Digital Divide and Risked Communities: A Case Study of the Vulnerabilities of Women In India during the Pandemic

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Abstract

Digitalization is a revolution to change the face of the world. Countries across the globe have accepted this. India too was in her mission of digitalization by launching the flagship program "Digital India" on July 2, 2015.Though India had made a considerable stride in the process, there existed a digital divide in the country on various grounds. Gender was a prominent cause of digital divide in the country. But this became an acute issue during the pandemic when the gendered digital divide showed its ugly face and brought insurmountable issues to women accentuating their vulnerabilities and proving them as a risk community. The present paper aims at unveiling the sex disaggregated digital demography of India, the existing digital divide in the country. It tries to delve out the dynamics behind this gender based digital divide and the way it contributed to increasing vulnerabilities among women during the pandemic. The paper also provides some insight into preparing strategies to overcome this divide and make women digital pro and help them to create an enabling and empowering environment for them. In a nutshell, the paper aims at looking at the situations of digital divide and bringing solutions to them to make women a resilient community as against a risk group. The paper reflects the situation of India during the pandemic at its climax and is based on purely secondary data located and retrieved from articles, reports, blogs..
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Keywords: *Digitalization; digital divide; accessibility; risk society; vulnerability*

Introduction

The world today dwells amidst a state of knowledge revolution. This knowledge revolution has been spearheaded by a process of digitalization. Digitalization became the climax of media revolution sweeping the world in the period of globalisation. Digitalization refers to the adoption and use of digital technology for the production, processing and dissemination of information. This process became the "second wave of industrial revolution" which galvanized the world economy.The ancestry of the process of digitalisation is rooted in the advent of computing technologies and digital electronics. Today it has spread its tentacles to various facets of human life starting from media and communication to healthcare, from retailing and manufacturing to the system of governance. Innovations in e-communications, e-commerce and e-governance bear ample testimony of the rapid process of digitalisation. While technocrats are euphoric about the economic productivity and growth impacts of the process of digitalization, social scientist are vocal about its transformative impact. They look into the social deliverables like reducing risks, bringing equalization, empowerment and creating an enabling

environment for the social milieu. On the whole digitalization is conceived to be the greatest booster to the process of development. Against this backdrop, the present article reflects on

- India's venture and failure in the process of digitalization.
- The gender based digital divide and its cruel face manifested during the pandemic COVID19.
- The impact of gendered digital divide on accentuating women's sufferings and vulnerabilities and making them a risked community.

India launched its flagship programme "Digital India" on July 2, 2015. The basic motto of the programme was "Power to Empower" (DNA,2018). One of the main agendas of Digital India was to access to and get connected to rural areas by improving digital infrastructure. The government undertook the mega Bharat Net programme to provide highspeed broadband connections to all 2.5 lakh gram panchayats across India and to connect all households and individuals [15]. The Internet Democracy Project argues that in India the digitalisation revolution opens a new epoch for women's empowerment. The massive use of mobile phones makes it possible for women to develop new ideas of the self, to explore and exercise autonomy, choice, and agency. Even the report goes to the extent of submitting that digitalisation in India is a strong challenge against patriarchal regimes of control and surveillance. It is a path forward to women's empowerment.

However, the efficacy also depends on the availability of digital devices among the common citizenry and their accessibility and knowledge to their use. This availability, accessibility and usability became a big challenge among the common population during the pandemic. This led the UN to point out that digital divide is the new face of inequality surfaced in the world today.

Many parts of the world still miss out digital connectivity and cooperation. Contrary to its transformative effects, digital technologies have reinforced and exacerbated inequalities. It has created a whole group of excluded milieus, the so-called digitally impoverished ones. As per the UN records, almost half the world's population, 3.7 billion people, suffer from the digital deficit or are the digitally deprived ones. People from the developing world and more precisely the women are the worst sufferers of this digital divide [17].

On official records India is accredited as one of the largest users of internet services in the present world of digitalization. To be more precise, it is a country where about 600 million populations are enumerated as having access to digital services. It amounts to more than 12percent of all the internet users globally. But a recent Government data establishes that only 20 percent of Indians have knowledge on the use of digital services [11].

Gender Based Digital Divide

Within Asia-pacific region, India is found to have the widest gender gap in internet usage in recent years. Indian women encounter digital divide in access to, knowledge about and use of digital services. Data differ on the basis of agencies, but the commonality that all the reports land up at is that women are in the hind side of the use of digital devices and they have poor digital literacy. This gender gap emerges when only 15 percent of women access the internet services vis-à-vis 25 percent of men. Further, ownership issue of mobile phones grapple 15 percent of women in the country and 33 percent women hardly use mobile internet services as compared to men. In 2020, 25 percent of the total adult female population owned a smartphone as against 41 percent of adult men. [12]. A study, by Girl Effect and the Vodafone Foundation, found boys are 1.5 times more likely than girls to own a mobile phone and 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone. The gender based digital divide is accentuated and sustained through a triple foundation. They are the rural urban divide, income led divide and the intrahousehold gender stereotyping [4]. The fifth National Family Health Survey (NFHS) report of India also speaks about the huge digital divide encountered by India. As per the NFHS data only 42percent of Indian women surveyed have ever used the internet, compared with 62 percent of men. Further, women become doubly disadvantaged due to their dwelling sites. As per the NHFS data the percentage of internet use and use of mobile phones is slightly higher for the Indian city dwellers with 56 percent of women and 73 percent of men having access to these services. However, in rural areas the number drops from the average, with nearly 34 percent of women and 55 percent of men having ever used the internet [5]. The Mobile Gender Gap Report (2020) clearly mentions that 20% less women own mobile phones than men in India. 31% women in India possess brick or basic phones which do not have internet access. 14% of women in India do have smartphones. This situation took an ugly turn, became more prominent and came into public notice and popular concern only during the pandemic.

A very authentic policy report states that India herself bears half of the world's gendered digital divide. Only one third of its internet users are women [2].

The updated gender based digital divide figures is projected in Chart No. 1
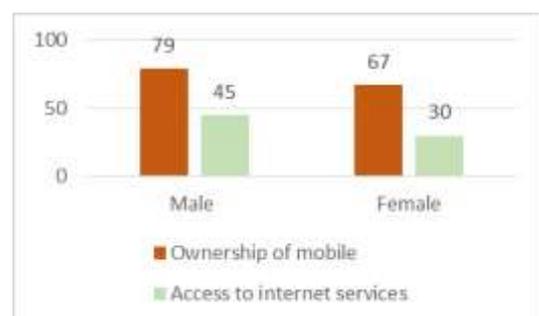
(Observer Research Foundation)

Why and How Women Became Risk Community in India during COVID 19?

COVID 19 coincided with the Beijing+25 years where the world had made substantial progress in empowering its women population by bringing considerable gender equality. It had an appeasing effect on the feminist groups and women's organisation who were dwelling with an impression that equality was tending to be a reality in terms of equal access to and control over resources by women and men [6]. Malhotra et al. (2002) and [7] note that empowerment of women in terms of obtaining resources (material, intellectual, human, or social), securing agency (sense of inner power, decision-making, bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, or reflection and analysis), and realizing achievements (outcomes such as basic needs) are some of the important indicators of such progress in terms of gender equality.

COVID 19 as a pandemic was pan global. It brought terror and a tremor to all and women became the worst prey of it. Particularly in a developing country like India, people in general and women in particular got heavily affected by the impact of the pandemic. As a precautionary measure to arrest the spread of the virus, the Government introduced lockdowns of varying severity and durations during the pandemic. As per the survey made by Dalberg in October and November,2020, 28 percent of women out of a working population of 24 percent lost their jobs and 43 percent of those could not recover to their paid work by November 2020. There was an unprecedented spike in the unpaid care work of women with a 47 percent increase in unpaid labour for women and a 41 percent increase in unpaid care work for women during COVID-19 [16]. A very fresh report of the Center for Sustainable Employment of Azim Premji University projects that during the first lockdown in 2020, 47 per cent of women lost their jobs compared to only 7 per cent of men. During the early days of the second wave, 80 per cent rural Indian women carried the burdens of job losses. UN Women data also shows that more girls than boys were left out of school during the pandemic in India. 65 per cent of parents surveyed were reluctant to continue the education of girls and preferred to resort to child marriages to save costs [18]. The disruption of food supply chains, labour shortages, limited production, and restricted mobility brought food insecurity to millions of women in the country. This exacerbated the undernourished and anaemic situation of women in India. According to the National Commission of Women data, India recorded a 2.5 times increase in domestic violence between the first phase of lock down which spanned between February and May 2020. Overall decrease in the complaints received during the months of lockdown in comparison to even the initial months of 2020 (Complaints received: January: 538, February: 523, March: 501, April: 377). The Whatsapp number launched by the NCW had a limited reach as only 38% of women in India own phones and fewer have an internet connection, making this platform inaccessible to majority of women in the country[1].

Dynamics of Gender based Digital Divide

Gender digital divide is rooted deeply in India's socio-cultural traditions. It reflects a major facet of gender discrimination faced by women and girls in India. It indicates the denial of digital space often thought to be public space to the girls and women. Normative structures decide technology use in the households. This sharpens the gender directed public private dichotomy. To give an example in the state of Uttar Pradesh, for instance, in the age group of 15-19 years, 70percent of young boys access the internet regularly as compared to 33percent of girls [13]. In the same vein, the patriarchal nature of purses, online violence against women and girls and language barriers or inability to comprehend online language were some of the strong reasons of digital divide. However, it remained an accepted and hidden understanding before the pandemic.

This divide took a further ugly turn during the pandemic. The culture of patriarchy, the gender divide and discriminations, lack of property rights and loss of income among the women in large measures deterred their access to use cell phones during the pandemic. Job losses among men limited their capacity to recharge the cell phones of the girls and women during the covid19 induced lock down situation. The limited availability was converted into zero availability in many homes. This was backed by two lines of thinking developed by the poor households. These were: the use of cell phones is an extravaganza for women and girls and it would distract them from their care responsibilities which had gone up in manifold levels with their husbands remaining at home with loss of jobs and children staying at home with the closure of schools and Anganwadi centers. This was directly related to the situational income poverty and gender role expectations of the male patriarchs. The second thought was directly related to the gender preferences of Indian households where boy's education, exposure and men's outer world connect is given prima facie significance. Further, the continuing stereotype that technology is a male monopoly and male competency got accentuated during the pandemic induced lockdown period and prevented many Indian girls and women to access and use internets.

A Saga in Digital Revolution:

There was a second forceful way of digital revolution during the pandemic in India. Covid-19 introduced new ways of health consultations, structural shift towards online shopping, cash transfer to accounts of the marginalised as social security benefit, and digital payments. All these brought gender handicaps and brought India's gendered digital divide to forefront. During the

pandemic the government was under extraordinary pressure. There was a sharp shortage of manpower to manage the health situation and the social benefit distribution which was the need of the hour. Both the state sector and the non-sector used Twitter and other social media platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp became the substitute for human intervention and the bridging bond between the vulnerable population and the service providers. Provisions were made for seeking help of all kinds like cooked food, grocery, oxygen, beds, medicines through the platform. Even the digital platforms were used for sensitisation, information sharing, conducting online classes.

Gender based Digital Divide and Its Accentuating Impact on Women's Vulnerability

At this point of time India's gendered digital use surfaced in a great way and it contributed to aggravate the vulnerabilities of girls and women showcasing the deeply imbedded gender discriminations. The 'Locked out: Emergency Report on School Education' made many startling revelations. It took adolescent girls of the country into its sample coverage and from their voices noted that adolescent girls felt that their access to information was heavily restricted due to the lack of their possession of cell phones. 71 percent girls admitted that affordability became a big issue for their exclusion from digital led sharing of benefits and services.

One of the major impacts of digital divide was noted on the learning of the girls. UNESCO estimates suggest that 89percent enrolled students are currently out of school because of school closures. Of the 1.54 billion children and youth, 743 million are girl students. Even before COVID-19, India had 30 million out-of-school children, of which 40percent were adolescent girls. This figure has proliferated during the pandemic. School closures placed 320 million students including 158 million girls at risk of dropping out from the system of education ensured through the right to education Act of 2009. For these girls online and digital learning was a dream. On the one hand, many interior pockets, mountain terrains and hinterlands witnessed connectivity issues and the male children were allowed to go up to the other places where digital connectivity was available and the girls were prevented from doing so. This was the voice of at least 80 percent of the tribal girl students and rural girls from schools to the universities where the authors are teaching. Prototype was the situation in the marginalised households of the urban pockets. Further, in many poor households the digital devices and data packs were made available only to the male children on a dedicated manner expressing gender biases in their worst forms. This resulted in an upward stride in the gender-based learning gaps. As per the reports of the World Bank and UNICEF, girls attending online classes has seen a huge fall. This is a

silent way of sideling the girls from the system of education. This is likely to create a risk future for the girls of the country and will sharply contradict goal 5 of the SDG.

Digital illiteracy and unavailability became a prime mover for women's entrepreneurship and S.H.G. participation during the period of the pandemic. As per the observations of the Nikore Associates and LEAD interviews women in the states of Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha suffered a lot as they were not familiar to connect to procurement centers and markets and were unable to make financial transactions online. At this point of time women could realise the depth to which digital illiteracy gave a set back to their income earning and productive capacity. This led to the furthering of financial exclusion among women in the country and had a negative impact on women's empowerment.

Gendered digital divide has also prevented women and girls from accessing government social security benefits. They were far away from getting the information which was flowing through digital media during the period of social distancing and lock down. They failed to register themselves on online portals for availing cash transfers and availing other government benefits. Even informing the local COVID centers for their tests, even booking COVID-19 vaccination slots were difficult for them. The government made it mandatory to register on the Co-WIN portal or the Aarogya Setu app for vaccination. The lack of access of women to digital devices and their ignorance on their use limited their capability to register themselves in the portals. This became a prime factor for gender divide in vaccination. Out of the 309 million COVID vaccines delivered since January 2021, only 143 million were given to women as compared to 167 million given to men [9]. Thus, digital divide not only proved to be miserable for women's health security, but was responsible for widening the gender gap.

Another cruel face of the digital divide manifested itself in the incapability of women to fight against violence at home. In India, the National Commission for Women noted a two-fold increase in reports of violence against women. Social isolation and mandatory home confinement with potential abusers and frustrated male partners increased the risk of domestic violence. There was a 131percent hike in domestic violence complaints in May 2020 in the districts that saw the strictest lockdown measures relative to other districts [8]. But, the women-protection NGO Jagori observed that calls to its helplines for women victims of violence fell by half during the national lockdown. This left many girls and women of the country physically and mentally insecure and exposed them to ruthless violence during this period.

Thus, gendered digital divide makes women a risked community. This was evidenced and felt during their handicaps due to the lack of their digital access and use during the recent pandemic. It aggravates their vulnerability. Remaining in the shadow regions of digitalisation, they have failed to obtain proper reproductive health advice, financial knowledge, and management which were undertaken on tele conferencing and conversing modes. This digital divide has become a powerful force to keep them aside from the system of education, employment market which has an immediate and long-term impact on their self-reliance. This is going to negate empowerment to this community. On the other hand, insecurities of myriad forms physical, social, emotional, food, health have grappled them due to this lack of digital access.

Bridging the Gendered Digital Divide: Some Forward Looking Strategies (Recommendations)

It is high time now to realise the need of creating digital space for women. A lesson learnt from the pandemic establishes that digital inclusion of women needs to be the fore ranking agenda of women's empowerment. The following strategies are needed on an immediate basis to bridge the gender gaps in the use of digitalisation and to break the existing gender based digital divide for a better future for women.

- Women's access to and control over digital resources need to be considered as a key area for reducing women's vulnerabilities and making them resilient. For this adequate digital literacy programmes need to be launched and digital education needs to be a part of the curriculum at every stage of education. Further, non-formal training for adult women in the use of digital devices is a requirement. Distribution of digital devices among poor households need to be a priority area for women's development. India's gender budget needs to make it a head of expenditure. At present, it is noted that the government has allocated some funds from its digital literacy program for rural areas in its gender budget. But the amount remains miniscule being only 0.00078 percent of the gender budget. It needs a revamp.
- There is an urgent need to share Knowledge- and information in the local language on the use of technology and use of e-gadgets. This will reduce the phobia among girls and women for the use of digital devices.
- Local infrastructure needs to be strengthened to provide free/subsidized/cheap Wi-Fi access to poor households which will reduce the financial considerations and will allow women and girls to use internet services.
- The institution of cyber clubs with women digital teaching and training agenda by CSRs,

and other civil society organisations can bring a revolution in bridging the existing gaps in digital use.
- The existing normative orders and the androgenic exclusivity and monopoly of the use of digital resources needs to be broken.

Conclusion

All these strategies put into action can break the digital divide and instead of making women vulnerable, it can make them resilient and instead of proving them as a risked community can prove them as an empowered community to face the forthcoming disasters and pandemics
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