

Research Report for the India China Institute

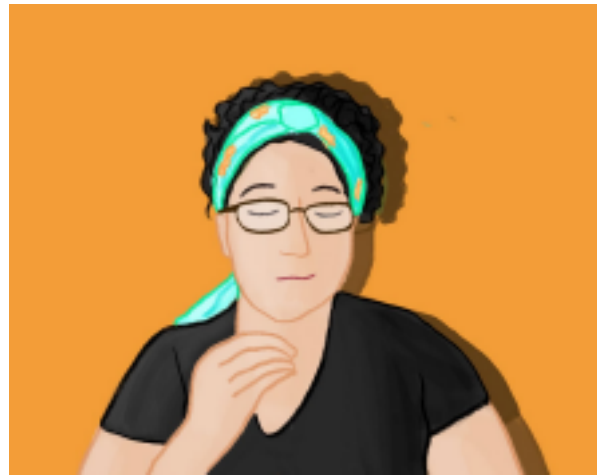
**An Exploratory Pandemic Research Project
with Women in India and the US**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a *shortened* overview of the exploratory research we undertook in the months of February and March of 2021 at the height of the COVID19 Pandemic. We were selected by the India-China Institute from the New School for Social Research faculty (Sociology, History, Political Science, and Humanities), Parsons School of Design faculty (School of Constructed Environments and The School of Art, Media, and Technology) and PhD students to propose research on the effects of the Sars CoV-2 (COVID-19) Pandemic. In our eight-week research period, we connected with not-for-profit and non-governmental organizations working on the question of public-private women's empowerment projects to help women establish new skills to gain independence from government welfare programs and family support structures. Combining our point of view as designers with those of social scientists we sought to study the effects of the Pandemic on women who were making attempts at working themselves out of poverty with the help of three organizations in the United States and India.

This paper does not include the more detailed findings of our study.

INTRODUCTION

The selection of three research sites were governed by Anezka Sebek's various streams of practice. Anezka's research interests as a media maker, feminist, sociologist, and activist tied these three sites together:

1. The New Start program was an outgrowth of the program Sebek used in the field work for dissertation *Family Homelessness in the Small City* (New School for Social Research, PhD in Sociology 2016). New Start under the supervision of the State University of New York in Ulster County. [1] was in its first year of operation to give older women living on the edge of poverty new opportunities in life. The support came in the form of computer and internet access along with skills to achieve their full personally defined potential rather than the futureless jobs in low-wage service jobs such as waitressing and office assistants.

2. As faculty at Parsons and The New School, Sebek was invited to participate in the collaboration between New School and IIT Gandhinagar, *Design for a Billion* pilot program (2018). Her subsequent connection to the WIN Foundation's projects in 2020 came with her scholarship in residence at IIT Gandhinagar where the WIN Foundations has its offices. The WIN Foundation under the supervision of Paresh Vora, India Director, is engaged in water management in the Kutch region North-Western India among many other sites, and this is how we were connected to the Participatory Groundwater Management research of Yogesh Jadeja at the Arid Communities and Technologies organization [2]. The research is centered on teaching village women how to manage water systems to give them full knowledge and control over the critical resource of water.
3. In 2020, Sebek was the MFA in Design and Technology thesis advisor to Bhavya Gupta's Pandemic effects research in Mumbai with the *Khaana Chahiye* organization that culminated in her award of the Schmidt's Futures scholarship and inclusion in the *Reimagine Challenge Anthology* by the Eric and Wendy Schmidt Foundation (2020) [3]. As a media maker and designer-researcher, Bhavya worked to shine a light on women's stories that would otherwise not be heard.

In the two-month time window of our research we were forced by the circumstances of the Pandemic to limit our goal to an exploratory foundation to understand the context of the problems in these communities and how COVID-19 affected them. In the future, our research may prove to be helpful to establish more targeted questions that may lead to policy and social change in the lives of all three populations. We asked, as social scientist-designers, how can design research inspire future action in these communities? As designers and collaborators with NGOs can we be better informed to affect changes in the field to help women in precarious communities achieve a better quality of life? How can we look at the systems and processes that underlie the problems we observed in our three sites? Through the lens of creating opportunities to give the women access to education and informal economy businesses, we found that:

1. All three communities were already living in or at the edge of poverty before the Pandemic. The Pandemic heightened their poverty and precarity.
2. The Pandemic affected each community in a distinct way:
 - a. Displacement and hunger (Mumbai)
 - b. Rural Produce Farm Market disruption (Kutch)
 - c. Employment Disruption (US).

METHODOLOGY

Prior to our gathering of ethnographic qualitative interviews, all participants in the three communities were engaged by NGOs who managed access to our interview subjects. The research these organizations were doing aligned with our interest in the betterment of women's lives in these communities. All three NGOs were created to give women the opportunity to improve skills and entrepreneurial knowledge. We created a concept map of what we could do in the short time we had access to our subjects. (See Appendix 1). In this concept map it is clear we were attaching ourselves to women's skilling (employment education) research that was already in progress. Support for the upskilling research by the three organizations came from a combination of government and the private sector contributions. The New Start program is a collaboration between the State University and a private donor. The WIN Foundation works with

local village governments who have access to government development money in combination with private donors. Khaana Chahiye works with government programs to aid in legitimizing the needs of the people in the Reay Road Colony in combination with generous funding from private donors.

We used Zoom video conference calls to speak with our subjects. Our research was conducted in English (USA), Gujarati (Kutch), and Marathi (Mumbai). The interviews were digitally transcribed for Kutch and US. Personal stories of lived experiences were gathered by on-the-ground Khaana Chahiye field volunteers in Mumbai and transcribed by Bhavya Gupta.

The three field sites were emblematic 21st Century human community settlements (See Table). All three communities in our study were living on the edge of poverty before the Pandemic struck. The sudden closing down of economies world-wide affected low-wage workers the most.

1. The peri-urban US case is representative of a city on the edge of the Northeast Megalopolis of New York where economics and lack of 21st Century skills cause poverty and lack of access to housing and education. In the New Start program, the women obtain an associate degree in Business Management. The New Start project started several years ago to target women who were mired in low-wage work without the possibility of upward mobility because of their lack of education and the economic downturns of the last decade. The women told us how their employment as low-wage service workers in hotels and restaurants was suddenly not available when the lockdowns began.¹
2. Mandvi is representative of a village in a farm community where drought and produce market forces are deterrents to economic stability. The lockdown caused the market for their sugar drinks to shrink overnight thus putting them in a predicament of having a crop without a market. The sample of our subjects was limited to a land-owning women’s group of mostly widowed farmers who are involved in establishing a water management system in their village.²
3. Mumbai is representative of a city in a rising economy where wealth disparity and caste are deterrents to health and social wellbeing. Bhavya Gupta worked to create a collection of stories about the Reay Road Colony where many of the women had been brought to the city by their husbands to work in the booming construction industry. The Reay Road community lives on the railroad tracks in substandard housing not served by the Indian government.³

Site name	Location	Population	Number of women interviewed
New Start	Kingston, NY, USA	23, 000	5
Participatory Groundwater Management Program, Arid Communities Technologies	Mandvi, Kutch, Gujarat, India	51,000	7

Reay Road Community- Khaana Chahiye Foundation	Reay Road, Mumbai, India	5,000 (Reay Road) 21 million (Mumbai)	10
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Table 1.

QUESTIONS FROM *PANDEMIC WORLDS* RESEARCH FELLOWS

At the April 19th, 2021, *Pandemic Worlds* seminar presentation, our fellow colleagues in the seminar asked helpful questions that expanded the many questions that arose during our exploratory research. We were given the excellent 2005 article by Hickey and Mohan (242) who asked the key question about the use of the word “empowerment” in what we were trying to accomplish:

“...to what extent can current approaches to participation be directly associated with the transformations promised by the language of empowerment, and thus constitute an adequate response to the critique that participatory approaches fail to deal with issues of power and politics?”

We agree that if participatory action in communities is used as a research method, subjects should be able to understand and overcome the structural reasons for their situations of poverty as a measure of a successful outcome of the project. We realize that our eight-week study did not begin to ask questions about the power structures controlling the populations in our study. This is a difficult and long-term activist journey not undertaken by most NGOs for reasons that could inspire our further research. However, in defense of our research partners, the WIN Foundation’s principles rest on working with the local village governments (*Panchayats*) to teach spokespeople (*Bhujal Jankars*) about sanitation and water management. Likewise, the Khaana Chahiye organization helps its constituents navigate the complexities of being counted as citizens of colonies like Reay Road. Bhavya found that this idea of empowerment to be “charged” the critique of her thesis research. The question of what the women really needed is what was asked in all the Mumbai interviews. For the US, The New Start organization works with the participants’ own wishes and visions for their futures to determine the best way forward for their families’ and their own well-being. Participants in The New Start Program are offered financial assistance and a collaborative community is an outgrowth of this program.

FINDINGS AND PROPOSAL FOR FUTURE WORK

This was a cursory snapshot of a full year after the first 2020 lockdowns, in two very different nations and three distinct populations. The variety of populations had one thing in common, they are living on or below the poverty line. However, they are participating in programs to improve their condition in the hopes of achieving independence from aid programs like government rations in India and food stamps and housing/rental assistance in the U.S. Factors that affect their exposure to, primarily, the economic effects of the Pandemic are associated with the women’s employment in the most vulnerable low-skill and low-paid service or menial labor. Our questions yielded very little new information. The narratives we extracted from our interviews did not demonstrate discoveries about the Pandemic that are already under investigation by journalists and NGOs in India and the US (see *People’s Archive of Rural India*, Fisher, et al. 2020, Long, et al. 2020).

Our research time ended at the end of March 2021 during what seemed to be a slowing

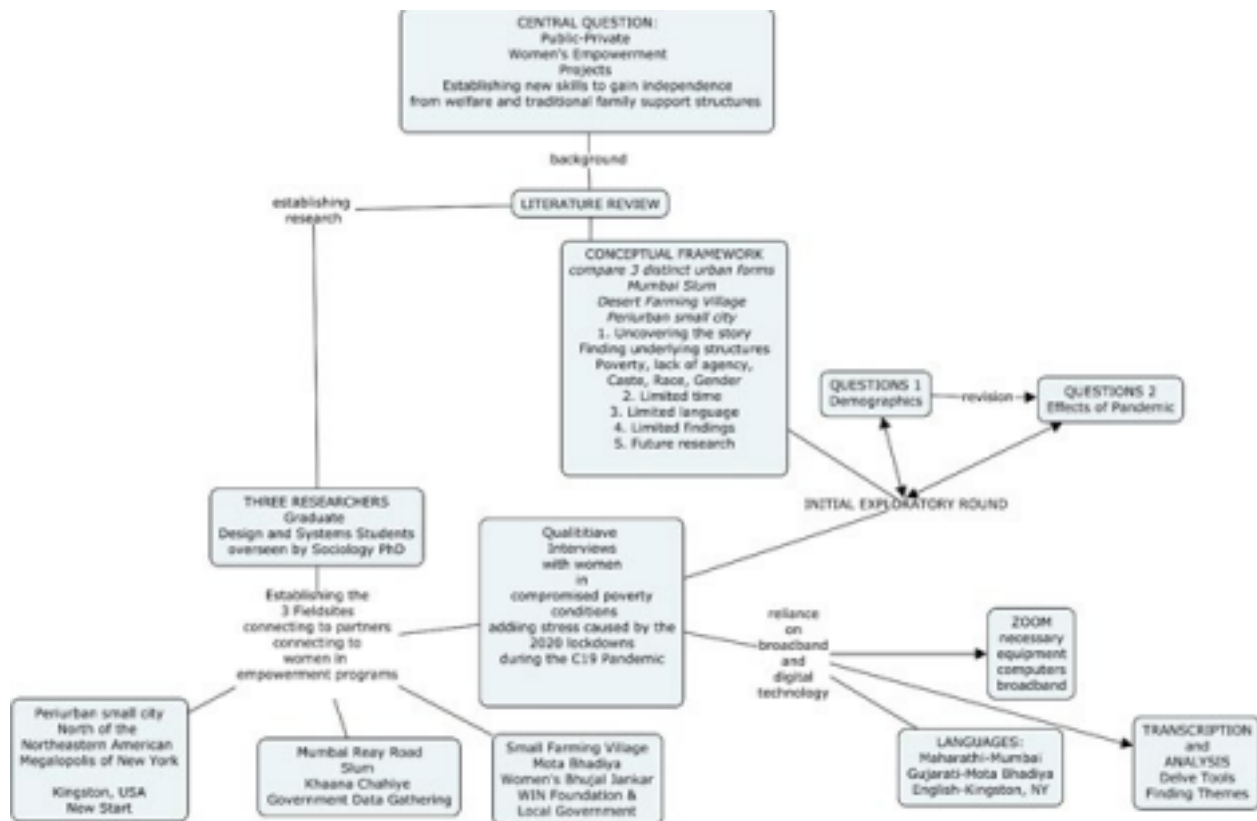
down in the increase of COVID19 and India had not yet begun to experience the effects of the Pandemic Delta Variant. Currently cases in India due to the Delta Variant stands at the time of this writing at 428,000. The true death toll may be in the millions (Pathak, NPR 2021). Other than clarifying how each of the three group programs worked, we did not ask political questions, nor did we point to possibilities for further advocacy.

We suggest that a future participatory action research methodology in the tradition of Paolo Freire (Baum, MacDougal, Smith 2006) would answer our colleagues' critique about the charged use of the word "empowerment" in use at all three research sites. Having the agency and the education to understand larger systems of oppression for all human communities is a noble albeit large and difficult goal because allowing participants to create systems and policies of their own, needs financial and structural support that is rarely available because hegemonic systems benefit from having an underclass that can do menial work at low wages. The "empowerment" question remains that we hope to pursue in our future research. We are grateful to the India-China institute for the opportunities and enlightening perspectives our exploratory research provided.

ENDNOTES

1. The **New Start for Women Program** at SUNY Ulster endeavors to build a new table of equity, justice, and opportunity in Ulster County by providing promising women of low income with access to the power of education and human connection. (Report not yet published). The project is generously funded by private foundations and grants in addition to the State University of New York.
2. <https://winfoundations.org/water-and-sanitation/>
3. <https://www.khaanachahiye.com/>

APPENDIX 1



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