EMERGE COVID-19 and Gender Data:
Protocol Recommendations for Conducting Phone-Based Surveys

Gender data are critical to understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on the safety and livelihoods of women and girls, on the burdens experienced by female healthcare workers and the strain on healthcare systems.[1] However, fear of COVID-19 exposure challenges and impedes large-scale surveys and routine data collection efforts that have used in-person interviews to track or examine these gender inequalities. In these times, data collection through phone-based interviews can be a valuable low-cost opportunity for research and programs to respond to this dynamic crisis, understand the needs of women and girls and the impacts of COVID 19 on their health and lives, without the risks of virus exposure and transmission both research participants and research staff.

Literature on the use of phone-based surveys shows several benefits of this data collection approach, including higher response rates compared to mail/email or web surveys[2] and ease in implementation. At the same time, evidence on the gender divide in phone ownership and use[3] shows the need for caution as there is a risk of missing out those who do not own mobile phones or control its use, in particular women from low-income or marginalized groups or those living in institutional settings.[4] Other issues with phone-based surveys have included infrastructural constraints in some settings (e.g. electricity and mobile connectivity issues), limitations on the length of the interview and concerns around ensuring participant privacy. Despite these limitations, a review of mobile phone -based studies from LMIC contexts has found that phone-based surveys have generally been successful when reaching those already reached in prior household surveys.[5] Further, large scale phone surveys have been able to ethically gather data on sensitive gender equity focused issues, including gender-based violence, across multiple national contexts[6,7] including LMICs.[8,9] Hence, we recommend inclusion of gender equity focused questions, but with consideration of certain ethical study guidelines.

The EMERGE initiative has previously offered guidance identifying, creating and adapting good survey-based measures for gender equality and empowerment. In this protocol, we focus on recommendations for the design and implementation of phone-based surveys. These recommendations, while applicable across phone-based surveys regardless of topic, emphasize considerations required for collection of gender data as well as gender sensitive issues, such as those highlighted on EMERGE COVID-19 page.

We outline our guidance in five sections:

Section 1: Creating a rigorous, valid and practical survey
Researchers must typically conduct a phone surveys within a 15-20 timeframe, as fatigue and time availability can be a concern, particularly in low resource contexts where the phones are shared. Hence, it is important to limit survey items to those most relevant to the research topic area, as well as to items with a sound evidence-based to support its inclusion. Evidence-based measures on Gender and COVID-19 are available on the EMERGE COVID-19 page, and evidence-based measures on gender equality and empowerment more broadly and across dimensions are available on the EMERGE Website.

Efforts to create an efficient survey with evidence-based measures should include the following:
1. **Ensure clarity on key gender constructs (e.g. norm, self-efficacy) and measures** based on research questions, analytic plan and time constraints. Researchers can utilize rapid literature reviews, identify measure items and their sources, follow clear inclusion-exclusion criteria and use psychometrically tested or harmonized measures across time and populations to improve content clarity (Please see EMERGE Measures Reports 1 and 2).[10,11]
2. **Adapt items and responses to your specific context/ population/issue related to COVID-19, based on inductive hypotheses**. Given the newness of COVID-19, tested measures with demonstrated validity and reliability are not readily available for use. We encourage researchers to adapt measures from existing validated surveys and develop new survey items only if necessary, as measure adaptation provides opportunities for further psychometric testing and validation of existing measures and constructs. Guidance for measurement adaptation, included on the EMERGE website, can be used to take constructs and assess them in the time of COVID-19.[11]
3. **Create Survey items for key constructs in relation to COVID, recognizing issues of bias, reliability and validity in measurement.** In some cases, we have no measures that can be adapted to assess Gender and COVID-19 related issues. Gender measures created specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic must recognize the dynamic nature of the crisis that can influence measurement validity, as well as reporting inconsistences, recall bias and social desirability bias influencing measure reliability and validity. Follow the EMERGE 10 Steps to create reliable and valid social and behavioral measures guidelines.[11]

4. **Pilot test your survey to help ensure survey comprehension and effective handling of sensitive questions.** Phone interviews require language and response patters to be as simple as possible. Pilot and cognitive testing processes can ensure that difficult or sensitive are understood or prefaced to increase comfort and support for respondents. These approaches are described in our above referenced [10 Steps to create reliable and valid social and behavioral measures.](#)[11]

5. **Prepare supports and referrals for services related to sensitive topics for respondents.** Many surveys focused on gender issues include assessments of gender-based violence, mental health or substance use, suicidality or other sensitive topics that can be uncomfortable for respondents and may even be indicative of danger or bodily threat for the respondent. Researchers must consider whether and how to ask these questions, ensure privacy if questions are asked, debrief or check in with respondents in cases of disclosure, and provide referrals for all respondents asked about violence, mental health and other issues for which services may be required. These efforts should be done in consultation with local service providers and with human ethics approval.

Section 2: Sampling and Respondent Characteristics and Circumstances

When designing phone surveys, a clear sampling strategy with defined respondent characteristics and circumstances can increase rigor in implementation and in inference. At the same time, respect for respondent time, culture and circumstances (including the pandemic) can be useful in drawing out effective responses and ensuring sensitivity in the research process. Some recommendations include:

1. **Clarify the Eligibility of Survey Respondents with a priori defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.** As the phone-based survey is being conceptualized, it is important to have clear guidelines on who is eligible for inclusion and who will be excluded from the survey. These eligibility criteria should draw from the aims, objective and purpose of your study.[4] To minimize error in sampling, screeners can be included in the phone-based survey to reconfirm the eligibility of your participant

2. **Prepare a clear sampling frame.** There are different approaches to developing a sampling frame for a phone survey, such as lists of subscribers from telecom companies, or random digit dialing often used to automatic interactive voice response or SMS surveys.[12] Remote data collection can also be carried out using mobile instant messaging interviews (MIMIs) such as WhatsApp, which may be very relevant for LMIC contexts like India where such apps are popular.[13,14] Another mechanism of sampling for surveys could be via random digit dialing which can generate large, random samples with the caveat of the sample being of only mobile phone users.[15,16]

3. **Sample participants from previous surveys**: Another approach to sample participants during the COVID-19 pandemic is to recontact participants from previous surveys, in case the previous surveys captured the phone numbers of participants. Sampling such participants will have a few advantages as compared to creating a new sampling frame altogether. First, this method allows us to retain the sampling design of the earlier study, which would be useful in estimating parameters such as Intra Cluster Correlations (ICC) and design effects more accurately. Secondly, a lot of information about the participants being re-contacted would already be available from the previous surveys. This might be crucial in reducing the length of the telephonic survey.

4. **Include key questions on socio-demographic characteristics**. Make sure to ask or otherwise collect adequate sociodemographic characteristics to describe and contextualize your sample (e.g., gender, age, race or ethnicity, primary language, income, etc.).

5. **Communicating clearly how much time an interview will take and being respectful of the time and circumstances of the respondent**. As noted above, we recommend shorter phone-based surveys (approximately 15-20 minutes) with precise closed-ended questions as much as possible. Long interviews are likely to be burdensome and may be cut short by the respondent.

6. **Respecting culture, time and circumstances of the respondent.** For cultural validation, all partners, particularly in-country or local partners must review the study questions and protocols. Translations should be reviewed by local speakers to ensure colloquial wording, non-violation of local cultural norms, and back translated as appropriate.[17] The questionnaire should have frequent prompts for the interviewer to check-in on the privacy level of the participant. Always end the interview by thanking the respondent for sharing their information and confirming that you will use it to guide improvements to program and policy.

Section 3: Minimizing Risk regarding Participant Safety when Assessing GBV

Ensuring that we do not compromise the safety of research participants (both respondents and interviewers, when relevant) in the context the COVID-19 response is paramount, across all forms of research, but particularly in cases of research involving potential disclosure of any form gender-based violence or coercion. During this crisis, participants are most likely to be in their homes, necessitating close proximity to the people most likely to subject them to violence and coercion (particularly, multiple forms of intimate partner violence), consequently increasing the risk of this abuse by male partners.

Recent guidance from WHO and UN WOMEN recommends against including assessments of experiences of GBV in surveys, particularly when using remote data collection methods, based on concerns that this may pose serious safety risks to those interviewed. They, instead, suggest using other data collection methods, such as key informant interviews with service providers, or survey assessments regarding participants' perceptions of safety (e.g., safety in the home), in the context of remote data collection.[18]

If researchers and organizations make the decision to conduct surveys of individuals during this period using phone or computer-based data collection, we suggest that researchers strictly adhere to a set of guidelines to minimize risks to participants related to GBV, including:

- Selecting only one woman or girl per household, as per established WHO sampling guidance for research on violence against women.[19]
- Making clear at the start of recruitment and throughout that participation is voluntary and that the respondent can abandon the survey anytime s/he wants.
- If the survey is administered via phone call with an interviewer, ensuring the research team/interviewers are properly trained and understand the ethical and safety principles of GBV research.
- Training interviewers to detect and respond to indicators of distress from participants e.g. background noise, hesitation etc.[20]
- Ensuring that the research team/interviewers have information about GBV support services that can be offered to respondents at completion of data collection.
- Asking respondents whether they can and would be willing to answers questions about women's lives that will require that they be in a private space where they cannot be heard (if via phone) or their responses seen (if via electronic means).
- Once a participant has moved to a private space, explaining clearly to the respondents the objectives of the survey they are participating in and how/what for the data will be used.
- Asking, specifically, whether they currently feel safe to answers these types of private questions.
- Reducing any pressure respondents may feel to participate by increasing acceptability of declining via telling her that we understand that participating is not possible for many women right now, and that she should not feel badly in any way if she cannot participate.
- Reducing potential for economic coercion (critical, given current heightened financial insecurity) by not sharing information about incentives prior to her agreement to participate in the study.
- Checking with the respondent regularly, throughout the survey, to ensure they still cannot be heard, or their responses seen.
- Not asking questions on experiences of GBV if a participant is interrupted or joined by another member of the household. If needed, skip to another section of the survey, and do not return to the GBV experience assessments until/unless the participant indicates that she, again, cannot be heard or her responses seen.
- Stressing at multiple points in the survey, and always prior to questions regarding any form of GBV or related issues on which discussion/disclosure may place her at risk (i.e., sexuality, sexual behavior), that she is free to skip any questions that she does not feel comfortable answering or to terminate the survey at any point she wants.
- After completion of the survey, providing clear instructions to her on how to ensure that information regarding the survey and her responses do not remain on her phone or computer.
- Reassuring respondents that their responses and information provided will be kept confidential and anonymous.
- Offer information to all women and girls about available services and sources of support (local agencies if possible), i.e. helplines, women's centers, psychosocial support.

It is important to note that neither these, nor any set of guidelines, allows us to eliminate the possibility that someone may hear or see her responses, or that there may be adverse consequences to her participation. Our obligation is to do all that we can to minimize risk to participants, particularly in contexts and at times such as these when risk for both lack of privacy and GBV is heightened. Thus, it is critical that we carefully weigh the benefits against the potential risks when deciding whether to conduct such research. This includes a determination that the information cannot be collected from other data sources or via other methods, and that the information is required to inform a response to prevent this violence or related harms to the participating population.

Section 4. Improving Phone-Based Survey Implementation: Selecting and Training Interviewers

Phone-based survey implementation can be improved by focusing on three aspects of data collector selection and training:

Criteria for interviewer selection[21]
- Clarity in voice and tone articulation over the phone
- Reading and verbal comprehension skills
- Capacity for demonstrated compassion or non-judgement for study participants
- Gender or other characteristics of the interviewer which may affect response rates,
- Ability and/or experience to navigate phone and/or digital technology.
- Access to a private space for the interviewer to be able to conduct phone interviews without interruption. Female interviewers in particular may be burdened with household responsibilities and constraints themselves, and the research staff must acknowledge and accommodate their concerns.

Interviewer training protocols
- Maintain the highest standard of interviewer training which include:
  - Reading and discussing the consent form and survey tool in its entirety with all interviewers via group phone or video chats. Gender related questions are especially sensitive in nature, and a special emphasis should be placed on the need for privacy during the phone interview.
  - Discussing the rationale and importance of each survey question.
  - Reviewing question prefaces, interviewer instructions, response options, and any other aspects closely.
  - Cover ways to build rapport with participants over the phone which include acceptable polite introductions and greeting. Interviewers must be prepared with these polite and culturally appropriate introductions.
  - Stressing the need for clear articulation of all survey aspects and standardized questioning, given that these are being conducted over phones.
  - Probing non-directivity to elicit responses or motivating responses in an exact answer format, to minimize questions that require non-standardized responses.
  - Maintaining an affect of non-judgmental interest throughout the interview, with a special emphasis on voice and tone modulation to ensure participant comfort during the time of data collection.
  - Role-play and/or practice phone interviews that are recorded for further feedback.
- Ensure adequate technology support for all members of the research team for the training and during data collection.
- Ensure a protocol on follow up procedures in case of mobile phone connectivity issues
- Train interviewers to recognize and respond to verbal signs of distress, including by providing a list of resources for the participant.[22]
- Investigators must remember not to give out any information or advice that they are not trained for. They must instead refer their respondents to the appropriate resources, including those available by phone or internet.
- Remain alert to background noises and/or any indication of privacy concerns, particularly when discussing sensitive topic such as gender-based violence and menstrual health.

Interviewer supervision and monitoring
- Supervisors should ensure high quality of data collection by:
  - Direct observation through listening (with consent).
  - Re-contacting respondents to randomly check responses from the larger original survey.
  - Data analysis to check any patterns in answers, skipping, logics, and time taken to complete surveys by the interviewers.

Section 5. Improving Phone Survey Implementation Science: Conducting Effective Phone Interviews
We recommend the following practical tips for interviewers success in phone interviews, based on previous literature.[23]

Before the interview:
- Communicate and confirm scheduled interview through messaging with respondent prior to the interview time, which may increase response rates.[24]
- Be well familiarized and practice with the tools.
- Prepare and testing audiotaping.
- Prepare for note taking while conversing.
- Ensure the interviewer has a sufficient amount of uninterrupted time and space to conduct the phone interview since they will need increased concentration to pick up on verbal cues and flexibility among their respondents.[25]
- Prepare to establish friendly conversation with a stranger which may need increased concentration, ability to pick up on verbal cues and flexibility in language depending on the respondent.[25]

Starting the interview:
- Prepare polite and culturally appropriate conversation starters that can help build rapport with the respondent even while over the phone.[26]
- Read out the informed consent and relay the specific points such as confidentially, use of data, length of interview etc.
- When developing the introduction to a survey, local cultural norms and interviewer-interviewee interaction as well their respondent's social status must be considered. It may affect the cooperation as well as data quality.[26]
- Build rapport and help the participant feel comfortable so they can share freely. This is particularly important in a telephonic interview since respondents may have differing comfort levels with telephone interviews.[26]

During the interview:
- Maintain a friendly, courteous, conversational, and unbiased style throughout.
- Provide indicators during the conversation that you are listening and acknowledge their responses are being heard on your end.
- Probe and elicit responses by using positive feedback as appropriate.
- Answer participant questions without misleading them or giving any technical advice.
- Be considerate of the participant's time and interview length. Thank them for their time and for sharing their personal information.
- Ensure that you have on hand the list of external resources and referrals.
- Remember, your role is for research. Even if trained as a social worker, counselor, or health provided, interviewers should not give out any information or advice related to any identified issues or concerns for the participant unless they are directly guided by the research protocol to do so. They should instead refer their respondents to the appropriate resources, including those available by phone or internet.

After the interview:
- Check data collected for accuracy of information.
- Edit any errors and prepare the data for analysis.
- Follow IRB protocol for confidential data management and storage.

CONCLUSION

Remember, our study participants are being generous with their time and information to help support greater understanding of important social and health issues, and this is particularly true in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. To that end, we must always be sensitive, responsible, and appreciative of our survey respondents, and we must work to ensure that we fully use the research we obtain to improve understanding for the field and responses for those in need.

This is a brief overview of phone survey research for those working on Gender and COVID-19 research, and we encourage you to review other resources to help guide your sound and ethical research practices. To that end, we recommend the following additional resources for your consideration:

Additional Resources:
1. Best Practices for Conducting Phone Interviews (J-Pal, March 20 2020)
2. Covid-19 Crisis: How to Adapt your Data Collection for Monitoring and Accountability (CartONG, April 2020)
3. COVID-19: Emerging gender data and why it matters (UNWomen)
4. Collecting Data with Mobile Surveys in Low- and Middle-Income Countries During COVID-19 (RTI International, March 26 2020)
5. Gender and Data Resources related to COVID-19 (Data 2x, March 2020)
6. Mobile Phone Surveys for Understanding COVID-19 Impacts: Part I Sampling and Mode (World Bank, April 7 2020)
7. Using Mobile phones to do research in the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and beyond (CGIAR, April 11 2020)
8. National Helpline Numbers on Violence Against Women (UN Women)

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