

## CONSTRAINTS OF MOBILE PHONE USAGE IN ADVANCING RURAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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### Abstract

Mobile phones have emerged as essential tools for bridging the digital divide and fostering socio-economic development across the globe. In India, where rural communities constitute a significant portion of the population, mobile connectivity holds the potential to transform the lives of rural women by enhancing access to information, financial inclusion, education, healthcare services, and participation in political and community decision-making. Despite this transformative potential, rural women often face multiple constraints that restrict their ability to fully benefit from mobile technology. Structural barriers such as inadequate network coverage, socio-cultural restrictions including patriarchal norms and gender-based discrimination limit mobile adoption and usage. Economic challenges, particularly affordability of devices and data, further exacerbate the digital gap. Additionally, low levels of digital literacy, safety concerns related to privacy and cyber security remain significant hurdles. Addressing these challenges requires an integrated approach that combines gender sensitive digital policies, affordable access schemes, community-driven digital literacy initiatives, and improved rural infrastructure. By addressing these constraints, mobile technology can become a transformative tool for rural women's empowerment in India.

**Keywords:** Mobile phones, rural women, Digital literacy, Gender equality, India.

### Introduction

The rapid proliferation of mobile technology has transformed communication and development opportunities globally. In India, mobile phones have penetrated even rural areas, providing the first point of digital access for many women. Empowerment of rural women defined as the ability to make decisions, access resources, and participate socially, economically, and politically remains a central development objective.

Mobile phones have the potential to support this empowerment by enabling access to health information, financial services, education, e-governance, and markets. Yet, studies indicate that women in rural India face significant barriers to fully utilizing mobile technology. Ownership and usage remain skewed due to gendered social norms, economic constraints, low literacy, poor infrastructure, and safety concerns.

This paper explores the constraints of mobile phone usage in advancing rural women's empowerment in India, relying exclusively on secondary sources. It addresses questions such as: Which barriers prevent rural women from fully benefiting from mobile technology? How do social, economic, and infrastructural factors intersect to limit empowerment? What strategies can policymakers, NGOs, and the private sector adopt to mitigate these constraints?

### Rural Women's Empowerment

Empowerment encompasses economic independence, social participation, decision-making authority, and access to information. For rural women, empowerment is closely tied to

- **Economic empowerment:** Participation in income-generating activities.
- **Social empowerment:** Freedom from restrictive gender norms.
- **Political empowerment:** Involvement in governance and community decisions.
- **Informational empowerment:** Access to relevant knowledge, services, and networks.

### Mobile Phones as Tools of Empowerment

Mobile phones facilitate empowerment by

- Delivering agricultural and market information to women farmers.
- Providing telemedicine and health awareness services.

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- Enabling financial inclusion through mobile banking and digital payments.
- Supporting distance learning and vocational training.
- Encouraging peer networks and self-help group communication.

### Gender Digital Divide

The gender digital divide refers to disparities in access, skills, and benefits from digital technologies. GSMA (2023) estimates that women in South Asia are 28% less likely to own a mobile phone and 58% less likely to use mobile internet, with **rural** women most affected due to literacy gaps, socio-cultural restrictions, and economic dependence. **Constraints of Mobile Phone Usage**

#### Socio-Cultural Barriers

- **Patriarchal norms:** Male family members often control device ownership and usage.
- **Cultural stigma:** Mobile usage by women is sometimes seen as immoral behavior.
- **Mobility restrictions:** Women confined to the household have fewer opportunities to learn about or access digital services.

#### Economic Constraints

- **Device affordability:** Smart phones remain costly for low-income households, with men prioritized for purchase and use.
- **Data and maintenance costs:** Even inexpensive data packs or device repairs pose financial challenges.

#### Educational and Digital Literacy Gaps

- **Low literacy:** Many women cannot read interfaces in English or major regional languages.
- **Limited digital skills:** Skills to navigate apps, mobile banking, or government portals are often lacking.
- **Fear of technology:** Hesitation to explore new features due to perceived risk or potential mistakes.

#### Infrastructure Challenges

- **Connectivity:** Poor or inconsistent network coverage limits online use.
- **Localized content gaps:** Essential applications are often not available in local dialects.

#### Privacy, Safety, and Security Issues

- **Harassment risk:** Women may face unwanted calls or messages, leading to restricted phone use.
- **Financial and online fraud:** Lack of awareness increases vulnerability to scams.
- **Shared devices:** Lack of privacy prevents use of sensitive services like mobile banking or health consultations.

#### Policy and Programmatic Limitations

- **Insufficient gender-focused programs:** Existing initiatives rarely target women specifically.
- **Awareness gaps:** Rural women may be unaware of e-governance and health services.
- **Fragmented interventions:** Pilot programs often fail to scale due to coordination or funding gaps.

While mobile phones provide potential for education, health, financial inclusion, and social networking, rural women's empowerment remains limited due to multi-layered barriers.

- **Access vs. autonomy:** Ownership does not guarantee independent use; patriarchal control and shared devices restrict agency.
- **Skills vs. usage:** Lack of digital literacy and fear of technology reduce meaningful use.

Effective interventions require synergistic strategies: affordable devices, literacy training, gender-sensitive campaigns, and improved rural digital infrastructure.

### Recommendations

1. Subsidized mobile devices and low-cost data plans targeting women.
2. Community-based digital literacy programs using local languages and culturally sensitive training.

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3. Safe and inclusive digital spaces to encourage private and secure use of mobile services.
4. Awareness campaigns addressing social norms and encouraging family support.
5. Robust rural infrastructure for reliable connectivity and charging facilities.
6. Integrated policies ensuring coordination between government, NGOs, and private sector.

### Conclusion

Mobile phones are powerful tools for rural women's empowerment, but structural, socio-cultural, economic, and technological constraints limit their effectiveness. Meaningful empowerment requires not only access to devices but also literacy, autonomy, cultural acceptance, and safe, reliable infrastructure. Targeted policies, community engagement, and gender-sensitive interventions can bridge these gaps, enabling rural women to harness the full potential of mobile technology for social, economic, and political empowerment.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I Acknowledge and thank the Management of Nallamuthu Gounder Mahalingam College, Pollachi for the receipt of funding seed money for this research work.

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