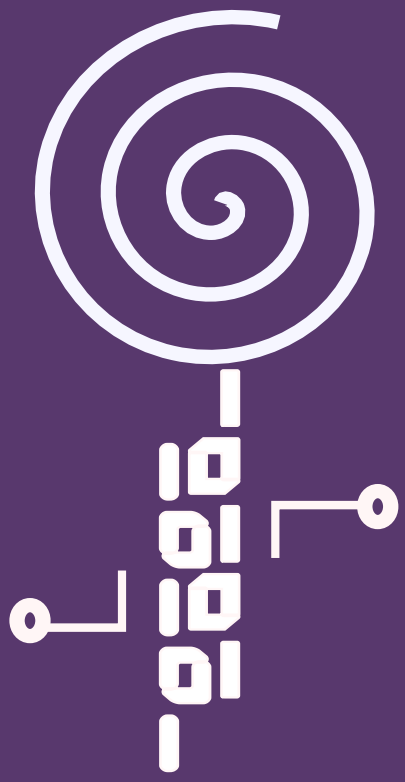
FREE BASICS: A wrong turn on the road to women's empowerment ?

India Country Report of the Women's Rights Online study

IT for Change

February 2016



With support from
WWW Foundation and Sida

IT for Change is an India-based non-governmental organisation engaged in research, policy advocacy and field practice for promoting a just and equitable information society for the global South.

Established by the inventor of the Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the World Wide Web Foundation seeks to establish the open Web as a global public good and a basic right, creating a world where everyone, everywhere can use the Web to communicate, collaborate and innovate freely. The World Wide Web Foundation operates at the confluence of technology and human rights, targeting three key areas: Access, Voice and Participation.

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, is a government agency working on behalf of the Swedish parliament and government, with the mission to reduce poverty in the world. Through our work and in cooperation with others, we contribute to implementing Sweden's Policy for Global Development.

Abbreviations

ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
SIM	Subscriber Identity Mobile
SNS	Social Networking Sites
WWW	World Wide Web
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
FB	Facebook
TRAI	Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India
ICTs	Information and Communication Technology
SNS	Social Networking Sites

1. Introduction to the research study

In 2015, WWW Foundation and Sida launched the Women's Rights Online research study to map the opportunities for women's empowerment through web-enabled ICTs, across the capital cities/economic hubs of 10 countries in the global South: Cairo, Egypt; Bogota, Colombia; Jakarta, Indonesia; Kampala, Uganda; Lagos, Nigeria; Manila, Philippines; Maputo, Mozambique; Nairobi, Kenya; New Delhi, India; and Yaounde, Cameroon. Towards this, at each site, a quantitative survey was carried out with about 1000 respondents from urban-poor neighbourhoods (750 women and 250 men) to map gendered patterns of access and use of the Internet.

This report details the key findings from the India component of the research study. The most important insight from the Indian context is that though the increasing market diffusion of mobiles is eliminating the gender gap in Internet access, this trend does not show impacts for women's empowerment. This is because access and uptake of the Internet by urban-poor women is not (at this stage of adoption) leading to an expansion of their informational, communicative and associational capabilities. For most individuals in urban-poor neighbourhoods, the Internet experience remains a largely passive one. Unless this is transformed, the Internet and web-enabled ICTs cannot open up empowerment pathways for India's most marginalised women.

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2. Research methodology

A survey on patterns of Internet use of urban-poor women and men was carried out at all 10 sites. In the implementation of the survey, a quota sampling method was used. At each site, 1,000 face-to-face interviews covering about 750 women and 250 men living in urban-poor areas and between the ages of 18 and 60 were completed. The focus of the data collection was on women, hence the larger sample of women and smaller sample of men. The latter is still useful for comparative purposes and to provide an indication of the gender gap in ICT and Internet use in each city.

Ipsos MORI, a research agency, was contracted to implement the survey and generate the preliminary data tables. In addition, a civil society organisation with experience in working on gender and ICTs was selected at each site, as the 'Country Partner' for the study – to provide qualitative, context-specific insights to enrich the interpretation of findings, and enable the identification of key priorities for policy and programming.

IT for Change was brought on board as the 'Country Partner' for the India study and 770 women and 265 men were interviewed in New Delhi. The following sections of this report summarise IT for Change's interpretations of the survey results from New Delhi, on the potential of the Internet for furthering the empowerment of urban-poor women.

3. Overview of the context under study

By 2016, India is expected to emerge as the home to the second largest base of Internet users in the world, in absolute terms, overtaking even the United States – thanks to the availability of low-cost smart phones and increasing mobile broadband penetration. However, this does not take away from the fact that the country still has a long road to travel, in terms of achieving universal access. In 2014, the proportion of Indian households in which at least one member had access to the Internet was 16.1% in rural areas, 48.7% in urban areas and 26.7% in rural and urban areas combined. Of these, only about 3% of households had access to the Internet at home. What this indicates is that the majority of individuals accessing the Internet are reliant on cybercafes, work-places, or friends and acquaintances.

More crucially, as the Global Information Technology Report 2015 highlights, there is a lot of ground to be covered, in ensuring access to the benefits of the digital revolution, especially for those who have historically been on the margins of Indian society[1]:

> "Despite many clusters of excellence and its knack for frugal innovation, India is not leveraging ICTs for the benefits of its entire population. (...). Uptake of ICTs is among the lowest in the world. When accounting for multiple SIM-card ownership, approximately one-third of the population owns a mobile phone. Smart-phones are the privilege of the very few, with 3 mobile broadband subscriptions for every 100 population. Only 15 percent of the

1 For example, Indian Muslims, dalits, First Peoples or 'Tribals'.

population uses the Internet. By international standards, technology adoption by businesses remains limited, as it does within the government".

There is also evidence of the access divide being amplified along gender lines. The Intel Women and the Web Study 2013 found that a woman in India is 27% less likely than a man to have Internet access. Similarly, a 2014 research study by the analytics firm comScore found that less than 40% of India's Internet users were women, figures far lower when compared to other countries. This is unsurprising, when we consider the fact that India has very high rates of gender inequality. In fact, the Global Gender Gap Report 2015, which ranks 145 countries in the world in terms of their gender equality attainments, assigned India the 108th spot. The Report uses a composite index that assesses gender inequality along the 4 dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment, health and survival.

4. Understanding gendered patterns of use of web-enabled ICTs: The need to move beyond the 'digital divide' approach

The Women's Rights Online survey found that among the urban-poor, the gender gap in access to mobile phones is rapidly closing. 69% of men and 79% of women surveyed own a mobile phone. Among respondents who do not personally own a phone, a greater percentage of women (70%) compared to men (59%) have shared access to a phone. 49% of men surveyed and 59% of women surveyed have access to a smart phone – personally owned or shared.

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Internet uptake among urban-poor women and men is nearly equal. 43% of the 265 men surveyed reported using the Internet in the past 6 months; as did 46.94% of the 769 women respondents who answered the question. Internet use is highest among those between 18-34 years, and declines as age increases. Similarly, Internet access shows a positive correlation with level of education; with a higher percentage of those who have completed secondary school using the Internet than those who have completed only primary school, and those with no formal education.

The 'personal mobile phone' is the most popular medium for accessing the Internet; reported by 76% of Internet users. Further, mobile phone ownership has a high degree of positive correlation with Internet use. Over 56% of those with their own mobile phone are Internet users. But only 22% of those with shared access to mobile phones use the Internet. The second-most common medium for accessing the Internet is the paid public access point/ cybercafe, reported by 62% of Internet users. This study also confirms the finding from previous research about cybercafes becoming 'male bastions'. 51% of male Internet users report visiting such spaces, as against only 33% of female Internet users. Clearly, it is personal access rather than a public access culture that is contributing to women's uptake of mobile phones and the Internet in the urban-poor neighbourhoods of New Delhi.

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In summary, market-led diffusion of smart phones and mobile broadband is bringing connectivity to a new generation of users: urban-poor women. In addition, the survey in New Delhi reveals that even among marginalised social groups, the urban-poor in this case, gender identity in and of itself may not be a barrier to access. Therefore, it is time to move beyond the rather simplistic concept of the 'gender digital divide'; it is not enough to understand who is left behind, it is critical to know what chasms reflect the divide with respect to ICT use, in a world where men and women are getting connected.

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5. Are prevailing cultures of Internet use contributing to an expansion of informational, communicative and associational capabilities for urban-poor women?

The bridging of the gender gap in access may be good news, but connectivity does not automatically translate into inclusion. Getting

a mobile phone may not bring the benefits of the information society for marginalised women (and men). By benefits we refer to the expansion of individuals' informational, associational and communicative capabilities. This augmentation of human capabilities is a result of the positive consequences of *particular cultures of Internet use.*

The survey indicates that social networking and social media sites have a high level of uptake among both urban-poor women and men Internet users. Facebook is the most popular platform, used by 96% of male Internet users and 98% of female Internet users. Among Facebook users, 82% of men and 78% of women use it at least 2-4 times a week. The second-most-popular platform is YouTube, with uptake from 70% male and 43% female Internet users.

Social networking sites (SNS) seem to mainly serve as spaces for maintaining existing networks of friends and family members. 88% of male SNS users and 92% of female SNS users report that they use these spaces to stay connected with friends, family and other social acquaintances. More men than women report using SNS to make new friends, 62% as against 38%. However, there is evidence that the Internet has some disruptive potential for challenging prevailing social controls on women's interactions outside the realm of the family. 47% of male Internet users and 53% of female Internet users report communicating with people of the opposite sex, apart from family members and work colleagues, in online spaces.

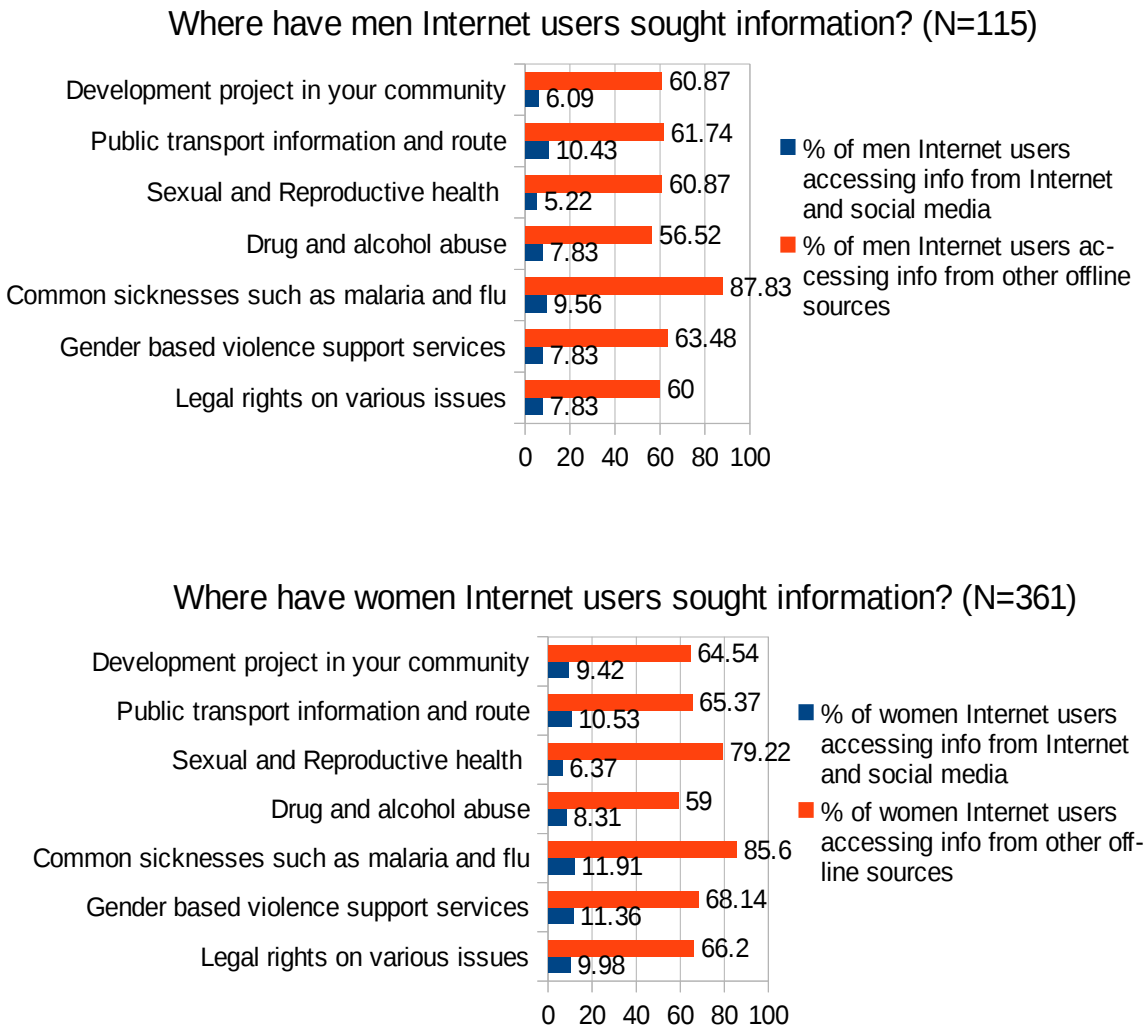
While these new opportunities for play and leisure indicate changing gender norms, the evidence does not necessarily suggest destabilisation of prevalent gender orders. The latter, we suggest, arises from whether and how participation online can facilitate for poor, urban women an expansion of choice. The Women's Rights Online study uses the analytical framework developed by the Women-gov research project (2014) to unpack the impact of technology on the expansion of choice – which notes that ICTs expand the choices available to marginalised women in three inter-related ways:
a) enhancing their informational power: by opening up access to hitherto closed information channels and enabling the development of capabilities for information-production.
b) boosting their communicative power: by creating new opportunities for public-political expression and generating counter-discourses challenging the status quo.
c) strengthening their associational power: by bolstering networks of peer support and solidarity

and enhancing the opportunities to participate in collective action.

5.1 Informational capabilities

Fig 1 provides a detailed break-up of the extent to which women and men Internet users actively seek information in online spaces.

Fig 1. Extent to which Internet is used for active information-seeking by female and male Internet users[2]

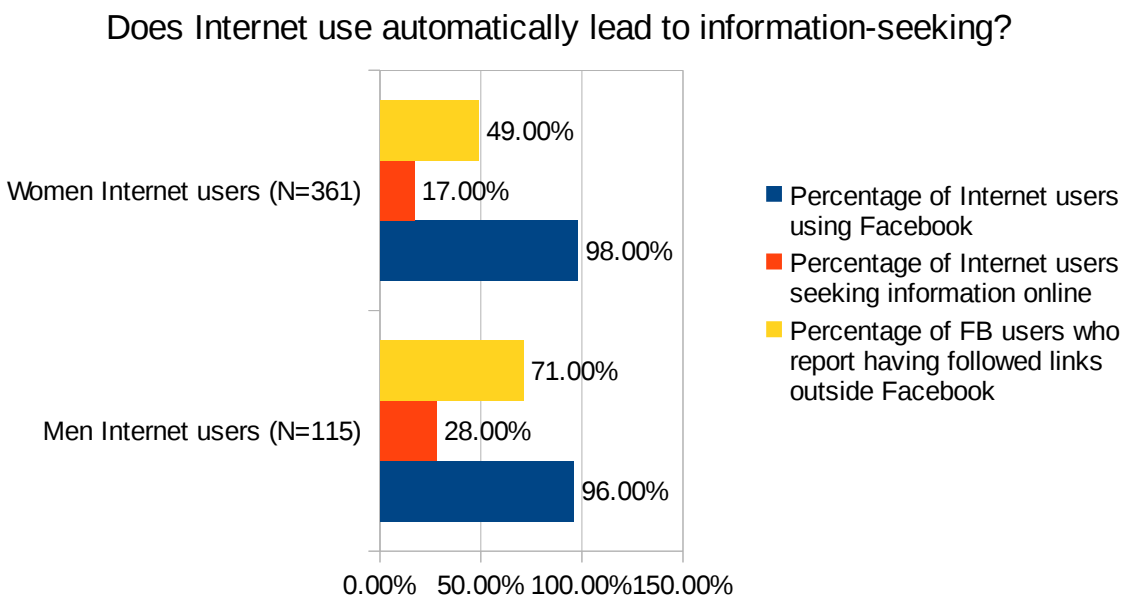


Clearly, female and male Internet users do not consider Internet and social media as important spaces for active information-seeking.

2 This includes Radio, TV, newspapers, public library, hospital/health clinic, school/university, community elder, health worker, friend/ family members, neighbour, community/ religious leader, NGO, local municipal council and any other offline source named by the respondent.

When these statistics are contrasted with data about survey respondents' Facebook usage and exposure to the wider Internet, this lack of information-seeking online seems a grave concern. As **Fig 2** indicates, Facebook uptake of women and men Internet users is high, at 98% and 96% respectively. The percentage of women FB users who are able to use Facebook as a stepping stone to the open Internet is much lower than that of men FB users. Only 49% of women FB users report to having followed links outside Facebook; but over 71% of men FB users report this. However, among both women and men users, the use of Facebook and the introduction to the open Internet through FB usage does not seem to lead to active information-seeking behaviour. A mere 28% of men Internet users and 17% of women Internet users report to seeking information online on health, legal rights, public transport or other issues (listed at **Fig 1** above).

Fig 1. Extent to which Internet use leads to active information-seeking by female and male Internet users



Thus, for urban-poor women and men, the mere act of going online does not automatically open up new pathways for informational agency. This finding is critical, considering that a linear logic of 'some-Internet-better-than-no-Internet' is often employed to make the case for supply driven market strategies like 'Free Basics'. **(See Box 1).**

Box 1. Why Free Basics is not enough for the digital inclusion of India's poor

Facebook rolled out its Free Basics service (initially *Internet.org*) in India in December 2014, in partnership with Reliance Communications. The service allows users access to a selection of partner websites for free, if they are accessing it from a Reliance mobile-data connection. This type of arrangement between a content provider and a telecommunications company that allows users to access select content without incurring data charges is termed a 'zero service' in telecommunications parlance. In March 2015, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) initiated a public consultation on net neutrality regulation in the country. Civil society response was overwhelming, and many from the digital rights community who mobilised themselves under the banner of *savetheinternet.in* criticised Facebook for promoting a 'walled garden' that would result in the creation of a tiered Internet, violating the foundational principle of net neutrality. Public opinion was so negative that some Indian companies who initially agreed to partner with Facebook, withdrew their support.

In response, Facebook initiated a massive PR campaign to regain support. In April 2015, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, published *a blog*, arguing for the need to balance net neutrality and universal access considerations, for the effective pursuit of the digital inclusion agenda: *"...The Internet isn't affordable to everyone, and in many places awareness of its value remains low. Women and the poor are most likely to be excluded and further disempowered by lack of connectivity....This is why we created Internet.org, our effort to connect the whole world. Internet.org lowers the cost of accessing the internet and raises the awareness of the Internet's value. It helps include everyone in the world's opportunities...Arguments about net neutrality shouldn't be used to prevent the most disadvantaged people in society from gaining access or to deprive people of opportunity. Eliminating programs that bring more people online won't increase social inclusion or close the digital divide."*

Facebook re-launched Internet.org as Free Basics in September 2015, even as the outcomes of the TRAI public consultation were pending. In an effort to counter the 'walled garden' criticism, Facebook issued a number of statements about Free Basics' commitment to non-exclusivity (willingness to tie-up with telecommunication service providers other than Reliance) and openness (invitation to all developers to apply for partnerships with the platform). However, most sections of civil society continued to remain critical of Free Basics, highlighting that the service posed the same threats to digital equality as its earlier avatar Internet.org, allowing Facebook to consolidate its platform power and contributing to the emergence of a new differential pricing model for Internet data.

In December 2015, TRAI issued a second public consultation paper inviting comments from the public on the issue of differential pricing; and directed Reliance Communications to temporarily suspend Free

Basics whilst the deliberation on net neutrality regulation was underway. Facebook responded with *an aggressive PR campaign* urging the Indian public to opt for Free Basics as a *"bridge to the full Internet and connectivity"*, stressing that *"instead of giving people access to some Internet services for free, critics of the program continue to spread false claims - even if that means leaving behind a billion people".*

The Women's Rights Online survey casts the spotlight on the flaws of the core argument that Facebook is using to defend its Internet.org/Free Basics service: that for the bulk of the world's poor, the mere act of getting online will bring the benefits of connectivity, through an automatic expansion of informational capabilities. The survey data unmistakably indicates that in and of itself, being online and on social networks, or even following web links from social networks, does not directly bring informational agency. Only 17 percent of the women in the study *seek* information online, although nearly all of those in the study use Facebook. This percentage reveals barriers to poor women's informational capabilities at many levels – primarily, the lack of affordable and meaningful information that will make women eager participants of online life. For the web to be a transformative tool redefining poor women's opportunity structure, their strategic life choices must expand.

On 8th February 2016, the TRAI issued an order clearly prohibiting all forms of discriminatory tariffs for data services – whether direct or indirect (such as zero services). TRAI explained that it was issuing this *ex ante* prohibition as discriminatory pricing gives telecos enormous (and unchecked) power to shape Internet users' experience. This order thus offers *a clear stance against price-based discrimination*, an area in which even regulators in the USA and EU have soft-pedalled.

5.2 Communicative capabilities

8% of male SNS users and 2% of female SNS users used these platforms to inform people in their network about interesting events, public debates, and social and political issues they consider important. Similarly, only 9% of male SNS users and 10% of female SNS users reported that these platforms had contributed to their awareness of public social events. This is a rather small proportion of the total number of SNS users.

As **Table 1** indicates, men and women respondents in general, as well as men and women Internet users in particular, seem to be actively asserting their citizen-voice in offline spaces. However, even among Internet users, online spaces do not seem to be significant spaces for public-political

expression. Only 8.7% of men Internet users and 7.8% of women Internet users report that they have used online spaces to share their views on important/controversial issues, more than once. But 72% of male Internet users and 67% of female Internet users report that they value the Internet as a space for posting comments about social, political and economic issues that they care about. This perception suggests a recognition of the Internet as an extension of the public sphere in contemporary times. The translation of such cognizance into active participation depends again on the incentive that policies can bring for marginalised women to use the online space as a political agora to voice their opinions and claim their rights.

Table 1. Assertions of citizen-voice by respondents

Particulars	% of Men respondents who have asserted their citizen-voice (either online or offline)[3] (N=265)	% of Women respondents who have asserted their citizen-voice (either online or offline) (N=770)	% of Men Internet users who have asserted their citizen-voice (either online or offline) (N=115)	% of Women Internet users who have asserted their citizen-voice (either online or offline) (N=361)	% of Men Internet users who have asserted their citizen-voice on Internet and social media (N=115)	% of Women respondents who have asserted their citizen-voice on Internet and social media (N=361)
Make a complaint about government services	182 (68.68%)	581 (75.45%)	84 (73.04%)	280 (77.5%)	7 (6.09%)	26 (7.20%)
Report corruption	160 (60.38%)	496 (64.42%)	76 (66.09%)	240 (66.48%)	6 (5.22%)	31 (8.59%)
Expressing views on important issues facing the community	147 (55.47%)	508 (65.97%)	73 (63.48%)	247 (68.42%)	13 (11.30%)	38 (10.53%)
Expressing views on important issues facing the country	132 (49.81%)	499 (64.81%)	72 (62.61%)	241 (66.76%)	14 (12.17%)	45 (12.47%)

3 Through Internet and Social Media, Radio, TV, Newspaper, Public library, health clinic, school/university, Local Council Office, emergency hotline, NGO/community organisation; speaking to a community elder, health/social worker, friend/family member, neighbour, community/religious leader, police or government official.

5.3 Associational capabilities

The survey revealed that only a small percentage of Internet users engage in political networking online. Only 8% of men SNS users and 2% of women SNS users use social media and social networking platforms to inform people in their network about interesting events, public/political issues and social events that they consider important. Only a small percentage report engagement in formal and informal political activities.

Studies reveal that the Internet can be a key precursor to the associational networks that can form the future-base for public-political action. However, the online space is not yet being used by urban poor women and men to build or strengthen ties of solidarity with others. Only 4% of women and men SNS users report using social networking platforms to connect with other people with similar interests or problems. An even smaller fraction – 3% of men SNS users and 1% of women SNS users – report that online social network sites help them build networks of support.

Read along with the passivity of the few women accessing online information and the non-use of the Internet by the majority for voicing opinion, the absence of avenues for poor urban women to forge meaningful online connections reveals the deficit in the current social and policy architecture of the Internet in India. The Internet is not defined in policy as an instrument for inclusive, empowering citizenship.

5.4. The prevalence of online violence and harassment

8% of men respondents and 7% of women respondents reported experiencing threats or direct personal bullying in the past 2 years over the Internet and/or mobile. Taking into account the prevailing culture of silence around gender-based violence and harassment, and the inaptness of the survey methodology for mapping sensitive issues, we recognise that this data may not be representative of the reality. The prevalent rates of online violence and harassment are likely to be much higher. For example, among women and men who have experienced Internet-based violence, 9% of women reported that they have experienced threats 10 times or more. None of the men interviewed reported receiving such a high frequency of threats.

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Also, respondents in the age group of 18-24 years are more likely to receive threats than those belonging to older age groups. When read against qualitative accounts of the widespread misogyny in India's emerging online public sphere (**Box 2**), the survey data presents cause for concern – online violence and harassment, if left unchecked, becomes a source of extreme dis-empowerment.

Box 2. Online VAW in India: Tackling a patriarchal weapon that silences dissenting women

The media commentator Laurie Penny once observed: "(A woman's opinion) is the short skirt of the Internet. Having one and flaunting it is somehow asking an amorphous mass of almost-entirely male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they'd like to rape, kill and urinate on you". An examination of online gender-based violence in India validates this observation – as in many cases it is women's political expression, especially the airing of viewpoints that contravenes majoritarian opinion, that has been at the receiving end of such attacks. Celebrities, women activists, media-persons and ordinary women alike have been targeted.

India currently has no legal provision that explicitly tackles the issue of online VAW. The provision that was previously used in such cases was Section 66 A of the Information Technology Act 2000 that penalised the use of electronic media for 'grossly offensive' and menacing communication with upto 3 years imprisonment. This provision was struck down by the Supreme Court of India for promoting unreasonable and excessive curbs on the right to free expression in March 2015, in response to a public interest litigation. This judgment was welcomed by feminist groups who pointed out that Section 66 A was used more often by state agencies to silence dissenters than in cases of VAW. Following the repeal of Section 66 A, the legal provisions used to counter VAW are the following: existing sections of the Indian Penal Code that deal with offline violence and harassment; and Section 79 of the Information Technology Act 2000 on intermediary liability which mandates website providers and Internet platforms to comply with content take-down notices issued by courts and government agencies. In terms of prosecuting the perpetrators, these existing legal provisions are sufficient. However, as the Indian NGO, Internet Democracy Project has observed: *"According to the Web Index Report 2014-15, India has a medium score (7 out of 10) when it comes to prosecuting perpetrators (of VAW), which is exceptional compared to most countries but dismally low (3 out of 10) when it comes to supporting victims subject to online harassment. This is where Indian lawmakers and policymakers need to be more assertive. It cannot be denied that prosecuting perpetrators brings relief to the victim, but having measures in place which support victims and ease their suffering should also be established".*

6. Conclusion

The India survey clearly reveals that market-led diffusion of mobile phones is reducing the gender gap in Internet access among the urban-poor. This is particularly true for younger women and women who have better educational attainments. Social media use is common among all those who go online; and women do explore new contacts online through these platforms. But at the same time, the data unequivocally demonstrates the inability of the current access paradigm to transform the basic capabilities of poor women. Internet use can lead to serendipitous possibilities, and therefore, as the poorest women get connected, new thresholds of change are plausible. However, at this point in time, the study in India among urban poor women and men does not present any evidence to reflect this potential shift. Rather, the study shows how only a small proportion of women has proactively sought information online, a negligible proportion has ever attempted to share their views and an extremely small number has used their online connections for solidarity and support. Women are also clearly at risk of receiving higher levels of threats and harassment online, when compared to men.

The study reveals that the Internet ecosystem in India – the online environment, the offline policies and programmes and the ensuing cultures of use – fails to measure up to the Internet's promise for women's citizenship and equality.

In this situation, it is critical to have public policies and investment in the development of digital capabilities of the most marginalised citizens. The country's ambitious Digital India programme, launched in 2014, recognises the importance of this mandate. In fact, digital empowerment of citizens is a critical pillar of its three-pronged strategy (with universalising access to digital infrastructure, and development of e-service delivery being the other two). Towards this, the state has launched the National Digital Literacy Mission, with the intention of strengthening the digital skills of 5 million people across the country – with sub-programmes specifically targeting women community workers. However, curriculum-development in this initiative is guided by the vision of creating an '*IT-ready workforce from India's small towns and villages in 5 years',* and not one geared towards opening up strategic pathways for women's digital citizenship. This focus needs

to change; as an expansion of digital capabilities can occur only when digital literacy is linked to social, economic and political empowerment. This requires creative programming with an emphasis on government-civil society partnerships and the involvement of women's organisations. It is time that connectivity is seen as a public good that will need to be provisioned universally with models that support subsidised access and meaningful uses by women.