



Unlocking The Potential Of Digital Commerce For Women

Artisans In India

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ABSTRACT:

Indian women are 15 percent less likely to own a mobile phone, and 33 percent less likely to use mobile internet services than men. In 2020, 25 percent of the total adult female population owned a smartphone versus 41 percent of adult men. In comparison, Bangladesh's gender gap in mobile ownership stood at 24 percent and 41 percent in mobile usage. Pakistan's gender gaps were even higher at 34 percent for mobile ownership and 43 percent for mobile usage. Despite the mobile ownership gap reducing from 26 percent to 19 percent, and mobile internet use gap from 67 percent to 36 percent, between 2017 to 2020, South Asia continues to have the widest mobile gender gaps globally.

INTRODUCTION:

In response to these issues, BFA Global, with the support of Gates Foundation India, started working with Shilpgram in August 2021 to enable their transition to a digital platform for sales of traditional Indian handicrafts. Specifically, our pilot project is working to connect Shilpgram's women artisans with high-paying customers using digital platforms and tools. This includes a revamped brand identity and visual design to better communicate Shilpgram's core values and propositions. We are working with the team on a platform to sell directly to customers online, and using digital media tools like WhatsApp and Instagram to establish critical customer relationships. As well, we're finding

meaningful demand opportunities via influencer marketing, B2B resellers, and brand collaborations. At the same time, we are optimizing the supply value chain for all the stakeholders involved in the process – getting orders to satisfied customers more easily and efficiently – while streamlining the backend operations.

CHALLENGE:

This gendered digital divide is often born out of a triple disadvantage for women in India. First, there is a rural-urban digital divide, such that rural broadband penetration is only 29 percent against a national average of 51 percent. Across states, women in rural areas are less likely to own mobile phones, with this rural-urban divide

being the narrowest in Goa, Kerala, and Northeastern states, and the widest in West Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. Second, there is an income-based digital divide between households. Given the average price for data is US \$0.68/GB in India, our estimates show that each GB of data costs low-income households (earning less than US\$2/day) 3 percent of their monthly income versus 0.2 percent for middle-income households (earning US \$10–\$20 per day). Finally, intra-household discrimination prevents women from equitably accessing digital devices within the domestic sphere, which in turn widens the gender-based digital divide.

SOLUTION:

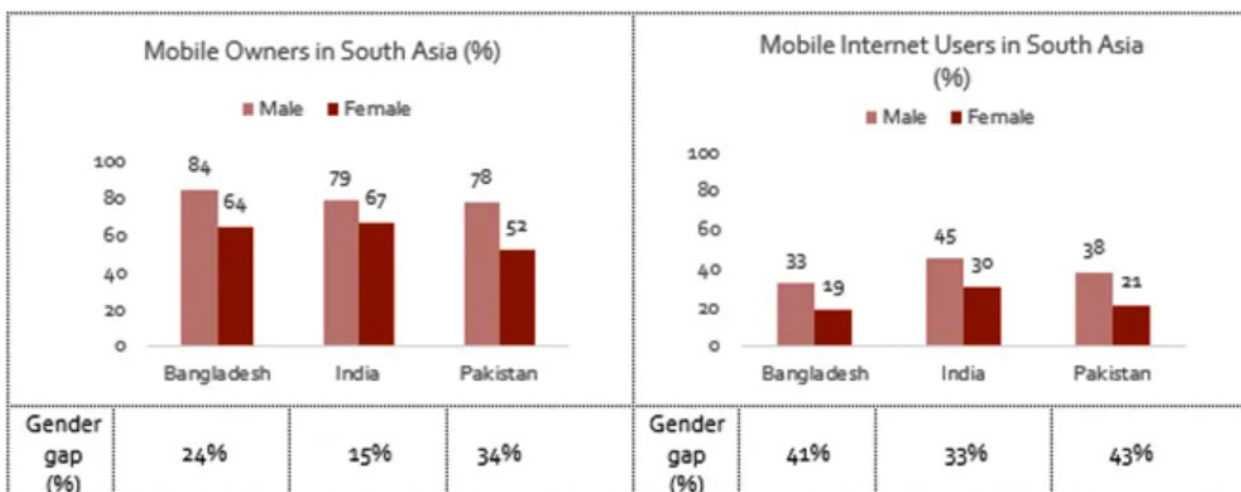
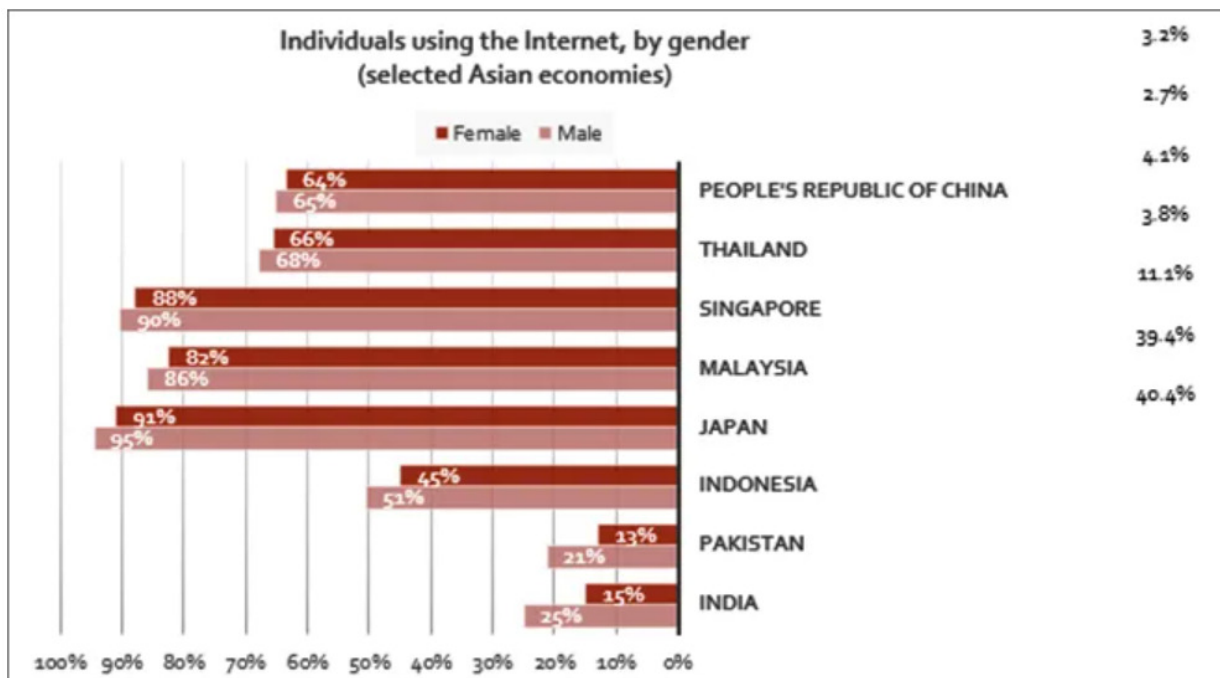
Even when they are permitted to own or use household-level mobile devices, women's online activity is often governed by male relatives. While mobile phones are viewed as a risk to women's reputation pre-marriage; post-marriage, phone-use is viewed as an interruption to caregiving responsibilities. Women generally refrain from speaking on their phones in public places, preferring to conduct their conversation within the home, owing to prevailing social norms and fear of judgement. In this social structure, women have found themselves excluded from the growing digital economy post COVID-19, especially when aspiring for online schooling, skill training,

entrepreneurship, and work opportunities.

Between March 2020 to February 2021, Indian schools were fully closed for 62 percent of instruction days, and partially for 38 percent. These school closures placed 320 million students including 158 million girls at risk of dropping out and reaching large learning gaps. During this period, nearly three-quarter of rural students, across government/private schools, received teaching material over WhatsApp, and nearly 1 in 10 parents purchased a smartphone for online learning. However, during consultations with our team at Nikore Associates, several stakeholders noted that families exhibited a preference for male family members during the COVID-19 period. They ensured their sons had the privilege of digital devices and data packs access even when facing income constraints, but did not extend the same treatment to their daughters. Digital illiteracy and unfamiliarity with digital platforms deterred women entrepreneurs from moving to online marketplaces post COVID-19. Stakeholder consultations by Nikore Associates found that despite their incomes being nearly wiped out due to cancellation of physical fairs and exhibitions during COVID-19, Jhuri-makers (bamboo artisans) in West Bengal were reluctant to move to online platforms due to limited knowledge of social media and digital marketing channels, combined with high data

costs. Women Self-Help Group (SHG) members across states like Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat shared that even though women in their community were

using phones for personal use, they were unable to make financial transactions online, and did not use phones for their businesses.



MATERIALS AND METHODS:

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in their lives and careers. They inspire passion and enthusiasm, take action to solve problems, and cope better with change and stress. Identify and evaluate specific situations quickly and to make more impactful decisions, with our Critical Thinking and Decision Making training.

CONCLUSION:

Programmes and initiatives across three action pillars should be prioritised:

1. Easing access to mobile devices, e.g.m by providing free mobiles/tablets to school-going girls, female health workers (including Accredited Social Health Activists, Anganwadi Workers, and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives), female teachers and female community leaders and the rural/urban poor; or offering affordable smartphone loans for women through corporate social responsibility and government schemes.
2. Digital literacy programmes for women and girls, including increasing public investment in the PM Gramin Digital SakshartaAbhiyan scheme from its current allocation of [INR 300 crores in FY2022](#), of which 40 percent is for women and girls;

launching tailored digital training courses for women entrepreneurs on digital marketing and digital payments; and integrating digital literacy in school curricula.

3. Investment in rural digital connectivity through the rapid implementation of the BharatNet programme to provide rural broadband connectivity and establishing village level high speed internet connectivity hubs.

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