Integrating Biographical Research into Focus Group Discussions

Lessons Learned from a Qualitative Study of Constraints Underlying Gender Disparities in Mongolia's Labor Market

A Knowledge Note from the East Asia and Pacific Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality

Photo: World Bank

While quantitative studies are useful in documenting gender disparities in economic opportunity, earnings, and productivity, qualitative research can help to uncover the constraints that underlie those disparities. A particularly promising methodological approach taken in Mongolia combines elements of biographical research with focus group discussions in the context of reconstructive research. Once successfully implemented, this combination of qualitative methods can serve as a positive example of the central premises of qualitative research: openness, engagement with different spheres of society, and the impartiality of the researcher.

Gender inequalities in access to economic opportunity, earnings, and productivity persist across the East Asia and Pacific region, as emphasized in *Toward Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific: A Companion Report to the World Development Report* (World Bank 2012). Labor-market disparities are likely to reduce macroeconomic efficiency; limit the role of jobs as direct instruments of women's development and empowerment; and limit the positive spillovers of jobs on women's agency, control, and power.

Several quantitative studies have analyzed and documented gender disparities in Mongolia, but the constraints underlying them have long remained largely unclear, providing little guidance for program design. Moreover, scant empirical evidence exists regarding the type of support that people generally expect from labor-market policies or how effective support is in addressing gender-specific constraints in Mongolia and elsewhere. The qualitative tool developed and launched for the report on which this note is based, *Perceptions of Precariousness-A Qualitative Study of Constraints Underlying Gender Disparities in Mongolia's Labor Market* (Schmillen and Weimann-Sandig 2017), can help fill these knowledge gaps. The tool addresses three related questions:

- What gender disparities can be identified or confirmed through qualitative research?

- What are the reasons underlying the gender disparities?

- Are current government policies, including active labor market policies, effective in addressing gender disparities? If not, what can be done to improve them?

The qualitative approach confirms the range of gender disparities in Mongolia's labor market that have been identified through quantitative research, painting a picture of widespread precarious employment, particularly in the private sector. Among the reasons believed to underlie gender disparities in the labor market are: (i) norms, such as the prevailing views on the roles of men and women with respect to marriage, household and family-care duties, and suitable career choices and jobs; (ii) deficiencies in the political environment; and (iii) the near-total absence of government support services and programs. Three contributing causes are considered salient.

- A prevailing societal expectation of women is that they devote the majority of their adult lives to supporting their husbands and raising their children.

- Some women manage to combine fulfilling societal expectations with maintaining successful careers, but many others perceive the quality and quantity of childcare facilities as inadequate to make this possible.

- Differential legal treatment of men and women appears to cement the acceptance of traditional gender roles.

Policies and programs designed to address some of these underlying constraints are widely regarded as ineffective, at least in their current form, at addressing gender disparities.

Methodological Approach

Whereas quantitative research deals with statistical parameters and aims to achieve a representative and random sample, qualitative research relies on a very different set of assumptions. The objective is not to test standardized hypotheses but rather to reconstruct typical cases by identifying contrasting and common issues among varied experiences and perceptions. This approach is possible only if there actually are contrasting cases in the sample; therefore, the composition of an appropriate sample according to observable attributes is of paramount importance. While statistical representativeness plays no role in a qualitative research design, the sample must exhibit the appropriate contrasts.

It is also necessary to use an *empirically appropriate method* (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The qualitative research approach to understanding social environments is usually quite distinct from quantitative research; as a result, the two approaches also differ in what constitutes an empirically appropriate method. Qualitative research, rather than relying on established and preformed role models, values, and norms, stresses the idea that social reality is created by the actions and reciprocal interactions of individuals, as well as by interpretation of these interactions. Social order is therefore not inherent but rather constantly built and rebuilt by the interpretations of interactive persons. Blumer (1973) called this paradigm *symbolic interactionism*.

Based on the theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism, the qualitative tool developed and launched for the *Perceptions of Precariousness* report combines elements of *biographical research* and *focus group discussions* for the purpose of *reconstructive research* (Bohnsack 2014). One central assumption of biographical research is that the actions and decisions of individuals can be scientifically understood only when viewed within the context of their life course and social context. The researcher must therefore create a survey situation that enables people to explain what is most important to them-rather than to the interviewer. The researcher must also consider an appropriate evaluation strategy.

Unlike *content analysis*, which seeks to analyze and systematically interpret what has been said explicitly during an interview or focus group discussion, *reconstructive research* not only identifies what has been said but also *why* and *how* it was said. Biographic narratives are seen as signifying more than a simple stringing together of actions and events. Instead, a distinction is made between the real chronological order of events and actions in a person's life and the meaning of those events and actions to the person; this leads to

shifting the prioritization of their life experiences. In other words, a distinction is made between *lived lifetimes* and *narrated lifetimes* (Rosenthal 2002). Biographical research usually assumes that the distinction begins with an adolescent's *secondary socialization*, that is, the period of learning what is appropriate behavior outside the home, which follows a child's *primary socialization*, mainly influenced by immediate family and close friends (Tillmann 1989).

The use of focus group discussions is among the most prominent qualitative social research methods, with a long tradition dating back to the 1930s. The first discussions were developed in the United States by Kurt Lewin and his students, based on assumptions borrowed from quantitative research.

Purely qualitative focus group discussions, like those used here, originated in Germany. Their development was deeply influenced by the work of Friedrich Pollock (1955) and Werner Mangold (1973). Important contributions include Bohnsack's (2014) refinement of the methodological approach of Mangold (1973) through the use of focus group discussions as a method to determine the *collective consensus* of a group, the premise being that they offer insights into both *individual opinions* and *collective knowledge* that are uncovered during the focus group discussion.

In this way, focus group discussions are an ideal approach to analyzing the values and standards of certain groups and comparing them with a society's common values and standards. A *group* in social research is defined by common features or interests. These common features or interests do not necessarily lead all member of the group to pursue the same actions, but they help the research to develop a deep understanding of why persons in the group are behaving in a particular way. In other words, the common features or interests create a sense of community-and not only in closed groups in which members know one another well or meet regularly.[1]

Implementation

The Mongolia Center for Development Studies (MCDS), a professional survey research firm, prepared, implemented, and documented 22 distinct focus group discussions for this study, each with a minimum of six and a maximum of nine participants. For each discussion, there was a moderator to lead it and a secretary to assist the moderator and to record comments word for word (electronic recordings were also made). The role of the moderator is to guide the discussion while disturbing it as little as possible (Weimann-Sandig 2014).[2] Data quality was the top priority before, during, and after the fieldwork.

The survey research firm was provided survey instruments for every focus group discussion, including: (i) detailed thematic guidelines to lead the discussion; (ii) a one-page form on which the moderator and secretary could summarize their perspectives of the discussion; and (iii) a one-page questionnaire for participants, mainly to gather basic sociodemographic information. All material gathered at a focus group discussion was fully transcribed immediately following the session, before being translated into English and systematically coded using MAXQDA software.

Moderators and secretaries attended a one-day training workshop prior to the focus group discussions with the following key objectives: (i) reach a common understanding of the expectations of a focus group discussion; (ii) provide a detailed explanation of the roles of the moderator and secretary; (iii) discuss how to encourage participants to speak out openly; and (iv) provide detailed instruction on how to acquire participants, guide discussions, and prepare transcripts and other materials.

MCDS also prepared the *Field Survey Guidance Manual*, which was used during the training session and the

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1. Mangold (1973) and Weimann-Sandig (2014) show that even strangers can identify with each other as long as they are members of the same group and group-specific topics are discussed.

2. Focus group discussions differ from group interviews, which involve bilateral questioning and answering; the discussions involve a moderator who stimulates discussion but avoids influencing participants as much as possible.

subsequent fieldwork. Most focus group discussions lasted between two and three hours. Thirteen were conducted in Ulaanbaatar. Nine took place in *aimags* (provinces other than Ulaanbaatar); of these, seven took place in *aimag* centers (provincial capitals) and two in *soum* centers (county seats). The 13 sessions in Ulaanbaatar were spread out over the city's four different districts (Sukhbaatar, Bayangol, Songinokhairkhan, and Nalaikh); those in the *aimag* centers and *soum* centers occurred in three different *aimags* (Khovd, Dornod, and Dundgobi). The districts and *aimags* were selected for their varying socioeconomic and regional characteristics. For example, the three selected *aimags* represent Mongolia's three main regions.

Based on a few exploratory biographical interviews and some expert interviews conducted by experienced qualitative researchers before the focus group discussions, it was determined that the composition of the focus groups should vary depending on six attributes: (i) gender, (ii) age, (iii) educational background, (iv) employment status, (v) marital status, and (vi) locality. Additional restrictions were placed on some discussions, such as limiting participation to business owners or human resource professionals of small or medium enterprises, the disabled, or individuals who had experienced internal migration. The precise composition of the 22 focus group discussions, in terms of the participants' observable characteristics, is provided in table 1.

Illustrative examples

At the outset, our hypothesis was that the decisions Mongolian women make over the course of their lifetimes are influenced by individual actions as well as by cultural, social, and political circumstances. To explore this idea, elements of biographical research were added to the focus group discussions. Ultimately, the combination of focus group discussions and biographical research was successful because both share one thing in common: treating individual narratives as key to understanding the social world (Przyborski 2004).

The following excerpt from a biographical interview with a Mongolian woman in her mid-30s illustrates how emphasizing individual narratives and distinguishing between narrated and lived lifetimes can offer deep insight into a person's life:

After finishing secondary school, I decided to go to university and study English at [a university]. I wanted to become an English teacher. Everything that had to do with the western world and Europe fascinated me because in my childhood, the Soviet and socialist paradigm had dominated everything. I was raised during the transition from a socialist country to a democratic country, so we had no contacts with other countries except Russia and China. So I chose to learn the English language because it was a key: I would be able to communicate with the other world and would have access to information about the other world, and that is the reason why I chose English; another reason was that I wanted to travel abroad. Well, and I have to say that at this time the quality of English teaching at [the university] was not too good and also the quality of the teachers differed a lot. Okay, I understand that success depends on personal behavior, but university was not as enjoyable and interesting as I had imagined. So, in fact, I didn´t end up working as an English teacher. From the present perspective, I should have done better because as a teacher I would have left Mongolia. But I didn´t work as an English teacher. I started my career [...] and then I passed the civil service exam [in the mid-2000s] and I was offered a job at [a ministry]. [...] I started working for [an office at the ministry] and came into contact with people from countries like Korea, Japan, and China. I really liked the work there because I got a good impression of Mongolian development. I worked there for three years [...]. After three years of work, the elections came, and in accordance with tradition, the whole staff within the ministries was changed. So I lost my job in [the late 2000s]. Fortunately, I got hired [by an NGO]. While I was working there, I organized [a big meeting]. But my NGO salary was not enough so I had to change my job. I applied for a job in the mining industry. In that time, in [the late 2000s] mining was a booming industry

Table 1. Composition of focus groups

Group	Gender	Age range	Education	Employment status	Marital status	Locality	Other
1	Female	20–30	Tertiary	Mixed	Mixed	Sukhbaatar district	–
2	Female	20–30	Tertiary	Mixed	Mixed	Khovd *aimag*	–
3	Male	20–30	Tertiary	Mixed	Mixed	Sukhbaatar dirstrict	–
4	Male	20–30	Tertiary	Mixed	Mixed	Dornod *aimag*	–
5	Female	30–50	Secondary (minimum)	Inactive	Mixed	Bayangol district	–
6	Female	30–50	Secondary (minimum)	Inactive	Mixed	Dundgobi *aimag*	–
7	Female	30–50	Mixed	Unemployed	Mixed	Songino–khairkhan district	–
8	Female	30–50	Mixed	Unemployed	Mixed	Nalaikh district	Beneficiary of training program or other active labor–market policy
9	Female	30–50	Mixed	Unemployed	Mixed	Dornod *aimag*	–
10	Male	30–50	Mixed	Unemployed, spouse employed	Mixed	Nalaikh district	–
11	Male	30–50	Mixed	Unemployed, spouse employed	Mixed	Khovd *aimag*	–
12	Female	30–50	Mixed	Employed	Single mother	Nalaikh district	–
13	Female	30–50	Mixed	Employed	Single mother	Dundgobi *aimag*	–
14	Female	30–50	Mixed	Inactive	Single mother	Bayangol district	–
15	Female	30–50	Mixed	Inactive	Single mother	Dornod *aimag*	–
16	Female	20–50	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Songino–khairkhan district	Disabled
17	Female	50–60	Mixed	Inactive	Mixed	Bayangol district	–
18	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Manager	Mixed	Sukhbaatar district	From small or medium enterprise
19	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Manager	Mixed	Songino–khairkhan district	From large firm
20	Female	Mixed	Mixed	Herder	Mixed	Khovd *aimag* (Erdeneburen *soum*)	–
21	Female	Mixed	Mixed	Herder	Mixed	Dundgobi *aimag* (Erdenedalai *soum*)	–
22	Female	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Songino–khairkhan district	Internal migrant

in Mongolia. So I chose to work for [a private company in the mining sector]. I worked there and then after a while my workload was very high […] and my bosses really set me under pressure so I had a breakdown. I had to go to hospital and then they fired me.

In the biographical interview, the woman describes her life from her present perspective, which is marked by grief. She is critical of her past behavior, such as her performance in college, and her past decisions, especially not becoming an English teacher and leaving Mongolia. She sees her motives for studying English as being related to her social circumstances: the socialist period meant reduced rights and fewer possibilities; learning English was synonymous with striving for western standards and the western way of life.

The biographical interviews and focus group discussions demonstrate that the entire career of a Mongolian woman is highly influenced by *biographical disruptions*—stages of life when an individual takes time to pause and reflect on her life and decide if she wants to continue on her path or make an immediate change (Schoyerer and Weimann-Sandig 2015). Decisions often depend on social networks and the availability of political and economic resources, according to our focus group discussion participants. For example, many Mongolian women drop out of the labor market owing to social practices and mindsets and because of their employer's attitude toward working mothers. Following are examples of two unemployed women, aged between 30 and 50, discussing the balance between work and family life:

> I started work in the dumpling making industry while my children went to kindergarten. […] I thought I could work there because I had chances to take children to kindergarten at 8:00 a.m. and would be able to pick up them at 5:30 p.m. during working hours. However, I worked with a team, and I couldn't leave the team to do the work in order to pick up children. Other members of the team would be angry and say "Are you the only one who has children?" Thus, I didn't have

any possibilities to work there due to me having two young children. So I worked at the job for six days. I don't have any chance to work constantly, and I can only do part-time jobs. – Participant 7.7

> Most young unemployed women have young children. Because the companies don't permit them to take leave, their husbands get annoyed with them and complain that they don't pay enough attention to the family. Consequently, they prefer part-time jobs—but there aren't sufficient part-time jobs. – Participant 7.1

Lessons Learned

Methodologically, the main lesson learned is how to successfully combine elements of biographical research and focus group discussions to answer the research questions posed at the outset of the investigation. Criticism of approaches that integrate biographical elements into qualitative studies is often focused on the argument that stimulating self-generated biographical narratives without unduly influencing or disturbing the discussants in a concrete interview situation or discussion is very difficult because, in many cases, biographical research is relatively foreign to interviewers and interviewees, and it is never clear, *a priori*, clear if an interviewee is willing to tell their entire life story. According to this view, interviewees associate qualitative research with a kind of question-and-answer game and are insecure about the type of narrative expected of them.

Given these concerns, extraordinary diligence was devoted to our sampling of discussants and interviewees for fieldwork in Mongolia. Not every person is likely to narrate freely, because doing so requires communication and social skills (Spöhring 1989). Our fieldwork reveals that a combination of open questions and narrative stimuli substantially affects the willingness of a focus group participant to offer deep insights from their individual biographies. We therefore began every focus group discussion with an ice-breaking

question worded in a very open way that did not directly relate to the topic at hand from the participants' point of view. An example:

> Each one of us has an idea for our life. Can you tell us what your ideal life plans were like when you were a teenager or young adult-something about your dreams, plans, and wishes in terms of your professional and private affairs, as well as what influenced them?

These ice-breaking exercises liberated participants from chronological narratives, allowing them to concentrate on their own prioritization of events. A connection was made between life plans and the important biographical phase of being a teenager or young adult because of the relevance of that phase for every focus group discussion participant. Most of the women who had grown up in the socialist period recalled their lives mostly in relation to those political and social circumstances, but many younger women narrated the stories of their lives in relation to a political and economic system under transition.

Another crucial lesson learned is that the qualitative approach was successful because it was a complement and not a substitute for quantitative research on Mongolia's labor market. For the most part, this quantitative research has relied on labor-force survey data to document gender disparities in the labor market, including educational attainment, field of study, labor-force participation, unemployment, average earnings, and occupation- and sector-based segregation. In other countries without a recent or high-quality labor-force survey, some of the relevant quantitative information could potentially be collected from a measurement of living standards or other household survey.

Conclusions

Our methodological approach aimed to show the advantages of combining elements of biographical research with focus group discussions in the context of reconstructive research. Reconstructing the social world through biographical research means reconstructing people's lives, because people's actions and interactions are what create the social world in the first place. Reconstruction also fosters a general understanding of social norms and values. Combining biographical research and focus group discussions was possible because both are based on the same theoretical foundations (symbolic interactionism) and the same narrative methodology.

The synergy thus obtained enabled us, in the case of Mongolia, to gain knowledge on the constraints underlying gender disparities in access to economic opportunity, earnings, and productivity and to launch a qualitative tool that can contribute to filling similar knowledge gaps in other contexts.

Eliciting narratives through qualitative research is a complex task that requires an experienced research team and a general openness toward appropriate research design and process. Unlike structured interviews, this approach does not rely on detailed survey instruments for individual interviewees. Instead, only thematic guidelines are available, which need to be as open and flexible as possible to capture the participants' narratives. It is therefore necessary that the interviewers have sufficient expertise on the topic under study and that the research designers have sufficient expertise in selecting participants for focus group discussions and moderators who will be able to lead focus group discussions without imposing preconceived notions. Once successfully implemented, this combination of qualitative methods can serve as a positive example of the central premises of qualitative research: openness, engagement with different spheres of society (legal, economic, familial, etc.), and impartiality of the researcher (Lamnek 2016).

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