

January 2021

Research in the Covid-19 Context

Adaptive Methods and Ethical Considerations

By Mukta Naik, Fellow, Centre for Policy Research

Resilience and adaptation have become buzzwords as governments, corporations and society find ways to survive the Covid-19 pandemic and, where possible, seek to develop processes and outcomes that improve on the pre-crisis status quo. Members of the [Women, Work, and the Gig Economy](#) research consortium have also thought deeply about strategies to continue research under these challenging conditions, while considering the ethics that must underpin research at a time of great distress for people across the world.

This brief summarizes the conceptual and practical approaches that consortium members have taken to address ethical concerns as well as strategic and tactical shifts in research methods within the broader, geographically diverse and ever-transforming context of Covid-19. These insights draw on the deliberations of an internal workshop held in September 2020 where consortium members presented and debated their respective approaches and perspectives. In particular, the team at LIRNEasia provided substantive takeaways from their colloquium on "[Research methods in a pandemic](#)."

Background

Governments across Asia, like in much of the rest of the world, reacted to the pandemic by putting in place lockdowns and stay-at-home measures. In the Asian countries where the consortium is conducting research¹, these lockdowns started in March 2020 and lasted anywhere between one and four months, followed by partial reopening. Shuttered business and weaker consumption during this time have drastically reduced the demand for labor. Amid widespread economic crisis, informal economy workers have suffered the greatest decline in employment, with many turning to self-employment at much-reduced earnings.

¹ India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar

Research Countries: Covid-19 Snapshot showing Confirmed Cases (Total and Trend)², Population³, and Lockdown Status

1
INDIA

10,610,883
Pop: 1,387.7 million



Peak in September 2020, currently declining.

Lifted in phases since May. Currently local containment zones.

2
BANGLADESH

529,687
Pop: 165.6 million



Peak in June 2020, currently declining.

First phase ended in May. Local restrictions followed.

3
MYANMAR

135,721
Pop: 54.6 million



Peak in November 2020, currently declining.

Currently restrictions in selected districts.

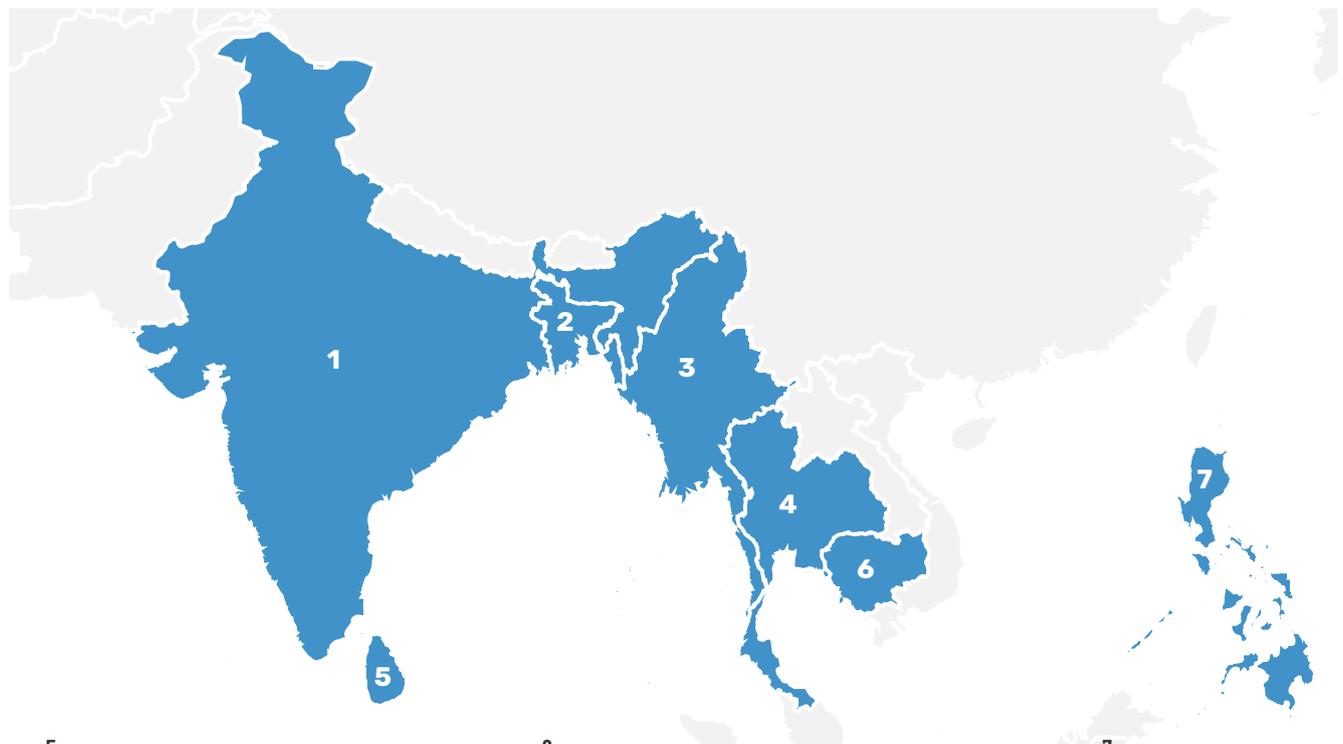
4
THAILAND

12,795
Pop: 69.9 million



Peak in January 2021, recently declining.

Currently restrictions in numerous provinces.



5
SRI LANKA

55,189
Pop: 21.5 million



Peak in December 2020, remaining high.

Currently local isolation areas.

6
CAMBODIA

453
Pop: 16.8 million



Peaks in March, July 2020 and January 2021, recently declining

Lifted in May. Recent restrictions currently being eased.

7
PHILIPPINES

505,939
Pop: 110.4 million



Peak in August 2020, currently declining.

Varying restriction levels across all provinces.

² Source: World Health Organization (<https://covid19.who.int>), 21 January 2021
³ Source: <https://www.worldometers.info/population>, 21 January 2021

Despite the enthusiastic adoption of digital technology and online platforms outperforming brick-and-mortar businesses during this period of crisis, it is clear that the benefits of digital technology will be highly unequal in their distribution, mostly benefitting large corporations and high-skilled workers. In developing countries, the large portion of the workforce that is informally employed in jobs that require physical presence, like manufacturing, construction, retail and tourism, will not be able to access most forms of gig economy work. Teleworking opportunities, which have grown significantly during the pandemic, usually cater to high-income formal sector workers whose job profiles allow remote work. Though informal in its lack of contracts and social protections, the most remunerative, cloud-based gig

Women, who bear the disproportionate burden of household and care work, are being edged out of remunerative work as the few remaining jobs are retained by men.

work is far more available to educated workers who are hired for specific tasks by firms in advanced economies. With high-speed internet concentrated in certain geographies and smartphone access highly variable in Asia, the digital divide is also a real barrier for the poor – especially women – to access platform work (World Bank 2020; Picot and Spath 2020).

Women, who bear the disproportionate burden of household and care work, are being edged out of remunerative work as the few remaining jobs are retained by men. Data from the Centre for Public Health and Equity (CPHE) in India indicates that while everyone lost work during the stringent phase of the lockdown, men are beginning to return to work at a far greater rate than women (Vyas 2020). Moreover, many employed women work in sectors like health and education where the risk of contagion is high (ILO 2020).

These shifts have posed considerable challenges to the set of research projects that are part of the consortium. These challenges vary across geographies, since the progression of the disease varies across countries and regions. They also vary across sectors. Opportunities for work around essential commodities like food, health and related public services have been robust; work in sectors like manufacturing and construction is slowly getting back on track, while segments like tourism and hospitality will likely take much longer to bounce back.

In this context, studying women's work in the digital platform economy requires not only reevaluating sectors, modes of work, barriers and challenges to employment but also identifying specific vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms and possible future pathways to employment and empowerment in a post-pandemic world.



Research Challenges

The pandemic and associated lockdowns caused delays as project teams adjusted to new working conditions, but the larger concerns emerged around the feasibility of conducting fieldwork. Online and telephonic engagement is proving to be challenging for teams engaged in qualitative work. Ethnographic research, particularly, is harder to do online since one must build rapport and trust with respondents, and the need for follow-up questions requires synchronous communication. Health risks associated with face-to-face meetings has also necessitated a rethinking of research methods.

Along with the risk of viral transmission, ethical concerns emerged around conducting primary inquiries at a time when households had been through income loss, deprivation and mental trauma. Research teams had to evaluate not just feasibility and ethics, but also their own capacities to conduct research with sensitivity and empathy at such a time. Questions emerged around how research teams could support vulnerable women workers throughout this project phase.

As consortium members work to cope with these challenges, some strategies, opportunities and new ways of thinking have emerged.

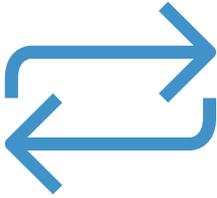
Going Digital: Diverse Approaches



The decision to switch to online modes of data collection is an obvious one, but these circumstances still differ across teams located in different countries. While a team conducting interviews in a Thai city was able to successfully make this transition, researchers in Sri Lanka were less confident that an online survey would be representative, owing to unequal access to digital infrastructure. Given continually improving safety conditions, they are now preparing to revert to face-to-face surveys by implementing a stringent safety protocol. A Philippines-based organization has been able to successfully deploy a planned online survey in partnership with government institutions.

While acknowledging shortcomings of digital methods compared to face-to-face research, teams are exploring a range of mechanisms like WhatsApp voice notes and videos to collect data from respondents at this time.

An additional idea to leverage big data in tracking mobility and communication patterns emerged from an internal colloquium organised by LIRNEasia, a consortium member, which also warns researchers to do a careful cost comparison of online and offline tools before finalizing research plans, and to be cognizant of who bears the costs.



Rethinking Research Design: Strategic Shifts

The pandemic urged researchers to reconsider aspects of research design, keeping in mind both practical and ethical considerations. Many groups have used this opportunity to reconsider which platforms and sectors to study. Covid-19 has had dramatic effects on platform businesses; some operations have halted while others have received a fillip, so a re-evaluation of which platforms to study is ongoing. Cross-team linkages to evaluate the opportunities and risks are also emerging.

Similarly, an India-based project has switched from studying women doing beauty and wellness work on platforms to focusing on women entrepreneurs who offer sanitization services and women-led, farm-to-fork businesses, both of which have seen a surge in demand during the pandemic. Just as new markets like these may be entering or growing within the platform space, new areas of vulnerability may also be emerging for projects to track and respond to, such as considerations around health risks for researchers and respondents and the unavailability of respondents owing to economic and psycho-social distress caused by Covid-19.

Research teams have also been rethinking tools, e.g. conducting additional secondary literature reviews in lieu of some primary work, or increasing key informant interviews and reducing focus group discussions where social distancing would remain a concern.

More radical shifts in research design include a reversal of sequence in project activities. An India-based project is using storytelling and audio-visual content as a method of engagement and inquiry rather than a way to convey experiences and outcomes, as was originally planned.

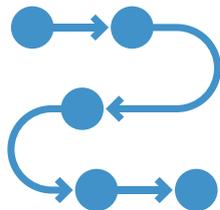
While innovation is the order of the day, questions remain on how to manage risks around less conventional methods, which might be new to researchers, or on whether they sufficiently address concerns around sampling and ethical biases.

The pandemic urged researchers to reconsider aspects of research design, keeping in mind both practical and ethical considerations.



Managing Emotional Outbursts and Trauma

To address a key ethical concern about conducting research in the wake of traumatic events related to economic loss, illness, death and relocation, consortium members are exploring the possibility of developing protocols that can help build researchers' capacities to handle emotional outbursts and disclosures, as well as compiling a handy set of resources related to trauma management and counseling that can be offered to respondents. There are related concerns and strategies around the management of sensitive private data as well, which must be addressed by the consortium.



Next Steps

The ability to continue with high quality and relevant research on women's work and the platform economy in this challenging Covid-19 context is contingent on a flexible approach that incorporates an understanding of the changing nature of platform use as a result of the pandemic, methodological innovations and strategic changes, as well as responsive ethical protocols. While the considerations will vary across projects, given their focus on different sectors and locations, the *Women, Work and the Gig Economy* research consortium will continue to document evolving approaches.

Emerging from the pandemic, consortium members hope to document not only the impact on and recovery from the pandemic among women working through digital platforms, but also the tools and adaptations to the research process that prove to be most effective. This may include new health and safety protocols, ethics guidelines for as-yet-underutilized methods, training modules or information on responding to emotional and trauma disclosures from respondents, and information on mental health that enumerators may need to make respondents aware of.

The inclusive recovery from the pandemic, an aim often vocalized, needs to be evidence-based. Therefore, it is essential to learn how to adapt to a crisis in social science research and to continue to gather data and information at moments when it is most critical, with the safety of all actors involved as a top priority.

References

ILO (2020). [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fifth edition. Updated estimates and analysis.](#) (International Labour Organisation, 30 June 2020)

Picot, M. & Spath, K. (2020). [Women and the future of the digital economy in Asia. Decent work for all?](#) (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2020)

Vyas, M. (2020). [Employment of young women hit most.](#) (Blog post on www.cmie.com, 27 July 2020)

World Bank (2020). [Beaten or Broken: Informality and Covid-19.](#) (World Bank: Washington D.C.)

Members of the Women, Work, and the Gig Economy Research Consortium

JustJobs Network

Centre for Policy Research

University of Hyderabad

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Philippine Institute for Development Studies

IT for Change

Just Economy and Labor Institute

Kenan Foundation Asia

Centre for Economic and Social Development

LIRNEasia

Indian Institute for Human Settlements

World Resources Institute India



IDRC | CRDI

International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada

**International Development
Research Centre (IDRC)**

Email: eg@idrc.ca

Twitter: [@IDRC_CRDI](https://twitter.com/IDRC_CRDI)

Facebook: [IDRC / CRDI](https://www.facebook.com/IDRC/CRDI)

JustJobs
NETWORK

**JustJobs
Network (JJN)**

Email: info@justjobsnetwork.org

Twitter: [@JJNglobal](https://twitter.com/JJNglobal)

Facebook: [JustJobs Network](https://www.facebook.com/JustJobsNetwork)

**FUTURE OF WORK
IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

For more information please visit

www.Connected2Work.org