

RURAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE AGE OF MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of mobile phones and social media platforms has created new pathways for economic, social, and political empowerment for rural women. Yet these opportunities are unevenly distributed gendered access gaps, connectivity costs, digital literacy deficits, social norms, and online safety concerns constrain benefits. This paper synthesizes recent empirical evidence and theory to assess how mobile social media can empower rural women across multiple domains livelihoods, entrepreneurship, social capital, health, and voice while identifying structural barriers and policy levers. Using global and India-specific data as focal points, the paper argues that mobile social media is a transformative but conditional enabler. Its potential is unlocked when technological access is complemented by affordable connectivity, targeted digital skills training, safety mechanisms, and gender-sensitive program design.

Keywords: Rural women, Mobile phones, social media, empowerment, livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones and social media have become integral to everyday life across the globe. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), inexpensive smartphones and low-cost data plans have accelerated online participation creating new possibilities for information access, market participation, collective action, and voice for populations previously excluded from digital public spheres. For rural women, who often face compounded socio-economic and mobility constraints, mobile social media can provide outlets for learning, business, social support, and political engagement. Yet emerging evidence also shows persistent gender gaps in mobile internet use and smart phone ownership these gaps limit the scale and equity of empowerment benefits and point to the need for targeted policies and interventions. This paper examines how mobile social media affects rural women's empowerment, what barriers remain, and which strategies can maximize inclusive outcomes.

Empowerment and Mobile Social Media

Empowerment is multidimensional. Commonly cited dimensions include economic social, political, psychological and decision-making power within households and communities. Mobile social media is a mobile internet access via smart phones combined with social networking, messaging, content-sharing and marketplace platforms e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube intersects these empowerment domains by changing access to information, social networks, markets, and platforms for self-expression.

Empowerment via mobile social media means measurable shifts across these dimensions that can reasonably be linked to mobile-mediated activities: increased business revenue from digital marketing, greater participation in local governance due to online awareness campaigns, improved health behavior following digital information exposure, or enhanced bargaining power from knowledge gained online.

The global and Indian context- access, adoption and gender gaps

The last decade witnessed a surge in mobile ownership and mobile internet adoption across LMICs, driven by cheaper smart phones and more affordable data. However, progress is uneven. The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap reports consistently find a persistent gender gap in mobile internet use across LMICs. In many contexts women remain less likely than men to own smart phones and to use mobile internet gaps that are wider in rural areas and among less-educated groups. India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) reveals stark rural urban differences in women's

individual mobile phone ownership and usage. While national averages have improved over time, only a minority of rural women reported that they personally use a mobile phone in several states urban women report substantially higher personal use. These gaps matter because they precondition who can benefit from mobile social media. Where mobile internet adoption is high and affordable, women have been observed to use social media for livelihoods, civic engagement, health information, and social support.

PATHWAYS- HOW MOBILE SOCIAL MEDIA CAN EMPOWER RURAL WOMEN

Below we list out the main channels through which mobile social media contribute to empowerment.

Economic empowerment-livelihoods and entrepreneurship

Mobile social media lowers barriers to market entry by enabling micro entrepreneurs to promote products, access customer feedback, and join marketplace networks without large investments in physical storefronts. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Marketplace, Instagram and short-form video apps ,YouTube platforms serve as low-cost marketing channels. Evidence from multiple country studies shows women using messaging groups for order-taking, product discovery, and supply-chain coordination. Targeted skills training photography, messaging, e-payments amplifies returns. Research focused on India finds social media especially useful for women entrepreneurs to reach customers beyond their village and to learn business practices through peer networks and video tutorials.

Knowledge and human capital- learning and health

Social media and video platforms host tutorials, health guidance, vocational training snippets, and peer-to-peer advice. Rural women consume content related to farming techniques, food processing, tailoring, child health tips, and government program information. Access to this knowledge can improve agricultural productivity, household nutrition, and health-seeking behavior key contributors to well-being and agency. Peer learning also reduces isolation and normalizes new practices.

Social capital and collective voice

Platforms facilitate network-building and mutual support. WhatsApp groups, interest-based Facebook groups, and local community channels help women coordinate savings groups, share market prices and mobilize for common causes. In contexts where public assembly or mobility is restricted, mobile group chats serve as a digital commons for solidarity and collective action. This fosters social capital and can translate into greater bargaining power within households and communities.

Civic engagement and voice

Social media amplifies women's voices campaigns against local injustices, awareness-raising about rights, and participation in political debates are increasingly mediated digitally.

Psychological empowerment

Access to information and supportive online communities contributes to self-confidence, aspirations, and perceptions of agency. Testimonials and success stories circulating on social media can help women imagine new possibilities and challenge restricting norms.

BARRIERS AND RISKS

Despite the clear pathways to empowerment, multiple structural, social, and technological barriers condition outcomes.

The mobile gender gap

A persistent gender gap in mobile internet use limits women's digital participation. GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap reports show that although mobile internet adoption has risen, women remain less likely than men to use mobile internet and to own smartphones trends especially pronounced in rural and low-income contexts. This gap is compounded by lower literacy, less disposable income, and restrictive social norms.

Affordability and connectivity

Data costs and poor network coverage are primary constraints. Even when women own or can use phones, affordability limits the frequency and quality of online engagement. Reports find that many women rely on intermittent access shared devices, limited top-ups, which undermines continuous business activities or participation in time-sensitive civic processes.

Digital literacy and content relevance

Low digital literacy including difficulty navigating apps, creating content, or conducting digital transactions reduces benefits. Content and platforms designed without local-language support or illiteracy-friendly interfaces further exclude many rural women.

Control of devices and time poverty

In many households, men may own or control smartphones. Women's access can be sporadic or supervised, restricting opportunities for business growth. Time poverty, balancing household chores and unpaid work leaves limited time for learning new digital skills or sustaining an online business.

Online safety and harassment

Women face online harassment, privacy risks, and potential reputational costs. Concerns about misuse of images, and the threat of harassment deter many women from active online participation..

Algorithmic and market biases

Platform algorithms and payment systems may privilege certain geographies, languages, or commercial profiles. Small women-led ventures may struggle to access platform visibility or digital payment ecosystems that favor larger vendors.

CONDITIONS THAT AMPLIFY IMPACT- PROGRAMS AND ENABLING FACTORS

The empowerment potential of mobile social media is realized when particular enabling conditions converge.

Affordable and reliable connectivity

Sufficient network coverage and low-cost data plans are foundational. Where connectivity is intermittent or expensive, mobile social media's benefits are curtailed.

Targeted digital skills Training

Short, hands-on, language-appropriate training on smart phone use, content creation, digital marketing, and e-payments boosts women's capacity to use platforms productively.

Gender-informed design and community outreach

Programs that recognize gendered constraints ,timing of training, child care provisions, have higher uptake.

Safe online spaces and grievance redressal

Platforms and local organizations must offer privacy, safety tools, and reporting mechanisms to reduce harassment and protect users.

Linkages to finance and supply chains

Digital payments, microcredit, and connections to e-commerce platforms help translate online visibility into sustainable income.

Local-language and low-literacy interfaces

Voice-based and image-based content can overcome literacy barriers.

Peer learning and role models

Showcasing successful local women entrepreneurs and creating peer support networks builds trust and inspiration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To expand the inclusive benefits of mobile social media for rural women, coordinated action is needed across government, the private sector and platforms.

Improve affordability and rural connectivity

- Subsidize last-mile connectivity and prioritize rural network upgrades.
- Incentivize affordable data plans targeted at low-income users and women-specific bundles with safety and training components.

Expand digital literacy and entrepreneurship training

- Fund localized, hands-on digital literacy programs that teach content creation, online safety, e-commerce, and digital payments.
- Integrate digital skills into existing women's SHG (self-help group) trainings and agricultural extension services to leverage trust networks.

Strengthen safety, privacy and grievance mechanisms

- Platforms should provide easier reporting, moderation, and privacy controls tailored for vulnerable users.

Create market linkages and finance pathways

- Promote e-marketplaces that highlight rural women entrepreneurs and offer logistics support.

CONCLUSION

Mobile social media presents transformative opportunities for rural women opening channels for livelihoods, knowledge, networks, civic voice, and psychological empowerment. However, these benefits are not automatic they require deliberate policy and program interventions addressing affordability, connectivity, literacy, safety, and market linkages. Closing the mobile gender gap and designing gender-sensitive digital ecosystems can not only improve women's agency and well-being but also contribute to broader economic growth and social inclusion. The digital era offers both a promise and a test to ensure the benefits of mobile social media are shared equitably, societies must act to remove structural barriers and to design digital interventions with women's realities at the center.

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