

ADDRESSING THE GENDER DIVIDE TO HELP WOMEN BENEFIT FROM DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES



While greater access to digital services has opened up many opportunities for gaining knowledge, accessing services and enhancing employability, women are yet to equally benefit from these. Based on BAIF's work on promoting digital services with rural communities, Rajashree Joshi and Santarpana Choudhury illustrate and underline the importance of designing digital interventions keeping in view the gender digital divide.

CONTEXT

India's digital landscape is undergoing a rapid transformation. With a proliferation in the number of Internet Service Providers and the concomitant decrease in cost of services, coupled with a favorable policy environment, digital services have been on an upward trajectory. However, the digital divide remains an area of concern as the rate of digital penetration in rural and tribal areas continues to lag behind that in urban areas.



"DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality." Is the theme for 2023 International Women's Day celebrated on 8th March

GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

This digital divide is also gendered as women are less likely than their male counterparts to own a mobile device and even less likely to use internet services. Though women have had improved mobile ownership in terms of access and internet services over the years, men have an upper hand irrespective of rural or

urban India (OXFAM India 2022; Carboni et al. 2021; NFHS 2019-2021). For instance, the GSMA survey 2021 reported that in India, men had the highest mobile ownership (79%) and internet service utility (45%) compared to women (67% and 30%, respectively) (Carboni et al. 2021). Similarly, the National Family Health Survey 2019-2021 reported the improved status of mobile ownership by women from 45.9% to 54% since 2016-17. It also highlighted the urban-rural gender digital divide indicating that urban men (72.5%) and women (51.8%) had the highest internet service utility compared to rural men (48.7%) and women (24.6%). Though gender inequality is observed in this urban-rural digital divide, it is the rural women who evidently had limited digital access and internet service utility.

The digital divide is among the many obstacles faced by women in their everyday lives that inhibit their capabilities. These obstacles can be at the individual, familial or larger socio-cultural level. Among the widely acknowledged challenges are the preference for a son, fewer educational opportunities, poor nutrition and social taboos that have been frequently written about. In addition, there are biases and stereotypes against women that do not allow them to take up certain jobs or perform certain activities. For instance, women are assumed to be inept at operating machinery or using digital technology. The latter coupled with lower literacy levels allows this digital divide to persist.



In the recent past, Indian agriculture has shown a trend towards feminization. As agriculture grows less remunerative, more men migrate out in search of work, while women stay behind to take care of agriculture. However, women are seldom recognized as farmers. Their contribution in agriculture tends to get sidelined and they are perceived as performing supporting roles in agriculture. Therefore, any kind of digital intervention for agriculture is targeted towards men in agriculture. This is corroborated by findings from a project (see Box 1) implemented by BAIF Development Research Foundation (BAIF) www.baif.org.in and Borlaug Institute for South Asia (BISA) across three states of India.

Box 1: Reaching women with weather-based agro-advisories

The project interventions included the dissemination of weather-based agro-advisories over mobile phones for building resilience to climate change. In some of the locations, when women participants were asked for their phone numbers, they could only provide their husband's or children's phone numbers. This made it difficult for the project implementation team to accurately target the recipients of agro-advisories, since the men and children were often found to be residing in urban areas nearby. Hence, there was scant or no impact of the advisories on these smallholder women farmers' vulnerability to the effects of climate change.

Though an unprecedented expansion in digital infrastructure across the country has led to connecting hitherto unconnected parts of the country with urban areas, certain lacunae exist in tribal areas, and several villages still remain at the periphery of this web of connectivity. Some of the major challenges limiting connectivity are the nonavailability of fiber optic cables, supply side constraints like the reluctance of Internet Service Providers to enter rural areas due to low average revenue per unit (ARPU), lack of digital awareness limiting demand, intermittent availability of electricity, etc. Moreover, tribal populations face multiple layers of deprivation whose overlapping nature compounds their adversities: poor status of health and nutrition, particularly among women; few opportunities for educational attainment; and meager earnings from limited sources of livelihood that confine them to a vicious cycle of poverty.

**eDost**

Responding to the need for digital services in remote tribal villages and the potential for building the capacities of young women to earn their own livelihoods, the 'eDost' program was created. The program was jointly implemented by BAIF and Association for Progressive Communications (APC). eDost is a cadre

of trained young women who are equipped by BAIF Development Research Foundation with knowledge, hardware and attitude to provide last-mile digital and financial services at the doorstep of tribal households (Ramaprasad and Pooja, 2020; APC 2021). This allows the young women to be partially employed and earn an income, while still being engaged on their farms. The eDost program bears testimony to how digital technology can be harnessed to earn livelihoods in remote, unconnected areas (see Box 2).

Box 2: Impact of eDost

This program was started with a few eDosts in tribal regions of Palghar district in Maharashtra. Today it has spread across tribal regions in the three more states namely Maharashtra, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh covering nearly 150+ villages, being served by 150 eDosts. With training, the women learnt to operate mobile phones and the internet. This enabled them to provide cash withdrawal, money transfer, mobile and DTH recharge and bill payment services in their respective areas. With growing demand from the community, eDost has started providing more services for Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, Job cards, printing and lamination services and ticket booking.

The community thus saves money, time and effort due to reduced frequency of travel to the nearest town to access these services. There are now more than 200 young women providing Aadhaar-enabled payment services in five different locations in Maharashtra. This has aided in providing access to a variety of services as developed by the Government for those in need.

A survey conducted by BAIF in 2021 studied the outcomes of the program with over 50 participants. It emerged that an eDost earns an income ranging between Rs 3000 and Rs 6000 per month. This income proved indispensable, as it was found that almost 30% of the eDosts had family members who had lost their means of livelihood during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, 57% of the respondents indicated that their family income was less than what it had been before the pandemic. Further, the program has greater intangible social impacts. The women feel a sense of dignity, earn respect within the family and community, and are empowered from their newly acquired financial autonomy. This trained cadre of women can also be used to raise awareness as they are the last mile service providers, as was demonstrated during the pandemic.



END NOTE

The eDost program clearly illustrates how empowering women can generate benefits for not only themselves and their families, but also the community. It is a perfect case in point of how women can quickly adapt to new challenges, even in unfamiliar domains like digital technology, when provided with an enabling environment.

The two cases cited go to show that simply providing means to access digital technology is not a sufficient condition for women's empowerment. It is equally critical to address the gender divide. Thus, digital interventions should be designed appropriately for gender equality and empowerment of women.

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