

Leeds University Business School: Research and Innovation Podcast

International Women's Day 2023: Episode 3

Speakers: Asiya Islam and Nishi Khandelwal

[00:00:00] **Asiya:** Hi everyone. Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Asiya Islam. I'm a lecturer in Work and Employment Relations here at the Leeds University Business School. And today I'm delighted to be joined by Nishi Khandelwal, who heads the Women's Literacy Program at Nirantar, as part of our International Women's Day podcast series. Hi Nishi.

[00:00:26] **Nishi:** Hi, thanks for inviting me.

[00:00:29] **Asiya:** You're very welcome. We are very pleased to have you here. So today we are going to be talking about a project that we've been working on together and this is a project on gender inequalities in Digital India. But before we go in depth into the podcast in terms of talking about the project Nishi, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about Nirantar, the organization that you work.

[00:00:51] **Nishi:** Yeah. So, Nirantar is a resource organization for gender and education, and it works with the vision of democratizing access to power through education, especially for the marginalized girls and women in India, who are living in the area of rural places or in the urban poor.

[00:01:13] **Asiya:** That's great. Thanks Nishi. And I've known about Nirantar's work, which is excellent, for many years now. So I approached Nirantar I think a year ago, a year and a half, maybe two years ago, you know, you kind of lose track of time during the pandemic. But I remember approaching Nirantar during the pandemic about this project that I wanted to do on looking at gender inequalities in Digital India.

So what was Nirantar's interest and involvement in this project Nishi? So when I approached you, what were some of your thoughts? Why was Nirantar interested in this?

[00:01:44] **Nishi:** So, I would like to talk about Nirantar's history in a bit. Basically when you approached Nirantar, Nirantar was already working on literacy of women. And not only literacy, we were also working on digital literacy of women. Nirantar has always approached or promoted literacy from right and empowerment perspective. We were already, like, we were working on literacy. We were knowing that there are disparities in the literacy rates of male and female in India. And when this National Digital Literacy mission was launched by the government of India, the first question came in our mind was, Who will be benefited with these, these programs and who are the ones who are left behind from such interventions?

So to get the answer of this question, we did a study and we got to know that in rural and urban poor areas of India, there are a lot of like issues of access and lack of literacy, digital literacy issues there among women. When you approached uh, for this study to Nirantar we thought that we are already working with women, but to get to know about these disparities among young girls and like, yeah, the young cohort would be better for us and maybe we will be able to plan a long time or

we can enlarge our scope or we can see this in a broader framework. So that's why that was the most important thing for us to work together on this project or on for this study.

[00:03:26] **Asiya:** That's great. Thank you. I'm really glad that we've had a chance to collaborate because I think it's about combining expertise, isn't it? Nirantar has been doing, as you say, work on women and girls' literacy for a very long time, and now it's kind of starting to move in the direction of thinking about digital literacy as well.

And that's where this project came in. So just to say a little bit more about the project the reason this came about is because, in part because I'm interested in gender and work. I've been doing research on gender and work for the last seven, eight years, and I particularly work in Delhi. And while I've been in this field, obviously lots of things have been changing, including the nature of work, particularly with the advancement of digital technology and then the timing of the project.

I said earlier that we started this during the pandemic, that was not simply a coincidence in the sense that the pandemic also pushed everything much more into the digital realm including with the Indian government, thinking about creating a Digital India and launching various initiatives like the National Digital Literacy Mission, mission that you just mentioned, Nishi.

So what I was interested in is doing a finer grained analysis of what gender inequalities in digital literacy, access and use look like. Which is why we then ended up designing this multi methods project. And I approached Nirantar to see whether we could do this together. So there were two things that we did together.

One was a survey and the other was digital diaries. And I thought we could talk a little bit about. Both of those maybe beginning with the survey actually. So we had 735 respondents, both young and women from Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. So it was a mix of urban and rural India. I was thinking about the findings of the survey that we've written as part of a working paper as well.

And I was wondering Nishi if there was something that emerged from that, that was very striking for you. So if you were to think about one finding that was very, very interesting or perhaps surprising for you, what would you say this was?

[00:05:30] **Nishi:** Yeah. So, as I told you that we have already discussed that Nirantar was already working with women on digital literacy aspect when we started this program. Before that also we did a study that what are the issue? How do women understand Digital and what are their needs. So we came to know that the access issue was very much like, women did not have access to digital tools, especially the mobile phone.

But when we did this study and the data came to us I was surprised to see that, maybe it was a result of the covid lockdown and pandemic that the access to digital tools have increased, especially the mobile phone, have increased from 2018 to 2021 when we did this study. Though still there is a gender gap in access because earlier it was much among the older women, but now it has decreased due to various reasons. And also I was thinking there could be another reason that the, these young girls and young women were able to access the mobile phones, but the access were not easy for the for the old age women or the who are in their middle age.

So this was both striking for me, but I was also surprised to see. Maybe I was contemplating that this access was just for the education purpose, but in the, in other areas for accessing the social media platforms and other like. To chat with friends and other things.

This access is not easy and that's, that data tells us that most of the girls or women, we, with whom we were talking in this study, were accessing mobile phone and data for Educational purposes, not for using the social media platforms and other things. So that was most striking to me Asiya.

But in continuation with this, because I, we both were looking data together, I would like to know what were the major issues or challenges for you while analyzing this data?

[00:07:25] **Asiya:** Yeah. Yeah. Thanks, Nishi. I mean, it's really, really interesting the data that's emerged from this survey. So just a couple of things before I talk about the challenges with the analysts. Just as you were talking, I was thinking about the whole issue of access to digital technology for young women. And you're absolutely right in the sense that for young women that access might actually still be easier than it is for older women.

So that was one of the things that emerges, if we look at the survey data, which was reflecting what was happening with young people versus some of the other data that's out there, including with Nirantar that looks at slightly older women. But I think one thing that was really striking for me with that data was how women are disproportionately sharing their mobile phones with other members of their family.

Or they might just be using phones that belong to other members of the family. So that was one of the things in terms of access and that they do have access, but that access is Often shared versus young men where they seem to just exclusively own their mobile phones and therefore have longer periods of time to spend on their mobile phones and access technology that way.

So that was just one of the kind of interesting, more nuanced aspects of thinking about gender inequalities in digital technology. Where in terms of analyzing the data, One of the things that emerges, and this is again in conversation with Nirantar, is the need for intersectional analysis. And I'm talking specifically about the survey data here.

So with survey, our main focus was on looking at gender inequalities, as we've already said. What we also did was conduct the survey in both urban and rural India. So the survey was conducted in Delhi, which is obviously urban area. And then we were looking at UP and Bihar and specifically at rural areas in UP and Bihar.

So there was this mix of location as well. and when I was looking at the data, one of the things that came out was how gender really intersects with location. So you could see that there were variations across urban and rural areas in the way gender inequalities manifested when we look at digital technology.

But also, secondly, one of the things that we are now looking at that we haven't been able to look at in depth until now, but we do want to do this again in discussion with Nirantar is the intersection between gender, location, and caste. So caste is something that also comes up, and this is something that we'd recorded as part of the survey, but this is something that does become quite important

once we start breaking down the data and looking at the intersection between gender, cost, and location.

We find that in terms of marginalization, in terms of inequalities to access digital technology, this intersection of gender, caste and location becomes quite important. So then women who are in rural areas who come from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe backgrounds are the most marginalized in access to digital technology, and this is something that we are going to further look at.

So that's basically where we are with this data right now. But connected to that, we also conducted digital diaries. And just to kind of briefly summarize that, so with Digital Diaries, we created a WhatsApp group with 16 young women from Delhi, UP and Bihar, the regions where we'd conducted the survey.

and we sent them daily prompts on the WhatsApp group to understand their everyday use of smartphones and the internet. And for me, this was a very interesting method of doing research. I hadn't done digital diaries before. It's something that I'd thought about before, but we got a chance to actually do this as part of this research.

And what did you think, Nishi, about this particular method of research about finding out about digital technology and how women use it through digital diaries?

[00:11:07] **Nishi:** So this particular technique is very interesting and from the point of getting the data, I believe that we have received a very rich data through this method. In survey, the the questions were close-ended whereas in the digital diaries the questions were open-ended and the respondents were free to choose the form for their responses and hence we not only received data in various forms but in different ways. And for me, like it's always been a challenge to analyze the rich data because making the categories and then finding the patterns looking the data from different intersection.

It's very challenging. So yeah, we have a very rich data. But now further working on that data is again a second level challenge, which we have to yeah.

[00:11:46] **Asiya:** Yeah. Yeah, I completely agree with you. I mean, that data is incredible. So just as part of the WhatsApp group, when we were sending daily prompts to the young women who participated in digital diaries, they would send us responses in various forms. So we would get text messages, we would get videos, we would get audio recordings. Sometimes we would get images.

So it's very mixed data. It's multimedia data in that sense. And that makes it challenging to, you know, put it all together and think about how to analyze it. But I think interestingly, it really complements the survey data quite well because there are things that emerge from the survey data, that obviously are not that fleshed out in the survey because the survey questions are obviously limited. But then when we ask women for these prompts, through these prompts every day to tell us what they were doing in terms of using their smartphones, in terms of using the internet, there's so much more that comes out of it.

So it feels like there's a kind of story and narrative emerging from it. And again, this is analysis that we are in the process of doing and it's challenging, but it's also incredibly exciting. I mean, obviously

we are in the process of putting all of this together, but I was wondering, Nishi, if you could talk a bit about what Nirantar plans to do with this data.

So in the beginning, We talked about what Nirantar's interest in this project was but I was wondering if you could say a bit more about what value this data holds for Nirantar and what Nirantar could potentially do with it in the future.

[00:13:16] **Nishi:** Thanks, Asiya. One thing before I come to this question, I was thinking that research or doing studies, is one of the core areas of Nirantar's work. It's not a separate thing from our project work because we always try to take out the questions from the programs which are in implementation.

And then we do researches, study to get the answers or how we can give a right direction to our programs. So in order to do that, we do research and studies. So the findings we always get inform our further actions. So similarly from this study, the findings will inform our further actions or guide our programs.

What should be the right direction of, of these programs? Digital intervention programs should be so, definitely we are already working with women, but since this study is with the young girls. This, the findings of this study will definitely inform our program or intervention with the young girls in the Delhi and other areas like in UP and Bihar.

So basically we will plan for the interventions based on the findings and many more things, like maybe further studies can, or research, interventions can come up from this findings. So maybe that will be completely depending upon what kind of findings or how we are planning further actions on this.

So many more things can be done based on this, but. That has to, particular action has to be planned, basically.

[00:14:52] **Asiya:** Yeah, and for me it's the same thing. So this is going back to what we said right at the beginning in that I approached Nirantar because I thought that Nirantar has vast experience on the field working with women and young girls. But in addition to that, Nirantar also does research itself and plans interventions that are informed by research.

So for me, that holds great value because that helps me think about my research in terms of what it can do out in the world. And here we are collaborating so we can think about what to do to on Gender inequalities in digital access, use, and literacy. And we've obviously particularly been looking at young women and thinking about where the gaps are.

And I think one of the things that this research does that hasn't been done before, is really look at this in a fine grain manner, just very in depth. So there are surveys out there, there are other studies out there that show that there are gender inequalities in access to digital technology.

And this has often been called the gender gap in digital technology. But what our research is doing and through this particular combination of surveys and digital diaries, is really going in depth into it to show that even where women have access, there are inequalities in that access, whether that's through sharing of smartphones or through family restrictions on how much they can use their

phones or just general family restrictions on how much they can use the internet, whether through phone or any other device. So I think this research is really giving us lots of new data and there's much that can be done with that data, as you say, both in terms of thinking about what interventions should look like but also thinking about future research. And as we highlighted earlier, one of the areas for future research is to do intersectional research.

So particularly focus on gender and caste and location in thinking about access to digital technology.

So thanks very much for joining me today, Nishi, and thank you to everyone for listening. If you would like to find out more about this research, the details are in the episode show notes. Thanks, Nishi.

[00:17:01] **Nishi:** Thanks Asiya.

[00:17:02] **Asiya:** Okay, goodbye.

[00:17:04] **Nishi:** Bye-Bye.