National Consultation on SDGs from a Gender Lens
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Note from IT for Change

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1. Introduction

Progress towards Agenda 2030, and in particular, the task of *"eradicting poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world"*, will remain incomplete unless we ensure that the digitalised social order ushered in by the Internet revolution is inclusive and equitable. The empowering potential of the information society needs to be claimed for women and girls, while securing the interests of those with non-mainstream gender identity and sexual orientation. The propensities of the network society for consolidation and concentration of power must also be tackled to ensure that development brings egalitarianism.

This input paper evaluates India's progress towards Agenda 2030, taking into consideration the key highlights of the official report prepared by the Government of India for the voluntary national review of SDGs[1].

The analysis has 3 main focus areas:

(a) Identifying issues and challenges for gender equality in progress towards SDGs, stemming from the digitalisation and datafication of governance and development decision-making. In specific, Goals 1,2,3, and 5 have been examined, as they have been selected for in-depth review at the upcoming HLPF.

(b) Assessing the adequacy of national level indicators pertaining to Targets 5b and 9c, in capturing progress towards enhancing women's[2] access to information and communication technologies and the Internet.

(c) Analysing national statistical capacity and data capabilities for monitoring and accountability (part of Goal 17. Means of Implementation).

2. Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

2.1 Target 1.3 - Analysis of Progress

Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.

The official report of the Government of India highlights the enactment of the *Aadhaar* Act (and by extension, *Aadhaar*-enabled direct benefit transfers and biometric authentication in physical delivery of in-kind benefits) as a key achievement for effective social spending, that "directly targets poverty". However, reports (from think tanks, research centres and journalists) based on grassroots stock-taking clearly reveal that the shift to *Aadhaar*-enabled social security schemes has been characterized by deepening exclusion from welfare delivery, especially because of institutional and technological unpreparedness, as highlighted below:

1. Biometric authentication at the last mile in *Aadhaar*-enabled service delivery shows high susceptibility to failure. For example, a 2017 study conducted by the state government of Telengana on *Aadhaar*-enabled biometric authentication deployed for worker payments in the MGNREGS

1 https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?page=view&type=30022&nr=507&menu=3170
2 Reference to women, in relation to the analysis, includes reference to girls

revealed failure rates as high as 36%[3]! This is not an isolated instance, as other studies on *Aadhaar*-enabled biometric authentication in a range of social security schemes reveal similar rates of failure[4]. In addition to biometric glitches, interrupted power supply, patchy Internet connectivity, and server issues have contributed to verification failures at the last mile[5]. Given women's dependence on the MGNREGS scheme and poor women's low bargaining power, technological failures in authenticating payments result in cutting out life-line support to wages. There is also no recourse at the local level to seek redress to such failures. The *Aadhaar* Act does not have a provision for beneficiaries to seek redress before a court against the unfair denial of entitlements due to errors in the transition to *Aadhaar*-enabled delivery of social security benefits. There is no grievance redress mechanism at the local level where beneficiaries can seek assistance in resolving glitches in entitlement-processing[6].

2. Seeding errors in preparation of beneficiary databases by departments and agencies, as part of the transition to *Aadhaar*-enabled service delivery, have led to the unfair denial of benefits to many. For example, in the state of Rajasthan, errors in linking the database on old age pensions to *Aadhaar,* resulted in stoppage of pensions for 350,000 beneficiaries and cancellation for 700,000 beneficiaries, without explanation[7]. Women's economic disenfrachisement owing to lack of ownership of land and other assets leaves them highly vulnerable in their old age. Basic social security, such as pension, constitutes a life-line for survival for women, and if retracted, can put them in extreme duress.

3. *Aadhaar*-enabled Direct Benefit Transfers through the JAM (Jan Dhan bank account-Aadhaar ID-mobile number) mechanism are plagued by last-mile issues. Hardly 27% of villages in India have access to a bank branch within a 5 km radius[8], and therefore, the bulk of rural beneficiaries of JAM are at the mercy of business correspondents or other middlemen, to get access to the benefits transferred to the bank. This leads to lack of timely access to bank remittances and susceptibility fraud. The Reserve Bank of India has cautioned that these accounts are vulnerable to frauds[9], while other reports document instances of the same[10]. Money laundering through *Jan Dhan* accounts was widely reported during the demonetisation drive of the government in late 2016.

Research world-wide indicates that one out of four financially excluded women in the world, is from India[11]. Schemes like *Jan Dhan* – which aim to 'include' women into the banking sector may not be powerful unless women can be financially literate and able to negotiate the formal financial systems. As was pointed out by one analysis - "Simply opening a bank account for a woman does not make her financially independent, or even any greater a part of the financial system than she was before. Unless the women actually start using these accounts, and banks actually start serving

3 http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Uf5B33ZB2sYKpmLqwMke8O/Aadhaar-fails-MGNREGS-test-in-Telangana.html

4 http://www.ndtv.com/opinion/yes-aadhaar-is-a-game-changer-in-wrecking-welfare-schemes-1434424 ; http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/freedom-in-peril/article8408760.ece

5 http://itforchange.net/mavc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Research-brief-India-1.pdf

6 UIDAI has established contact centers for grievance redressal at 8 locations, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=107892 although this is not a judicial body

7 https://scroll.in/article/813132/rajasthans-living-dead-thousands-of-pensioners-without-aadhaar-or-bank-accounts-struck-off-lists

8 http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2015-16/echapvol1-03.pdf ; http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-business/dbt-jammed-by-lastmile-challenge/article8287095.ece

9 http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/banking/finance/banking/jan-dhan-accounts-more-vulnerable-to-frauds-rbi/articleshow/52402328.cms

10 http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/jan-dhan-yojana-fraud-should-be-curbed/article9169214.ece

11 http://www.livemint.com/Politics/KH3o9IVQHvswhLHkt5vyWI/One-out-of-four-financially-excluded-women-across-the-world.html

them as customers in their own right, even this spectacular achievement promises to remain no more than a tick in the tokenist checklist. At the moment, more than a third of PMJDY accounts are dormant. And 86% of women PMJDY account holders, according to a Financial Inclusion Insights study, have only used their bank accounts for basic activities like deposits…. A 2015 Standard & Poor's survey on financial literacy found that 80% of female respondents in India were financially illiterate. There is a also a huge 'digital divide' – only 44% of women have a cell phone compared to over two-thirds of men in India. With 'Digital India' driving digital delivery of financial services, this means that six out of ten women are automatically excluded[12]." Without political commitment or imagination, powerful ideas for financial empowerment of rural and marginalised women, like the Bharatiya Mahila Bank (a Bank for women, now merged with a nationalised bank), have been jettisoned[13].

4. Despite the Supreme Court's directions to the contrary, the government has mandated *Aadhaar* enrolment for receipt of benefits under various social security schemes[14] – including for receipt of maternity benefits[15] and conditional cash transfers in lieu of take-home rations for pregnant women and lactating mothers.[16] The trends indicate high risk of exclusion for women from economically marginalised groups from the social safety net. Research shows that emergency expenses for child-bearing pushes about 46.6% mothers in India into poverty[17]. Similarly, a third of women of reproductive age are undernourished and have a body mass index of less than 18.5 kg/m^2. Errors of exclusion with *Aadhaar*-enabled conditional cash transfers can therefore be disastrous for the longer term health and economic status of women.

5. The *Aadhaar* Act and Rules offer absolutely no protection against data breaches or leakage of an individual's personal information – as no penalties are imposed in case of accidental breaches and there is no provision to notify an individual who has been affected by a data breach[18]. Also, India has no standalone privacy and data protection legislation. In fact, *Aadhaar* numbers and personal information of over 135 million Indians have been put out on governmental websites, in acts of illegal data disclosure/publication[19]. The government's decision to make *Aadhaar*-linking mandatory for rehabilitation of women rescued from sexual trafficking reveals inattention to social norms that easily label and marginalise women in patriarchal societies[20]. Privacy and confidentiality are vital for their social empowerment. Not having a guarantee to privacy/ data protection can have serious consequences for women's public participation as equal social, political and economic agents.

6. Even though it is mandatory for the requesting entity to inform the concerned individual about what it intends to do with the identity information that it obtains[21], in a context with 173 million non

12 http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/merely-opening-accounts-for-women-wont-ensure-equality/article17367696.ece
13 https://www.thequint.com/business/2017/03/31/why-has-the-bharatiya-mahila-bank-flopped
14 See the 14 notifications issued by various ministries between February and March 2017. http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/not-just-mid-day-meals-aadhaar-made-mandatory-for-11-more-schemes-117030600122_1.html
15 https://scroll.in/pulse/831175/the-government-wants-pregnant-women-to-enroll-in-aadhaar-to-get-their-social-scheme-benefits
16 http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=159011
17 http://www.indiaspend.com/cover-story/childbearing-expenses-push-47-of-indian-women-into-poverty-47627
18 http://tech.firstpost.com/news-analysis/aadhaar-act-the-digital-rights-of-indians-are-at-the-mercy-of-an-act-that-is-incomplete-374766.html
19 http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/unique-identification-authority-of-india-puts-posers-to-centre-for-internet-and-society-over-aadhaar-data-leak-claim/article9707647.ece
20 http://www.hindustantimes.com/interactives/aadhaar-mandatory-schemes-timeline/
21 https://thewire.in/118655/hello-aadhaar-goodbye-privacy/

literate women (more than one third of the female population), this provision for "informed consent" for *Aadhaar* use seems hugely inadequate to address the question of consent. Additionally, the Aadhaar Act also permits the UIDAI to share *"a positive, negative or any other appropriate response"* including identity information excluding biometric information to authentication queries by various agencies. The section makes no mention of when sharing of identity information would be warranted. Operations in the world of the digital are still alien to a majority of women as also the consequences of the data sharing with government and corporate agencies. The 'terms of use' text in transactions by entities that want to use citizens' personal information for private use and that are binding on them are a mockery of transparency, taking away autonomy from those who are least powerful in the wider data ecosystem and subjecting them to the risk of newer vulnerabilities.

7. The Common Services Centres (CSCs) scheme, meant to provide facilitation to government schemes through a private entrepreneur at the village level, is based on a for-profit model. The limits of this model have been analysed in many research studies and reports[22]. By privatising digitally mediated access to public services, and delinking service delivery from the right to be heard and grievance redressal, the CSCs scheme dilutes government accountability to the citizen. The scheme – in its very conceptualisation – is gender neutral. Given the huge body of work on telecentres, it can be said that the design and architecture of the CSCs are unlikely to be welcoming to marginalised women.

2.2 Target 1.3 - Recommendations for action

1. 51 out of the 61 services for which *Aadhaar* is required, comprise welfare schemes[23], which are a life-line for women's economic wellbeing. Women's stakes in the governance framework of any ID system like *Aadhaar,* are therefore very high. The *Aadhaar* Act and Rules need to be amended to set up a grievance redress mechanism at the local level, for addressing complaints of biometric authentication failure and glitches in *Aadhaar*-enabled service delivery. Such a mechanism should have an outreach component specifically targeted at women beneficiaries (a helpline number, extension workers who make village visits periodically, and a help desk at the sub-district headquarters etc.)

2. A robust privacy and data protection legislation must be enacted, and the *Aadhaar* Act and rules amended, to ensure that clauses on informed consent and protection against data breaches are strengthened; and the scope of querying the *Aadhaar* database is narrowed to mere 'Yes/No' responses to identity authentication cases (as was the case in the originally proposed National Identification Authority of India Bill of 2010).

3. Digital literacy schemes must be revisited and a new design for targetting girls and women for financial literacy modules, open data use/ meaningful decoding of information on portals, verification and auditing of published government information etc. Digital methods offer a huge advantage for citizenship literacy for women, which is yet to be realised.

4. In the transition to digitalised welfare systems, no one can be denied their rightful claims and entitlements, just because they do not have Internet access. It is the duty of the State to ensure that women can access their public services through offline mechanisms, where poor infrastructure becomes a barrier for access to social welfare. In fact, the active participation of women in e-

22 http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/A-leap-into-the-digital-world/article16785727.ece; http://itforchange.net/mavc/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Research-brief-India-1.pdf

23 http://www.hindustantimes.com/interactives/aadhaar-mandatory-schemes-timeline/

government depends on cheap access to devices, and a public good framework for connectivity. Under current contexts, where electricity and connectivity infrastructures continue to be a challenge in many parts of the country, informational transparency, grievance redress and social audit in relation to social welfare schemes require more than just mobile/web based solutions. Institutional approaches to tackle inclusion and be responsive to gender power in society must blend human facilitation with digital avenues, towards accountable governance for all.

5. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has held that provisioning of Internet access to all sections of the population, including rural masses, is sine qua non for their digital inclusion. The Authority has accordingly recommended that the Government should adopt a scheme to utilise a part of the Universal Service Obligation Fund to provide a reasonable amount of monthly data free of charge to all subscribers in rural and remote areas. Measures such as these are vital for women to become active agents of transformation, engage with government agencies over online interactions and use emerging economic opportunities.

6. The CSC model needs a comprehensive reassessment. It needs to be tied in with a knowledge centre approach offering women and marginalised populations continuing / life-long digital skills and facilitation. New design thinking that brings the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology in collaboration with the Ministry of Women, Department of Education and Ministry of Rural development and Panchayati Raj for a localised model is an urgent need. The transition to the digital is not a simplistic, technical shift. It is a socio-cultural, behavioural and organisational change and offers the promise of restructuring the gender code within governance systems. For instance, the CSC can double up as *Gram Sabha* Resource centres that offer the tools for using open data to understand their entitlements and perform social audits. It can also offer linkages to open university programs. Training young women from marginalised backgrounds in becoming knowledge intermediaries and embedding the CSC within a wider ecosystem of 'intimate government' that women can hold accountable, such a design can optimise investment and revolutionise the citizen rights of women and people with marginalised/ non-mainstream gender identities.

7. The unlocking of welfare benefits in the *Aadhaar* regime is predicated upon a fragile and system like biometrics. This has given raise to innumerable concerns, both for exclusion from basic entitlements such as ration supplies under the PDS which affects the food security of the most marginalised, and for confidentiality of personal information[24]. Privacy laws cannot address the hard coding of service delivery operations based on biometrics and so, a complete rethink about an identity system for social security that respects the economic and political rights of women and sexual minorities is an urgent need[25].

2.3 Target 1.4 - Analysis of progress

By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.

From the set of draft indicators published by the MoSPI, it seems that the government thinks of the *Jan Dhan Yojana* as a key strategy to ensure the financial inclusion of poor and vulnerable men and women (A critique of the same has been presented in the previous point). To facilitate their access

24 http://cis-india.org/internet-governance/salient-points-in-the-aadhaar-bill-and-concerns
25 https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/04/05/a-rebuttal-to-nandan-nilekanis-arguments-for-aadhaar

to banking without having to go through traditional banking protocols, the government has built an *Aadhaar e*nabled Payments Bridge system that enables '*Aadhaar-to-Aadhaar* money transfer' by simply using the *Aadhaar* numbers of the parties involved, as banking addresses for the transaction; and the BHIM mobile app that uses this system for mobile banking (which has been officially described as a mechanism for including the poorest of the poor in mobile banking services)[26]. Experts have flagged that the *Aadhaar* enabled Payments Bridge System is unauditable. This system records transactions only between different *Aadhaar* numbers and not between different bank accounts associated with the same *Aadhaar* number – making it possible for individuals to open a number of bogus accounts for the same *Aadhaar* number and move money across, while escaping scrutiny. More importantly, the *Aadhaar* Payments Bridge does not distinguish financial transactions made as part of Direct Benefit Transfers, from other transactions[27]. As a result, any audit of Direct Benefit Transfers involving crores of rupees of public funding is completely impossible. Considering that women, on account of their lack of access to devices, connectivity and skill training, may have little use for payment apps that run only on smart phones, and considering their traditional marginalisation from the domain of finance, a digital system for financial transactions must be robust and secure. It must aim to remove barriers that undermine women's economic empowerment and introduce a feminist approach to public finance that makes tracking of financial benefits to women transparent and accountable.

2.4 Target 1.4 - Recommendations for action

1. Digital financial systems set up by the government must, first and foremost, be open for scrutiny by the last person. Instituting changes to the *Aadhaar* enabled Payments Bridge mechanism to enable tracking /audit of Direct Benefit Transfers would be important.

2. As far as assessing progress towards this indicator is concerned, the MoSPI's decision to track the number of *Jan Dhan* Accounts that have been opened, by disaggregating them as rural/urban, and tracking the number of zero balance accounts, is a good starting point. But this can be improved upon with gender-disaggregation of the data, and data about actual transactions / routine operations to capture financial inclusion in actual terms.

3. Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

3.1 Target 2.2 - Analysis of Progress

By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons.

The official report of the Government of India highlights the provision of ration cards in the name of the senior most woman member of a household, digitalisation of ration cards and *Aadhaar* authentication in delivery of PDS, as key areas in which progress has been made. The move to register ration cards in the name of the senior most woman member of the household is commendable, as it recognises inter-household gender dynamics that may lead to diversion of rations by other powerful male members. However, as explained in the analysis of progress towards

26 http://zeenews.india.com/personal-finance/now-people-can-do-banking-with-thumb-using-bhim-app-says-pm-modi-at-digi-dhan-mela_1962954.html

27 http://www.moneylife.in/article/banking-on-aadhaar-what-concerns-the-rbi/43569.html

Target 1.3, *Aadhaar* linking to delivery of benefits is fraught with numerous errors of exclusion. In fact, the Delhi High Court is currently hearing a Public Interest Litigation on *Aadhaar* related exclusions and implications under the National Food Security Act. The Court has turned down the Centre's plea to dismiss this petition by using the rationale that no circumstances can excuse the denial of food grains to eligible beneficiaries[28].

3.2 Target 2.2 - Recommendations for action

See recommendations provided in the discussion on Target 1.3, section 2.2

4. Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all age

4.1 - Target 3.7 Analysis of progress and recommendations

By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.

The official report of the Government of India highlights the conditional cash transfers introduced under the maternity benefits programme as a key area of progress (though this has been positioned under the Goal 5 section). See the analysis of the challenges arising from the Aadhaar linking of maternal benefits programmes in the discussion on Target 1.3 (section 2.1) and recommendations (section 2.2).

5. Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

5.1 Target 5.6 - Analysis of progress and recommendations

Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

See discussion related to Target 3.7, section 4.1

5.2 Target 5b - Analysis of progress

Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.

According to ITU statistics of 2015[29], about 26% of India's population uses the Internet. The official report for the VNR draws upon the IAMAI study of December 2016, and places this estimate at 432 million, that is about 33% of the population.

There are no official gender-disaggregated statistics on Internet use. But third-party surveys reveal that the bulk of India's Internet users are men. 79% of urban Internet users in India are men. The rural user base consists "*almost exclusively*" of men, who constitute 98% of the total connected users[30]. Of course, this is not very surprising as research indicates that the gender digital divide is a

28 https://thewire.in/140230/delhi-high-court-appoints-commissioner-probe-ration-denial-due-aadhaar/
29 This is the latest year for which statistics are available.
30 Boston Consulting Group Survey, 2016.

reflection of socio-structural divides between women and men, in education, employment and income. And certainly, these divides are wider in rural India. Mobile ownership statistics are another indicator of the gender divides in access – in a context where it is the mobile phone rather than fixed broadband which is driving Internet diffusion forward[31], and where there is unmistakable evidence of household and community surveillance of women's use of shared phones[32]. A 2015 study by the GSMA revealed that only 28% of women in India own a mobile phone, as against 43% of men, which accounts for a gender gap of nearly 114 million[33].

Even when women come online, they are not able to automatically unlock the benefits of connectivity. Research studies reveal that access to the Internet does not translate into an automatic expansion of informational, associational and communicative capabilities for marginalised women[34]. 43% of men and 46% of women interviewed for this study reported that they used the Internet. However, a mere 28% male Internet users and 17% of female Internet users reported that they actively seek information online on critical information such as rights, on health, public services or development projects. 96% of male and 98% of female Internet users surveyed were on Facebook. But only 12% of men FB users and 4% of women FB users reported that social networking has helped them to find a job or increase meaningfully their incomes. Similarly, only 3% of male FB users and 1% of female FB users reported that social media has helped them forge networks of support[35]. The main reason that access fails to translate into empowering use cultures is the lack of digital capabilities; and data indicates that this is a widespread problem in India, not amenable to quick-fix and superficial techno-managerial solutions.

In fact, NSSO data from 2014 reveals that a mere 8.8% of the rural population and 30.2% of the urban population possess computing ability – that is, the ability to operate a desktop, laptop, palmtop, notebook, smart phone and tablets[36]. Without such ability, access to the Internet can only foster a passive culture of use. Informational, content and data capabilities are tied to skills and educational attainment, so that users can become creators and innovators. Unless the capability gap can be bridged for computational and higher order use of digital technologies, the optimism about market-led mobile diffusion will remain a red herring, distracting attention from how women can become equal participants in the information society.

The official report for the VNR specifies that *" a women's empowerment campaign has focused on enabling digital literacy and gainful employment opportunities"*. In our opinion, this statement could be referring to two key developments:
(a) coverage of women as part of digital literacy trainings undertaken through the National Digital Literacy Mission (since revamped into the *Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan*/ PMGDISHA in Feb 2017)
(b) the announcement in the 2017 budget about the proposal to set up *Mahila Shakti Kendras* – or women's empowerment centres at the village level, across all 14 lakh *anganwadis* that are part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme. The idea is that these centres can serve as *"one stop*

31 As the Census of India 2011 reveals, only 3% of households in the country use a computer/ laptop with a broadband connection.
32 https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone_ban
33 http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/DwiRdnamLz6pAKAEZhKaeL/Mobile-phones-empower-women.html
34 In 2015, a research study on patterns of Internet use among the urban poor, was carried out by Web Foundation and IT for Change – based on interviews with 1000 women and men in an urban poor neighbourhood of New Delhi, See http://webfoundation.org/2015/10/india-womens-rights-online/
35 ibid
36 http://www.thehindu.com/data/on-computing-ability-rural-india-is-lost-in-the-woods/article17463258.ece

convergent support services for empowering rural women with opportunities for skill development, employment, digital literacy, health and nutrition[37]*"*.

The PMGDISHA aims to make 60 million rural households digitally literate, by training one member from each of these households in *"operating computers/digital access devices (like tablets, smart phones, etc.), sending and receiving emails, browsing internet, accessing government services, searching for information, undertaking cashless transactions, etc"*. The responsibility for enrollment has been handed over to *Gram Panchayats,* and the trainings are to be carried out by empanelled digital literacy centres at the grassroots, to be compensated on the basis of the number of participants they successfully train. Beneficiary selection criteria for this scheme indicate that the following categories of applicants will be accorded priority: women, differently-abled individuals, dalits, college drop-outs, individuals from BPL households.

However, these trainings are conceptualised as a programme of 20 hours duration, which is to be completed in a minimum of 10 days and maximum of 30 days. Also, apart from a vague requirement that the centres have to provide support/ assistance to the trainees for at least two years after the training is over, there is no clear strategy on how the digital literacy programme will catalyse a meaningful use-culture at the village level, in the long run. There is an opportunity to do this, by finding strategic linkages with the *Mahila Shakti Kendras/* women's empowerment centres – but for this, budgetary allocations to these centres need to be stepped up so that they can function as women's digital libraries/women-run digital knowledge centres at the grassroots. Currently, the government has just announced a budgetary allocation of 500 crore, for the 14 lakh *anganwadis*, which amounts to a miniscule 3,571 INR allocation for each centre![38]

5.3 Target 5b - Recommendations for action

1. Gender disaggregated data in the digital sector is crucial for governance in the digital age. The government should immediately initiate an NSSO survey round, focusing on gendered patterns of access and use of digital technologies, including the Internet.

2. Policy innovations in broadband are vital to ensure that the national efforts to connect India's villages reaches local institutions – schools, *anganwadis*, health centres and hospitals. Capacity building of local agencies is vital for gender sensitive management of information and data, and appropriation and deployment of the same for local planning and development.

3. Using a combination of formal, informal and distance education modalities, incentives must be provided for girls and women to build digital capabilities. The range of literacies required for meaningful participation in the information society is mind-boggling and can pave the way for economic and social empowerment of marginalised groups. Government schools must become the fulcrum of girls' citizenship education through digital training. Kerala's IT@Schools program has launched an ambitious program, which needs to be studied and adapted suitably. Careers in all sectors of the economy are increasingly based on digital skills. Unless girls and women can acquire the higher order capabilities in computing, they run the risk of ending up in the lower segments of the new economy. Curricular approaches need an urgent relook in this regard, across the spectrum from formal to life-long learning.

4. A strong legal framework that guarantees digital rights and spells out the institutional mechanisms for shaping an equitable information society is an urgent imperative. This can ensure

37 https://scroll.in/article/828285/what-to-expect-from-the-budgets-mahila-shakti-kendras-not-much-say-activists
38 Ibid.

that women's freedoms and rights in the digital age are enshrined in law, providing the basis for policies cross-sectorally.

5. As discussed in Section 2.2 - Target 1.3 - Recommendation No. 6, local knowledge centres constitute a cornerstone institution for a future society that is gender just. If operated by young women, they have the potential to spawn new, gender transformative public cultures. Regional pilots of the *Mahila Shakti Kendras*, with enhanced budgetary allocations need to be implemented to explore the role and impact of digital strategies in capacity building and empowerment. Pilots must be designed in partnership with grassroots development practitioners, gender and digital rights organisations and experts in feminist pedagogy. Based on the pilot phase, localised models can be encouraged, through suitable public finance options involving all levels of government.

6. Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

6.1 Target 9c -Analysis of progress

Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet.

The official report for the VNR highlights the Digital India programme and the Bharat Broadband initiative that aims at building a nation-wide fibre optic broadband backbone, as key achievements. This scheme, launched in 2011, was initially known as the National Optic Fibre Network, and rechristened 'Bharat Broadband' in 2014, following an overhaul for addressing delays in implementation. The project is now being implemented in a phased manner, and a new target date of March 2018 has been set[39]. The project, however, does not take any steps in creating/supporting last mile initiatives for catalysing meaningful use cultures, such as support for local content creation efforts or e-government efforts to engage citizens/ local organisations. This is an area where we can take a leaf out of other good practices. For example, the 'Women and Broadband' initiative of the Government's Equalities Office, United Kingdom, has supported innovative projects for women entrepreneurs to take advantage of high speed broadband, incentivising them to develop online businesses and acquaint themselves with digital transactions online etc.[40] Indigenising such ideas towards locally responsive, gender transformative outcomes would be useful so that being connected can translate into pathways for empowerment for women and girls.

6.2 Target 9c - Recommendations for action

1. To increase access to ICTs and provide universal and affordable Internet, India must implement the right to broadband envisioned in the National Telecom Policy. A rights framework can glavanise new conversations and actions for women's access to the Internet and to their information and communication rights. A gender budget must be intrinsic to such a right. In fact the state of Kerala has declared access to the Internet a basic human right. This will hopefully usher in a new paradigm in the state for policy and programmatic directions in public administration, presenting a useful opportunity for gender mainstreaming.

2. The Bharat Broadband programme needs to have a budgetary component for supporting pilot projects that aim at encouraging local content creation with a strong gender component. A pilot

39 http://www.financialexpress.com/industry/corrective-steps-taken-to-complete-bharatnet-project-by-2018-government/591770/

40 http://www.ispreview.co.uk/index.php/2014/05/1m-fund-help-female-entrepreneurs-benefit-superfast-broadband.html

project implemented a few years back by the USOF, the *Sanchar Shakti* programme, focused on subsidising development and roll out of mobile value-added services (for public information, health, financial literacy etc.) to women's self help groups. The programme needs to be scaled up throughpartnerships with local organisations for context-appropriate content – SMS/IVR info services on entitlements, health, agriculture, financial literacy etc. – and linkages with *Mahila Shakti Kendras/* women's empowerment centres.

3. TRAI has proposed provisioning of non-discriminatory free data in rural areas, to fulfil the vision of Digital India[41]. Provisioning by government through the USOF funds of free monthly data to subscribers in rural and remote areas, as recommended by TRAI, can trigger positive spirals in demand, especially if dovetailed with e-government initiatives for gender-responsive content, an upgraded CSCs programme as discussed earlier in Recommendation 6 of Target 1.3, section 2.2, and local pilots of the Mahila Shakti Kendras, discussed in Recommendation 5 of Target 5b, Section 5.3.

7. A brief comment on national data capabilities for monitoring and accountability (part of Goal 17)

1. India has initiated an Open Data programme, but the lack of interconnections between data sets of different departments, interoperability issues, and department-centric, rather than citizen-centric, focus in presentation have posed challenges to effective implementation. As a recent research study on OGD observes, "*of the total 52 ministries[42], only 32 have uploaded datasets of which 7 have uploaded less than the mandatory 5. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the 25 (32-7) ministries that have fulfilled the mandatory requirement, have in any way uploaded all the remaining datasets*"[43]. The open data policy framework does not provide concrete guidelines on how a full fledged programme on open data – covering all tiers of government – can be developed.[44] In the current context, where *Gram Panchayats* are being equipped with broadband connectivity, this lack suggests a missed opportunity for strengthening national data capabilities. The need of the hour is to initiate a nation-wide drive for creating open data portals at the local government level, including budgetary data, in formats that support *Mahila Gram Sabha* dialogues and claims-making by marginalised women.

2. There are no clear directives about the extent of granularity that is permissible in open data sets, to ensure that privacy of women and individuals with non-mainstream gender and sexual identities is not compromised in open data publishing. This results in many inadvertent violations. For example, the state government of Karnataka published personal information collected about women from the backward classes, as part of a Socio-Economic Caste Census exercise, on the website of the Backward Classes Commission[45] and a high court directive was needed to pull the information out of the public domain. Similarly, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, that runs an IVR-

41 Recommendations on Encouraging Data usage in Rural Areas through Provisioning of Free Data, http://www.trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/Recommendations_19122016.pdf

42 Central government ministries covered by the NDSAP.

43 Agarwal, N. (2015), Open Government Data: An answer to India's growth logjam, https://www.dropbox.com/s/met5t8bujeydpse/OG3.pdf?dl=0 , cited in IT for Change (2016). The e-government institutional ecosystem in India through the gender lens: A state of the art analysis. See http://egov4women.unescapsdd.org/files/documents/country-overviews.pdf

44 IT for Change (2016). The e-government institutional ecosystem in India through the gender lens: A state of the art analysis. See http://egov4women.unescapsdd.org/files/documents/country-overviews.pdf

45 Gowda, A. (2015), Karnataka government risks women safety, puts out personal data in caste census, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/karnataka-government-caste-census-women-privacy-violated/1/450140.html , Retrieved 20 November 2015.

based reporting system for supporting victims of gender based violence, publishes all details of cases handled on its website[46]. This lacuna must be urgently addressed through legislative measures, especially in the current context when all databases are being seeded with *Aadhaar* (as explained in the discussion on Goal 1).

3. It would augur well for the government to pay heed to the caution on the limits of the present Big Data paradigm in development policy making, as flagged by the recent report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the gender digital divide[47]. As the report argues,

> "the advent of big data and artificial intelligence may have an impact on women's rights and on the gender digital divide. Data-driven technologies may provide new opportunities to solve societal problems and perform a range of complex tasks in everyday life, but there is also a risk of increasing disparities for those who do not have access, and of reinforcing, or even amplifying, gender inequalities due to data gaps and bias. For example, while big data analytics may offer possibilities to make gender-based discrimination more visible and to quantify women's political, economic, social and health status, there is also a risk that it may not pick up information about the diverse experiences of women, owing to underrepresentation or exclusion of particular groups online and a lack of reporting."

State led efforts on data – that lead to an ethical framework of data for development – are an urgent need to correct data inequities, so governance leads to gender just outcomes.

8. Comment on adequacy of national level indicators for Targets 5b and 9c

The indicator under target 5b is "number of mobile phone users by sex", and those under target 9c are "Proportion of population covered by a mobile network by technology", "Number of broadband subscribers (in million)". Clearly, these indicators do not shed light on the gender digital divides in quality of access and use. Indicators need to be able to serve the purpose of measuring progress towards the goal in its most substantive meaning. The government needs to capture the individual, institutional and social aspects of access. Therefore, in addition to mobile cellular telephone subscriptions (which indicator needs to be disaggregated by gender, age, location and income), it would be useful to consider indicators such as[48]:

- per capita data use in kbps by gender, age, location and income;
- percentage of households (disaggregated by location) with access to internet;
- percentage of households (rural/urban) with a computer;
- fixed broadband Internet access costs per month, and as a percentage of monthly per capita income (this will enable measurement of household level access, which may be key for many women and girls unable to access public internet points).
- free public access points per 100 inhabitants;
- percentage of public libraries with public internet access

46 See http://9connections.com/sacap/admin/print_pdf.php?search=Search&districtText=&district=15&districtText=ANANTAPUR%20&incomplete=2

47 https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/111/81/PDF/G1711181.pdf?OpenElement

48 For more details, see https://www.itforchange.net/Inputs%20to%20the%20consultation%20on%20Indicators%20of%20Gender%20Equality%20Goal%205