BRIDGING THE GAP: UNDERSTANDING THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR UNION TERRITORY

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Digitalization is a crucial element in contemporary societies, playing a key role in achieving sustainable development goals and deeply embedding itself in our social, political, and economic lives. The versatile benefits of digital technology touch various aspects, empowering entrepreneurs, facilitating citizen engagement, aiding migrant remittances, improving accessibility to telemedicine, supporting flexible work arrangements, and enhancing educational experiences. However, the transformative potential of digitalization is not equally accessible, especially for women and girls facing barriers rooted in social, cultural norms, and gender stereotypes. Jammu and Kashmir, the northernmost union territory of India, grapples with a literacy rate of 67.16%, notably lower than the national average of 77.7% (NFHS, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened challenges in the region exposing gaps in technology availability and proficiency, emphasizing the need for robust digital infrastructure. Unfortunately, ICT facilities in J&K are costly, limited, and unevenly distributed. Adding to these challenges is the pervasive gendered digital divide, hindering girls in the UT of J&K from fully embracing digital technologies. This research paper aims to scrutinize digital device accessibility, assess the gender gap in device usage among women in the UT of J&K, and explore challenges faced by women in adopting digital technology. The study also seeks to highlight digital initiatives by the federal government, state governments, and the Government of J&K to address the gender digital gap. Additionally, it strives to provide practical recommendations for bridging this gap and promoting digital inclusivity in the UT of J&K.

Keywords: Digitalization, ICT Infrastructures, Gender Digital Divide, Digital technology.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, technology has emerged as a hallmark of societal transformation, with profound advancements witnessed in the digital landscape. This digital revolution has permeated every facet of life, becoming an integral component that shapes the experiences of individuals. Digital technology and platforms play a pivotal role in facilitating various aspects of daily life, from education to business, financial matters, politics, and beyond. The proliferation of digital technologies has not only made education more accessible but has also opened avenues for enhanced convenience and connectivity across diverse domains.

However, amidst the surge in digital technology utilization, a concerning issue has come to light, echoing pre-existing societal divisions. This issue, known as the "digital divide," encapsulates the disparity in opportunities for accessing and utilizing information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet across different socio-economic levels, geographical areas, households, and businesses (OECD, 2018). The growth of digital platforms and technology has triggered heightened concerns about inequality in access and information distribution.

This concern is particularly pronounced in the context of Jammu and Kashmir, the northernmost union territory of India, where disparities in digital access have become intertwined with existing societal divisions. In this region, the digital divide mirrors and, in some instances, exacerbates socio-economic inequalities. The disparity is stark when considering the different rates of access to technological resources, favoring those who already had greater access (De, 2004; Van, 2006).

Despite the transformative potential of digital skills, a notable gender gap persists, hindering women and girls from fully harnessing the educational benefits of digital technologies. Despite a decade of concerted national and international efforts to bridge gender gaps in digital skills, these disparities continue to widen globally. This imbalance, termed the "gender digital divide," encompasses the inequalities between men and women in accessing ICTs. The lack of access to computers, the Internet, and mobile technology for girls and women in economically disadvantaged nations, including Jammu and Kashmir, remains a critical issue.

The consequences of this gender digital divide are far-reaching, negatively impacting women's confidence, social and economic standing, and opportunities for capacity-building. Women experience limitations in terms of education, employment, earning potential, and peer relationships due to this digital divide. Additionally, the gender digital gap can have adverse effects on the welfare and development of children, given reduced career opportunities and lower income levels for married women (UNICEF, 2017). Understanding and addressing the nuances of the digital gender divide in Jammu and Kashmir is essential for crafting effective policies and interventions to ensure digital inclusivity and empower women in the region.

GLOBAL GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE: A COMPREHENSIVE EXPLORATION

Ensuring equal access to information and communication technology (ICT) and implementing robust learning opportunities and strategic policies are essential for advancing women's empowerment in social, political, and economic realms. Globally, a persistent gender digital divide exists, with women's Internet usage trailing behind men by 12%. This divide stems from various challenges, including access barriers, educational gaps, technological literacy deficits, and entrenched gender biases and socio-cultural norms (OECD, 2018).

The potential benefits of providing extensive digital facilities to women and girls are significant, contributing to a projected USD 13 to 18 billion increase in the GDP of developing economies (Intel and Dalberg, 2012). Despite the recent increase in global Internet usage, with 69% of men and 63% of women accessing the Internet, a stark numerical gap persists, with 259 million more male Internet users. The consequences of excluding women from the digital sphere lead to a substantial $1 trillion loss in poor and developing countries, expected to escalate to $1.5 trillion by 2025 (UN Women's Gender Snapshot report, 2022).

Beyond economic impacts, over 50% of women globally have experienced digital violence, with 68% occurring on social networking sites. This hampers women's ability to express themselves freely online, emphasizing the urgent need for intervention and systemic change (UNICEF, 2023).

The Gender Digital Divide Index (GDDI) serves as

A crucial tool in tracking a nation's progress in reducing gender gaps in the digital sphere. This index evaluates components such as accessibility, pricing, Internet coverage, and enablers like national policies combating gender-based violence and supporting digital skill development for women and girls. The GDDI acts as a compass for nations navigating digital inclusivity, offering insights into challenges and opportunities to address the global gender digital divide. This comprehensive exploration reveals that bridging the digital gender gap is not just a technological imperative but a fundamental step toward fostering a more equitable and inclusive global society.

Table No. 1: Showing gender Digital Divide Index (GDDI-2022) of various countries

Enclosed as Annexure 01

SOURCE: Gender Digital Divide Index Report (2022)

GLOBAL GENDER DIGITAL DISPARITIES: A MULTI-NATIONAL ANALYSIS

The 2022 Gender Digital Divide Index (GDDI) study canvassed twenty nations with diverse income levels, unveiling the intricate tapestry of gendered technological access on a global scale. This examination shed light on both successes and challenges in the pursuit of gender inclusivity in the digital sphere across continents.

Prominently, South Africa secured the fifth position in Sub-Saharan Africa, while Chile claimed the third spot representing Latin America. In the Asian landscape, Singapore secured the second position, and Sweden topped the rankings for Europe, with the United States securing the fourth position in North America. India, with its burgeoning technological landscape, secured the sixth position. Metrics such as affordable and widely available Internet, initiatives fostering women's STEM education, and reduced gender disparity in the use of digital payment systems stood out as commendable achievements across the studied countries.

However, amidst these successes, a nuanced narrative exists. Challenges persist in certain dimensions of the digital gender gap, necessitating a holistic understanding for targeted interventions that transcend geographic and economic boundaries. While progress is evident in metrics related to internet accessibility and digital education

Initiatives, the nuanced nature of this challenge calls for a continuous and dynamic approach, adapting strategies to the evolving technological landscape.

As we navigate the digital era, fostering gender inclusivity in the digital realm is not solely a matter of technological advancement but a fundamental component of global progress. Lessons from the diverse experiences of these nations offer valuable insights for policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders working towards a more equitable digital future. In the contemporary landscape, digital literacy stands as a cornerstone skill set that transcends age, profession, and societal roles. With the world becoming increasingly interconnected and reliant on technology, the significance of digital literacy cannot be overstated. Key facets include access to information and opportunities, professional relevance and employability, effective communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving, cyber-security and digital safety, lifelong learning and adaptability, global connectivity, cultural understanding, and empowerment and inclusivity.

NATIONAL GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IN INDIA: A COMPLEX TALE OF INEQUALITIES

India, boasting the highest number of women globally at an estimated 691 million, finds itself at the crossroads of a burgeoning digital age. Despite this, the nation grapples with a glaring gender digital divide, particularly among its youth, where the chasm is most pronounced for girls. The repercussions of this divide echo across various facets of women's lives, impacting social participation, work, education, and health, thereby impeding women's empowerment and gender equality.

In the Global Digital Divide Index 2022, India secured the 6th position, yet within the Asia-Pacific region, it stands out as the country with the most substantial gendered divide in internet usage, with a staggering 40.4% gap between men and women (Gulati, 2022). Alarming statistics reveal that only 15% of women in India have access to the internet, a stark contrast to their male counterparts (Mobile Gender Gap, 2021). Furthermore, a significant portion of the population, constituting 70%, faces poor or no access to digital services, with a mere 25% of adult Indian women owning smartphones in comparison to 41% of men (Times of India, 2023).

The gender gap extends into the realm of technology ownership, with boys in India being 1.5 times more likely than girls to own a cell phone and 1.8 times more likely to possess a smartphone. The dominance of men in the field of software development persists, with only 15% of software designers being female. This digital gender disparity is escalating rapidly, according to OECD (2018) findings.

Despite India leading in real-time transactions with 48.6 billion in the business sphere (Das, 2022), its global ranking in the UN's e-participation index is 105th out of 193 countries (2022). This index evaluates crucial e-government dimensions, including the availability of online services, telecommunication connection, and human capacity (United Nations in India annual report, 2023).

Digital payment usage reveals another facet of the divide, with 69% of males and only 31% of females in India utilizing digital payments and internet banking (India Inequality Report, 2022). While over half of Indian women (53.9%) own cell phones, a mere 22.5% engage in financial activities through them. Digital literacy presents a notable urban-rural disparity, with 61% in urban areas compared to 25% in rural regions.

The gender gap in internet usage is starkly evident in rural India, where males (49%) surpass females (25%) in online engagement. States like West Bengal, Jharkhand, Mizoram, and Himachal Pradesh highlight the highest urban-rural divide in internet usage, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to bridge these digital divides (National Family Health Survey, 2022). As India strides forward in the digital age, addressing these disparities becomes imperative for fostering an inclusive, equitable, and empowered society.

GLOBAL GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE: IMPACT ON EDUCATION

With half of the global population still offline, the digital gender divide becomes a pivotal factor in perpetuating educational inequality, as underscored by estimates from the United Nations. A staggering 168 million girls worldwide face educational challenges due to the unavailability of digital technology, exacerbating the disparities in access to learning resources (UNESCO, 2023). The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has further escalated this issue, with approximately

10 million girls dropping out of school due to inadequate digital facilities. Presently, 129 million girls find themselves out of school, a direct consequence of insufficient digital resources, and only 25% of girls in underdeveloped or developing countries manage to complete their primary education (UNICEF, 2023).

The field of education bears witness to the pronounced impact of the digital gender gap on women. Societal norms, cultural barriers, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure collectively impede women's equal access to digital skills. This, in turn, hinders their participation in digitally-intensive industries such as technology and engineering, contributing significantly to the gender gap in these disciplines.

Specifically focusing on the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the challenges persist. While 72% of students in the region possess smartphones at home, only 40% can access them for academic purposes, highlighting a digital disparity in leveraging technology for education (ASER-Rural 2021). Going beyond smartphones, the access to computers with internet connectivity remains alarmingly low. A mere 9% of enrolled students have access to such devices, and only 25% can connect to the internet using any kind of device, as per data from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) in 2017-18. The global gender digital divide, thus, compounds the existing educational inequalities, posing significant hurdles for girls and women worldwide, including those in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Addressing these disparities is not just a matter of technological inclusion but a fundamental step towards fostering educational equity and empowering all individuals, irrespective of gender, to thrive in the digital age.

VARIOUS DIGITAL INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN BY THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The Indian government has implemented numerous programs aimed at empowering marginalized students through various ministries, including the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship, Youth Affairs and Sports, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, and the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

The 2023–24 Union budget introduces a National Digital Library for Children and Adolescents, a crucial step in reducing the digital divide, ensuring fair access to high-quality education, and enhancing digital literacy. The "Stay Safe Online" campaign, developed by the Ministry of Electronics and IT under India's G20 presidency, aims to raise awareness about the internet, social media, and digital payment options (Wojnar&Agiwal,2023).

The Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDSA), implemented through Common Services Centres (CSCs), has provided digital literacy training to over 1.96 crore individuals in rural areas. Other initiatives, such as the ICT@Schools scheme, Bharat Net project, MHRD'S Operation Digital Board, National Repository of Open Educational Resources, SWAYAM, ePathshala, and DIKSHA, provide educational e-resources to students, teachers, and parents, promoting digital learning. E-content dispersal is facilitated through devices in educational centers, schools, and satellite communication technologies via the SWAYAM Prabha initiative on a 24x7 basis.

VARIOUS DIGITAL INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN BY STATE GOVERNMENTS IN INDIA

State governments in India have taken various initiatives in collaboration with community partnerships to cater to their local audiences.

- The Government of Andhra Pradesh, in partnership with Reliance Foundation and Microsoft, has created digital content in local languages (Telugu and English) and utilizes machine learning (ML) to predict students at risk of dropping out.

- In Himachal Pradesh, a program launched in 2015 with NHM and Piramal Swasthya established telemedicine units at government primary healthcare centers (PHCs) and sub-centers to provide specialist care, including child and adolescent health.

- Kerala's "First Bell" virtual school education program, introduced for the 2020–21 school year, offers classes on YouTube and television. Samagra Shiksha Kerala conducted teacher training and a survey to determine students without access to TV or the internet, declaring internet access a fundamental human right.

GENDER DIGITAL DISPARITIES IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: NAVIGATING INEQUITIES

In the landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, the gender digital divide mirrors global and national trends, underscoring a digital landscape where disparities persist. Regrettably, the discriminatory stance of the government towards the students and the populace in this region exacerbates the existing challenges.

Within the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, a discernible discrepancy in internet usage patterns emerges. Men tend to utilize the internet for extended durations, while women, on the other hand, engage in more frequent but shorter online sessions. A closer examination reveals that 19.5% of women use the internet specifically for entertainment, compared to 22.3% of men, showcasing distinct patterns in online engagement (Mushtaq, 2020). Furthermore, a noticeable gender gap in technical expertise is evident, with 63% of men possessing greater proficiency compared to 37% of women.

Delving into the rural-urban digital divide, only 38.9% of rural women in the UT of J&K have ever used the internet, in stark contrast to their urban counterparts at 55%. While digital connectivity through personal cell phones is prevalent, with 73.3% of rural women and 80.4% of urban women owning personal mobile devices, other digital resources exhibit a significant urban advantage. Notably, 88.5% of women in urban areas have personal bank accounts, compared to 83.5% in rural regions. The presence of home computers remains scarce, with only 3.5% in rural areas and 16% in urban areas having access.

The urban-rural digital divide extends to internet access, where 58.7% of individuals in urban regions enjoy connectivity, in stark contrast to the meager 28.7% in rural areas (NFHS-5). These statistics underscore the pressing need for targeted interventions and policies that address the unique challenges faced by women in Jammu and Kashmir, facilitating equitable digital access and fostering a more inclusive and empowered community.

Figure No. 1: Percentage of people who used internet in Jammu Kashmir

Enclosed as Annexure 02

Source: Data from National Family Health Survey (NFHS 2019-21)

From the figure, it can be estimated that in the union territory of J&K, nearly 79.4% of men in

Urban area has ever used the internet, in comparison to this, only 55% of women residing in urban area has used the internet. Similarly, only 38.9% of women living in rural areas have ever used the internet, compared to 68.8% of men.

VARIOUS DIGITAL INITIATIVES TAKEN BY JAMMU AND KASHMIR GOVERNMENT

In the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the government has undertaken several initiatives to support students in diverse areas, encompassing academics, career guidance, stress management, and counseling. The Department of School Education has implemented various programs to address challenges faced by children in the Union Territory of J&K. Key projects include:

Jammu and Kashmir Knowledge Network (JKKN):

This initiative aims to acquaint school children in J&K with a wealth of knowledge through the internet. The portal provides high-quality e-content accessible to nearly all school classes, offering essential technical assistance to educators creating e-content. The network connects many schools in the union territory equipped with CAL and ICT. Additionally, students can access the JKKN career information portal for insights into careers and professional exams.

Manzilein (jkcareerportal.org):

Managed by SAMAGRA Shiksha and the School Education Department (J&K), this career guidance program, provides students with a personalized career dashboard. The dashboard includes information about over 550 careers (both professional and vocational), 21,000 colleges, 262,000 programs across 16 countries, 1,150 entrance exams, and 1,120 scholarship opportunities. Students can access the career dashboard by entering their JKBOSE registration number and following on-screen instructions.

Aao Baat Karein (Tele Counselling Helpline):

Established by the Director of School Education Jammu, this platform utilizes a task force of mentors from the sixth to twelfth grade to address queries from parents, teachers, and students regarding anxiety, exams, e-resources, and other topics. From facilitating distance learning to guiding young individuals towards better

Professional opportunities, all organizations involved in students' education and career development are making concerted efforts to address the diverse concerns of the country's youth. Leveraging IT-based platforms ensures that these initiatives are as accessible as possible for students to enhance and progress in the current era of DIGITAL INDIA, where e-platforms play a crucial role in improving career placements and delivering classroom content to students at home.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

01. To understand and examine the status of the Digital Gender Divide in Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory and its women's access to digital devices in the Union Territory

02. To identify the issues and challenges faced by women in accessing the digital technology in the UT of J&K.

03. To put forward practical suggestions for bridging the gender digital divide in the UT of J&K.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study is Qualitative in nature. Data has been collected from the secondary sources that include related research papers, articles, official websites, reports, census of India, National Family Health Surveys etc.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Digital Access and Usage Patterns among Girls in Jammu and Kashmir

In assessing the digital landscape for girls in Jammu and Kashmir, the availability of digital devices plays a pivotal role. The region's accessibility to smartphones, laptops, and other digital gadgets is a key determinant in shaping the extent of digital engagement among girls. Understanding the prevalence and distribution of these devices is essential to gauging the potential barriers or facilitators for girls to access digital technologies. Factors such as economic disparities, infrastructure development, and technological adoption contribute to the broader analysis of the availability of digital devices in the region.

Another critical aspect of digital access is the status of internet connectivity in Jammu and Kashmir. The study delves into the infrastructure supporting internet services, examining

Factors such as coverage, speed, and reliability. Challenges related to geographical terrain, network infrastructure, and government policies may impact the overall quality of internet connectivity. An understanding of these aspects is crucial in discerning the opportunities and constraints faced by girls in utilizing digital technologies effectively.

Digital Access and Usage Patterns among Girls in Jammu and Kashmir

In the context of Jammu and Kashmir, understanding the digital access and usage patterns among girls is a multifaceted exploration that encompasses several crucial dimensions. The availability of digital devices is a cornerstone in gauging the digital landscape for girls in the region. Approximately 64% of households in Jammu and Kashmir have access to smartphones, serving as the primary gateway to digital engagement. However, there exist notable disparities, particularly in rural areas where access to digital devices remains comparatively limited. This discrepancy underscores the need for targeted interventions to bridge the urban-rural digital divide.

Internet Connectivity in the Region

Examining the status of internet connectivity further unravels the complexities of digital access. While strides have been made, challenges persist, with around 40% of the population in the region still facing issues related to internet connectivity. Variations in connectivity are evident across districts, emphasizing the importance of an inclusive approach to address the nuances of digital accessibility.

How Girls Engage with Digital Technologies

The engagement of girls with digital technologies is diverse and dynamic. A survey conducted in 2022 revealed that 78% of girls in urban areas actively use social media platforms for communication and information-sharing, while 62% engage in online learning activities. However, in rural areas, the figures drop significantly, with only 38% participating in online learning and 54% using social media. This points to the inter-sectionality of digital access, highlighting the influence of geographic location on the extent of engagement with digital technologies.

Understanding these nuances is crucial for developing targeted policies that

Address the specific challenges faced by girls in Jammu and Kashmir. Bridging the digital gender gap requires not only enhancing access to devices and connectivity but also tailoring digital initiatives to the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of the region.

Table No. 2: Percentage Growth in mobile phone ownership by women in J&K

Enclosed as Annexure 03

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS 4; 2015-16) and (NFHS 5; 2019-2020)

This table above shows the Percentage Growth in mobile phone ownership by women, uneven access to digital devices by women and Internet usage gap between men and women in the UT of J&K. This also highlights the obstacles and hurdles faced by women in accessing the digital technology in the UT of J&K. and it also draws attention to the digital steps taken by the federal government, state governments, and the government of J&K to eliminate the gender gap in the digital sphere. It highlights that the percentage of mobile phones access by women in J&K has increased by 40%, from NFHS 4 to NFHS 5. It shows % increase in women's mobile phone ownership across Indian states in general and in the union territory of J&K in particular from NFHS 4 to NFHS 5. Women's ownership of mobile phones and digital devices has increased noticeably over the period of five years between the publication of report of NFHS 4 in 2015–16 and NHFS 5 in 2019–20, with an average growth of 18% all over India.

Table No. 3: Uneven access to digital devices by women in J&K with respect to rest of India

Enclosed as Annexure 04

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS5 Data; 2019-2020)

The above mentioned table highlights the uneven access to digital devices by women in the UT of J&K with respect to India. In the UT of J&K, nearly about 75.2% of women have uneven access to digital devices and technology. The UT of J&K is amongst the top places in India having such poor and depressing status of women in relation to the access to digital devices.

Figure No. 2: Internet gap between men and women

Enclosed as Annexure 05

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS 5 Data; 2019-2020)

Figure 3 highlights the gender gap in usage of internet in various states of India in general and in the UT of J&K in particular. In the UT of J&K, the Internet usage gap between men and women is 29% which is amongst the highest UT in the country. In the UT of J&K, 72% of men use internet whereas only 43% of women use internet.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN DIGITAL ACCESS BY THE GIRLS IN J&K

The girls' inability to take advantage of the opportunities provided by digital technologies is largely due to structural inequalities that are deeply ingrained in society. These disparities also contribute to the exclusion of women from the digital future. An overview of some of the major obstacles to gender equality in the empowerment of girls in the digital sphere is given in this section.

Cultural norms and gender stereotypes: Cultural norms and gender stereotypes frequently impede women's and girls' access to digital technologies, limiting their opportunities for education and employment in ICT-related fields. In homes with limited computing resources, there may be a preferential bias to boys and men over girls and women. For example, parents may be stricter with girls than boys when it comes to using mobile phones and engaging in online activities.

Over-protective nature of the family members: Girls' parents' over caring and anxious tendencies are a significant contributing factor to the restricted access to phones and other technology by girls in the family. Sayings like "phones are not safe," "it is a waste of time," "it may harm her eyes," or "the daughter may misuse it" are used by parents to excuse their actions.

Poor financial conditions: Unhealthy finances are a significant barrier to receiving Smartphone and laptops. Eighty-five percent of the girls do not have a laptop or computer at home **(OECD,2018).** Being unable to acquire digital skills is primarily due to financial constraints. Girls lack the resources to access and use digital devices and technologies because they are underprivileged.

Lack of Awareness: The fact that more boys Use digital tools than girls is partly due to their ignorance of the advantages that the Internet may offer. Girls usually believe they "do not need it" or "do not want it,"

Technophobia: Digital illiteracy contributes to the gender gap in the digital sphere by making people uncomfortable using technology and the Internet. Concurrent factors including education, employment status, and income level frequently lead to such "technophobia."

Poor connectivity: Without connectivity, access is insufficient to support the fundamentals of the digital structure. In order to get full benefit from digital technology, one must be able to afford affordable connectivity costs. These benefits include the ability to attend online classes, use social networking sites, take advantage of opportunities, and conveniently access information and admission results.

Hostile online environment: The existing gender digital divide is exacerbated by hostile online environments characterized by hate speech, harassment, negative stereotypes, and attitudinal biases associated with conservative gender roles. Girls' learning is mostly hampered by poor, unhealthy, and unpleasant online environments, which further increases the gender digital gap.

Socio-cultural factors: Furthermore, the digital gender gap can be largely explained by socio-cultural factors. For a variety of cultural reasons, about one-fifth of Indian women feel that using the Internet is inappropriate for them. About 12% of Indian women claim not to use the Internet because of the unfavourable social perception attached to it, while 8% say they don't use it because their families don't accept them.

Poor technological skills amongst girls: It will take more than just equal access to ICTs to bridge the gender digital divide. Girls require more than just access to the Internet and related technologies; they also need the skills and tools necessary to turn that access into productive use. A few of these challenges are associated with the educational disparity that women face. Reduced technological proficiency is correlated with lower literacy and numeracy levels. A clear barrier to both accessing and using ICTs is the lack of fundamental technological skills, which is the resultant digital literacy gap.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BRIDGING GENDER DIGITAL LITERACY GAP IN J&K

Adopt a well established and targeted approach

Investing in digital inclusion is crucial from a social and economic standpoint, as it will help in empowering the girls. To address this, a targeted and concentrated strategy is needed, emphasizing the needs of girls from a variety of backgrounds, including those who attend schools or other institutions as well as those who live in rural, tribal, underdeveloped, and minority communities. Focus should be on lowering the dropout rate, enhancing the health and nutritional status of adolescents, and mainstreaming girls' job connections and skill development for a better future which in return can benefit families, the community, and the growth of the country as a whole.

Constructing long-lasting digital safeguards

In order to combat financial strain in digital access, it is crucial to include adequate and efficient digital social safety nets in the current national and state plans. The necessity of advocating for funding, support, or initiatives to lower the cost of digital devices and a reliable internet connection while facilitating access to relevant data and content should be prioritized. Another option is to provide improved and easily accessible digital facilities in community centers, colleges, and schools.

Ensuring last mile connectivity

The majority of people who live at the bottom of the digital pyramid are more vulnerable to it; girls are the main victims in this group. Targeted last-mile connectivity is desperately needed in the impoverished, backward villages, panchayats, and blocks; inexpensive community device access and reasonably priced internet access are essential. It can be advantageous to have digital resource centers for girls in every village or panchayat. These centers should provide regular access to the internet, content, and digital resources, either in a school environment or at Anganwadi centers.

Stimulating attitudinal shift towards female digital literacy in parents and families

One of the main causes of the digital divide that girls experience is strict family values. Through counseling sessions and online/offline workshops, Parents and families can change their attitudes, which will help to ensure that there is no discrimination against girls in the home compared to boys. Priority talks at workshops should center on topics like how to diminish online risks via safe and secure internet access, counseling parents on how to divide the family's disproportionate amount of household chores between men and women, and enabling teenage girls to use digital devices for free for an adequate amount of time.

Conducting regular and compulsory short-term digital skill-building programs

Girls find it more difficult to use digital devices in public libraries, internet cafes, and community centers than their male classmates. Short term digital building programmes should be conducted for girls to teach them to critically assess the reliability and safety of online content; and to acquire job-oriented skills that will allow them to make the most of job and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Creating helpful, safe content and a reliable digital space

While new programs, content, applications, and services have been made available for online learning, there should also be free and open access to information on jobs, social security, health, news, and even entertainment. In addition, the dissemination of illegal material as well as cyber bullying and harassment on these platforms need to be rigorously controlled by administrative and judicial measures. Girls should receive basic cyber security training in order to protect themselves against cyber bullying and fraud. Taking such actions would boost their self-esteem and provide them with the tools they need to stay safe both online and offline.

Constructing a policy framework for girls in digital sphere

When put into practice, a carefully considered and designed policy framework typically yields the desired outcomes. In the UT of J&K, a framework for digital policies for girls is required, along with national and state-level initiatives that can assist in integrating digital components as essential components of empowerment in the areas of education, health, and skill development. In areas of digital development, focus and investment serves

As a crucial factor in eradicating gender digital divide.

THE WAY FORWARD

Numerous facets of digital divides have been brought to light in this paper, particularly when it comes to gender. Today, it is essential that girls should be included in the electronic space by having their digital needs met. Prioritizing focused policy formulations and frameworks that emphasize girls' digital empowerment is imperative. Through this, the gendered digital divide will be addressed and girls will be equipped with the necessary digital skills and access. India's pursuit of Goal 5 of the SDG is particularly relevant in this context. In terms of digital education, women in Jammu and Kashmir lag behind women nationwide. As it impacts every member of society, it is a major issue and cause for concern for the entire nation. In the UT of J&K, as digital gender disparity is present in both rural and urban areas, education can play a significant role in enhancing the social and economic standing of women in the UT of Jammu and Kashmir. As a result, the central and State's education policies must be implemented with promptness.

Annexure(s)

Annexure 01

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE
1	Sweden	83.32
2	Singapore	77.44
3	Chile	74.99
4	United States	74.15
5	South Africa	70.20
6	Mexico	69.94
7	Ukraine	67.62
8	Russia	65.31
9	India	62.16
10	Saudi Arabia	62.07
11	Brazil	61.89
12	Vietnam	55.82
13	Egypt	55.76
14	China	55.13
15	Nigeria	46.57
16	Uganda	41.19
17	Tajikistan	34.44
18	Ethiopia	31.26
19	Haiti	23.68
20	DRC	23.37

Annexure 02
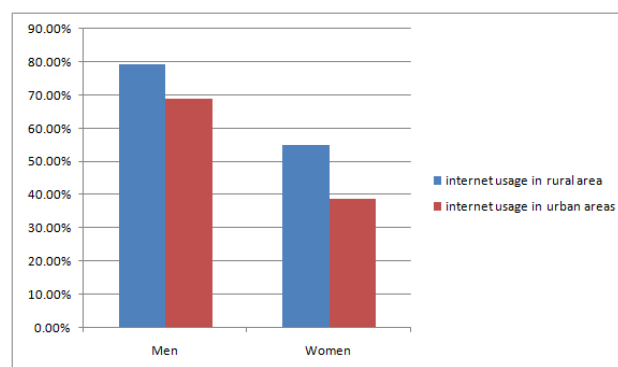
Annexure 03

States/UTs	Percentage growth of women in mobile phone ownership from NFHS 4 in 2015–16 to NHFS 5 in 2019–20,
Andhra Pradesh	35%
Assam	24%
Bihar	25%
Goa	12%
Gujarat	2%
Himachal Pradesh	8%
J&K	40%
Karnataka	31%
Kerala	7%
Maharashtra	20%
Meghalaya	5%
Manipur	14%
Mizoram	7%
Nagaland	17%
Sikkim	11%
Telangana	27%
Tripura	21%
West Bengal	20%

Annexure 04

State/UT	Percentage of uneven access to digital devices by women in UT of J&K
Andhra Pradesh	49%
Assam	57%
Bihar	51%
Goa	91%
Gujarat	49%
Himachal Pradesh	79.5%
J&K	75.2%
Karnataka	61.8%
Kerala	87%
Maharashtra	55%
Meghalaya	67.5%
Manipur	72%
Mizoram	82.3%
Nagaland	82.5%
Sikkim	88.6%
Telangana	60%
Tripura	53%
West Bengal	50%

Source: National Family Health Survey (NFHS Data; 2019-2020)

Annexure 05
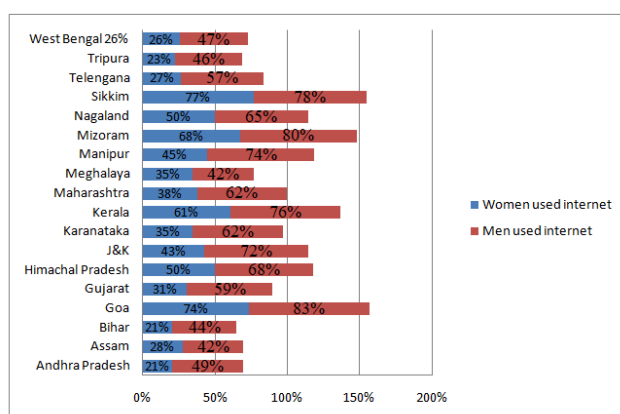
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