whereas farming and other kinds of activities were in rural areas. So, we found that women who are employed as street vendors, they face the problem of food insecurity or lack of food more than other kinds of respondents. For instance, those who are working as farmers. There are also problems that because of lack of mobility, or movement restrictions, and most of them responded that they were not able to go outside to buy essential items like food and meet their friends or you know, any other kind of essential activity. And most of them also responded by increasing the care towards the household members, both male and female, in equal number of hours. So, these were some of the key points. Most of them also, nearly 20% of the respondents also said that they had changed the types of occupation, which we expected. For instance, there was a shift among farmers to casual laborers, which

is simply easy to do, because both of them are basically easy to do and most of the respondents they change their occupation in order to cope up with the income losses. Their children also had to face school dropouts with more female dropouts than dropouts for the male child.

**Sivan:** As the pandemic continues, more and more researchers wonder how to best carry on with their fieldwork.

**Shweta:** There's a growing unrest among the research world, that they want to go back to the field because they know the merits of doing a face-to-face interview. And it helps you basically understand the ground reality, what's happening on field. You can do so much. It adds a lot of credibility in the person who is interviewing, or, you know, present there, which is something missing in phone surveys. So, I personally feel that, you know, an important research question here is if phone surveys are better than face-to-face interviews. There is no one answer as to if phone surveys or any other mode of administration is better than the other one. Because the success or failure of any mode of administration is not static. It depends on subjective factors, like the type of respondent you are surveying, the survey population, the survey theme that you have, study type, and also geographical location. All these things keep on changing with studies. And you know, there's no one way by which you can measure the progress of your surveys.

**Sivan:** Thanks so much to Shweta Gupta for her time. Her project is under the BMZ project funded by the federal government of Germany. To learn more about BMZ in South Asia, you can go to the IFPRI homepage [I-F-P-R-I.org](http://I-F-P-R-I.org) and type in B-M-Z in the search box. You can also find Shweta and her colleagues' blog post on this specific project on the landing page for this podcast episode.

#### **-Music Break/Switch-**

This is the last episode of Research Talks. If you missed any episode, you can find them all by googling IFPRI and Research Talks. I am Sivan Yosef and it's been so fun being your host. A big thank you to our talented editor Jennifer Weingart and our wonderful communications team, they include Drew Sample, Michael Go, Jamed Falik, Lee Dixon, Pat Fowlkes, Indira Yerramareddy, Sarah Edwards, Smita Aggarwal, and Rajul Pandya-Lorch. And thank you to our listeners for joining us from all over the world. Stay tuned to future podcasts from IFPRI. Till Next Time!