

The digital divide and is it holding back women in India?

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Despite rapid advancements in internet access in India, particularly via mobile internet use, which has nearly doubled from 2018-2020, the digital divide between Indian men and women remains stark. National Family Health Survey-5 data [from 2019-2021] assessed men's and women's internet use for the first time and found that only one in three women in India (33%) have ever used the internet, compared to more than half (57%) of men.

Rural India faces an even more pronounced digital divide, with men being about twice as likely as women to have used the internet (49% vs 25%). While we see the variation in the digital divide by state/Union Territory (UT), there is no single state/UT across India in which more women than men have used the internet. Given the important role of internet access for information access and social participation, this digital divide will further compromise the equal opportunity for women and girls in India if not addressed fully and immediately.

Source: NFHS-5 factsheets

Increasing internet use expands opportunities for hybrid and remote work, financial transactions, education, and video calls, all of which have become increasingly important in the face of Covid-19, but pervasive gender gaps inhibit women's ability to realise these opportunities. We continue to see the digital divide as a barrier to financial inclusion, education, access to information, and social connection for women and girls. Equality in digital and financial inclusion is an essential component of empowering women to realize their full potential, as recognised by the Government of India through initiatives such as Digital India's National Broadband Mission and Direct Benefit Transfer. This policy focus requires sustained data inputs to understand where access and inclusion are improving, and where gaps remain. The expanded range of questions on digital connectivity included in the 2019-21 National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 offers an important opportunity to track these changes at more granular levels, but they also highlight where women are lagging in participation.

Women's mobile phone access, which remains higher than their internet access, offers an entry to digital access as smartphones increase in availability and use. Globally and particularly in lower-resourced groups, internet access is largely increasing through smartphones. NFHS-5 data reveal that about half of women in India (54%) have access to a mobile phone, an increase of 8 percentage points since 2015-16. Unfortunately, subnational disparities remain stark. Where more than 85% of women in Goa, Sikkim, and Kerala had mobile phone access, less than 50% of women in Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh reported phone access. Women's mobile phone ownership has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, and as with the global data, that growth is concentrated in smartphone ownership and thus internet access

Corresponding to this growth in mobile phone access is investments in women's financial access, including via digital banking. Mobile money transactions are an important means of offering flexibility and access for financial transactions, but as of 2017, fewer than 1% of women in India had mobile money accounts. The NFHS-5 is the first to collect data on mobile money transactions, and it will offer important insights upon the release of data. Ongoing tracking of digital connection and mobile money transactions among women can facilitate our understanding of whether and how technology can galvanize women's economic empowerment. This approach without question needs to be expanded for analysis of adolescents to track educational opportunities as well, considering increased remote learning

While the elimination of the digital divide must be a priority in the nation's efforts to increase internet access, these efforts must also consider the unique or disproportionate vulnerabilities women and girls may face from the internet. Growing evidence documents that digital engagement can breed harm for women and girls, including cyber-abuses and mental health concerns from social media. A recent analysis of Twitter data from India demonstrates that online misogyny in social media platforms exists and is increasing under Covid, and such findings are unlikely unique to this particular social media platform. Data from India indicate an increase in cyber-stalking and other forms of cyber-sexual harassment, with adolescent and young adult females facing the brunt of these abuses. Online education due to the requirements of remote learning during the pandemic may be exacerbating these abuses. While laws are forming to support social protection, these are lagging internet capacities and uses.

National-level improvements in internet use, mobile phone access, and financial access are important, but highlight ongoing inequalities in women's access to digital technology, how the divide may compromise women's economic opportunity, and how improved digital access and policies should consider gender and safety. The Government of India has made a clear commitment to expanding digital access and infrastructure across India through its Digital India programme, with the acceleration of this access bolstered by industry giants such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon. Data such as that provided by NFHS offer important information in terms of our progress on these issues but are also important to check that approaches undertaken do not reinforce patriarchal norms and structures that harm or reinforce inequities but eliminate them.

(Lotus McDougal, Anita Raj, and Abhishek Singh, on behalf of the GENDER Project)