

Dream Desk - Baseline Report

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the baseline study conducted for the **Dream Desk** pilot, an initiative working with rural young women and adolescent girls in Mulluru village, Hunsuru block, Mysuru district, to build digital fluency, financial literacy, and agency as pathways to education, employment, and empowerment. The study was conducted as a four-day in-person exercise with 45 enrolled participants, 32 young women and 13 adolescent girls – capturing usage, knowledge, and perceptions across six themes: digital literacy, financial literacy, gender and patriarchy, media and communication, careers and education, and leadership and community voice. Needs assessment findings, drawn from both the baseline data and orientation sessions conducted with participants, have been integrated thematically throughout the report.

The cohort consists of respondents from socio-economically marginalized backgrounds, with limited personal income and mixed educational attainment. Across all six themes, a consistent pattern emerges: respondents express high aspiration, confidence, and awareness in principle, but this does not yet translate into active practice or decision-making power. Smartphone access is strong, but digital use remains consumption-led rather than creative or expressive; financial inclusion exists on paper, but spending and saving behaviour stays passive; belief in gender equality coexists with the continued need for permission to study or work; and strong interest in leadership and civic participation is undercut by low actual involvement and partial self-confidence. Concrete, addressable skill gaps, particularly, digital skilling, resume-writing, content creation, and scholarship awareness, stand out as near-term entry points for the programme.

These findings establish the baseline against which the Dream Desk Academy, Information Repository, and Media interventions will be measured at endline, and point to an early programmatic emphasis on practical, applied skill-building and structured opportunities for voice and decision-making, alongside continued awareness-building.

Introduction to the Dream Desk Project:

The Dream Desk project envisions an inclusive digital economy where rural women and girls actively harness the digital as a pathway towards continued education, employment and empowerment.

Rooted in rural Mysuru, the project addresses the socio-cultural and accessibility barriers that limit women's and girls' access and agency on digital platforms, and works towards building and nurturing a women-led information and media ecosystem.

The project pilot has been unfolding in Mulluru village in the Hunsuru block of Mysuru district, and is anchored at the women-led community information centre in the village. 45 young women and adolescents (aged 15 to 30) have been enrolled in the programme through an extensive outreach effort. The pilot aims to introduce structured training and media components through three broad interventions:

01. **Dream Desk Information Repository** - Compendium of vetted pathways to education, employment, scholarships, trainings and government schemes that are contextual and locally relevant.
02. **Dream Desk Academy** - Structured training spanning digital fluency, cyber safety practices, critical gender perspectives, media literacy, financial literacy, and employment-ready skills.
03. **Dream Desk Media** - Community media in the local language showcasing the voices and lived realities of young women and adolescent girls.

Methodology:

The baseline study for the Dream Desk pilot was a four-day in-person exercise. The project team administered the survey among 45 participants – 32 young women and 13 adolescent girls – using Google Forms. Along with the participants' demographic details, the survey aimed to capture their usage patterns, knowledge, and perceptions across six key themes:

01. Digital literacy
02. Financial literacy
03. Gender and patriarchy
04. Media and communication
05. Careers, education, and aspirations
06. Leadership and community voice

Refer to Annexure 01 for the Dream Desk – Baseline Questionnaire [here](#).

Key Highlights

Demographic details

The cohort largely hails from socio-economically marginalized backgrounds, with a majority (59.1%) belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) category. Educational attainment is mixed, with only about a third (36.4%) having pursued a degree. Of the 45 respondents, comprising 13 adolescent girls and 32

women, all adolescent girls reported having no personal income. Notably, of the 32 women, 30 also reported no personal income, with two reporting personal incomes under 10,000 INR each. Further, the women who responded appear to be working across diverse roles, including 'student', 'household work', 'work on own land', 'looking after petty shop' and 'self-employed (in tailoring)'.

01: Digital Literacy

- Usage:** Smartphones are more accessible to respondents compared to desktop devices. Current usage patterns largely cover communication and consumption of information, while content creation and self-expression remain limited. Smartphones appear to be more accessible to respondents than desktop devices, with a significant majority of respondents (93%) reporting having access to the former. Additionally, smartphone use does not appear to be passive, with the same percentage (93%) reporting they also use their smartphone on a daily basis. The nature of use across both smartphones and desktop devices remains largely focused on communication and information consumption (predominantly for learning and schoolwork), while content creation and self-expression remain limited.
- Knowledge:** A majority of respondents reported fluency and ease of use with smartphones. However, a similar proportion (75.5%) reported believing they exercise control over what they see online. A significant proportion (56%) also reported knowing what misinformation or fake news means. Of the respondents who expressed deep familiarity with misinformation and fake news, more than 80% reported being able to differentiate between mis- and disinformation. Significantly, despite a large proportion of respondents being familiar with misinformation and fake news, the most commonly reported action upon encountering fake news was to share it immediately. Further, when confronted with uncomfortable content, over half of respondents reported ignoring it rather than actively reporting it or seeking support.
- Perceptions:** A majority perceive equal internet and smartphone use across genders, but the disparity among remaining responses – 34.1% identifying men as primary users versus 11.4% identifying women – could hint at a different picture on the ground. Respondents also report feeling “Very confident” finding information online (56.8%), less confident filling forms (34.1%), and even less confident using apps (25%), which, in association with the previous statistic revealing they use smartphones primarily for consumption, could mean usage is concentrated around popular platforms and less around apps for specific use-cases.
- Attitudes:** Aspirations around digital fluency are unanimously high, with needs expressed primarily for accessing information on jobs, scholarships, and government schemes, and a smaller fraction expressing interest in entrepreneurship through running a small business. While no respondent denied the value of digital skills, self-expression remained the least prioritized use.

Digital literacy – Needs identified

While the dominant self-reported perception among respondents remains that access to devices is equal, the findings hint towards uneven adoption on the ground, with those who perceive unequal

access identifying men as the primary users. While this merits further investigation, it also signals a need to center gender as a key determinant shaping unequal access, rather than assuming that the gap in digital literacy is purely one of skill or use. Further, where access is possible, it is also significant to consider the limitations that shared device access might introduce for women and girls navigating patriarchal households, where family members act as “gatekeepers” for devices, restricting and surveilling usage. Here, it then begs the question of whether access necessarily enables women to benefit from using devices.

Beyond access, usage patterns also point to a second, distinct need: the need to reconcile superficial digital literacy and fluency with the critical literacy required to navigate use safely and responsibly. This is corroborated by the finding that while a majority of respondents expressed comfort with using devices, a similar proportion also reported believing they exercise control over what they see online. This reveals superficial digital literacy among the cohort, but a lack of awareness of underlying mechanisms (such as algorithmic recommendations). This gap is also evident in how respondents’ self-reported awareness of misinformation does not translate to how they *engage with* misinformation. Thus, while respondents report feeling capable of finding information and recognizing misinformation in principle, the most common response to surprising content is to share it immediately, and to uncomfortable content was to ignore it rather than report or seek support.

Ultimately, the needs that emerge from this assessment are threefold: (1) addressing and centering the nuances of gendered disparity in device access itself, (2) building capacity for content creation and self-expression among those with access, and (3) reconciling digital literacy with critical literacy to bridge the gap between perceived and actual digital skills

02: Financial literacy

- **Usage patterns:** While a large majority of adolescent girls and young women (more than 90%) have a bank account in their own name, financial activity remains fairly passive. Notably, the most common response was simply having “used” the account, with fewer respondents reporting active behaviors like saving or tracking expenses. While this is understandable among the younger cohort, this trend also extended to the older group, with adult women showing the same patterns of passive usage.
- **Knowledge:** Most respondents reported familiarity with terms such as “savings accounts” and “interest,” as well as with financial harm-related terms such as “debt trap” and “extortion”. However, these categories and awareness of government schemes also showed significant variance across responses.
- **Perception:** Less than a third of respondents report feeling that their word always has value in spending decisions. This may also partly be a reflection of the demographic – younger women who may have limited influence over household finances compared to older women and family members. A stark contradiction also emerges regarding financial autonomy: while 84% of respondents agree in principle that women should have independent control over their

earnings, only 44% maintain this stance when asked normatively who should *decide* how a woman's money is spent.

- **Attitudes:** Aspirations around financial autonomy and keenness in financial planning are high. However, spending priorities reveal an equal pull between familial obligation and individual aspirations such as education and training.

Financial literacy – Needs identified

Addressing these gaps requires looking beyond technical skills to target financial literacy and household agency. There is a clear need to build targeted awareness around relevant government schemes and protection against financial harms. However, as the data on perceptions reveals, a deeper divide exists between what young women aspire to in principle and the cultural mores they have internalized. While a vast majority desire financial autonomy, internalized patriarchal norms continue to skew their beliefs away from independent female-led decision-making. Therefore, any intervention must parallelly focus on strengthening young women's voices in household financial choices to help bridge the gap between their personal aspirations and their current limited influence.

03: Gender and Patriarchy

- **Perception:** Dominant gender roles and hierarchy are widely experienced within households and communities. However, a majority report feeling the courage to speak their mind freely at home.
- **Attitudes:** Respondents largely believe in equality within marriage and express a desire for free expression within the household. However, a majority report needing permission to study or work. When witnessing a girl being discriminated against on the basis of her gender, most prefer to recruit the support of a trusted elder.
- **Knowledge:** Respondents largely understand gender equality as equal opportunity and respect. Over a third have shared that they are aware of laws protecting gender equality. A similar proportion have shared they are unaware of such laws. More than a quarter have shared that they know of such laws, but cannot name them.

Gender and Patriarchy – Needs identified

There is a need to convert expressed opinion and aspiration into actual decision-making authority. Responses point to a gap in structural agency that skill-building alone may not close; it likely requires engagement with families and gatekeepers, not just the young women themselves.

There is also a need to move beyond individual belief in equality toward collective or systemic response mechanisms. Reliance on a trusted elder as the primary recourse when witnessing discrimination suggests limited awareness of, or confidence in, alternative channels, peer support structures, formal complaint mechanisms, or legal recourse.

05: Media and Communication

- **Usage Patterns: Social media and other apps** – 37 out of 45 of respondents use social media (91.1%) and access it daily (82.2%), with WhatsApp as the dominant platform (93.3%). While entertainment is the most preferred content, one-third said they would post content but 67% self-identify as content creators.
- **Knowledge:** All participants articulated some degree of comfort with basic tasks such as taking photos and videos, and a significant majority were able to identify media related to unique platform affordances, such as short-form content (reels, YouTube Shorts, etc.). Most participants (78%) also unequivocally agreed that when sharing media and personal information relating to another person, explicit permission is non-negotiable.
- **Perception:** A lion's share (89%) of participants agreed that women and girls should have a platform to share opinions and stories publicly. Similarly, a large group also agreed that social media is broadly safe, although only 0.06% deemed it 'very safe'.
- **Attitudes:** The respondents seemed optimistic about creating content. However, when asked what channels they would use when confronting a problem in the community, only 2 respondents shared that they would make a social media post about it.

Media and Communication – Needs identified

With social media use near-universal and daily, self-reported familiarity with content creation does not translate to real-world use. There is a need to shift the cohort from passive consumption toward active production and storytelling. The heavy concentration on a single platform (WhatsApp) and entertainment-led consumption also suggests a need to broaden media literacy beyond the most familiar, low-effort uses toward more varied and intentional engagement with media as a tool for voice and visibility. Importantly, when viewed in light of the findings (from part 02) that participants only had a superficial understanding of how content on these platforms is algorithmically mediated, and that their immediate reaction to surprising and harmful content is to share and ignore it, respectively, it becomes significant to reiterate the need to reconcile digital literacy with critical media and information literacy.

06: Careers, Education and Aspirations

- **Knowledge:** Awareness is highest around local vocational training and skill development programmes. Higher education options follow – though only half of respondents report "knowing many options". Scholarship awareness is more fragmented: a quarter have applied, a quarter know about scholarships but haven't applied, and the largest proportion remain unaware of scholarship options altogether. Most respondents also do not know how to prepare a resume.
- **Perception:** Respondents are largely optimistic about achieving their career dreams, with most believing they can successfully pursue higher education and vocational training – though many recognize this requires effort. Financial issues are identified as the primary barrier to education

and employment goals, followed by household responsibilities and lack of nearby opportunities.

- **Attitudes:** Aspiration is strong, with a majority expressing high motivation toward their goals, while pointing out that they would need support to pursue their aspirations. Most respondents articulated a specific dream or future goal.

Careers, Education and Aspirations – Needs identified

Resume-writing and scholarship awareness stand out as concrete, addressable gaps – most respondents do not know how to prepare a resume, and scholarship awareness is fragmented across applied/aware/unaware groups. Aspiration is strong, but financial constraints are real, indicating a need for both informational support (scholarships, pathways) and practical scaffolding (financial planning, negotiating household responsibilities) along with developing aspirations.

07: Leadership and community voice

- **Knowledge:** While most respondents know women can contest Panchayat elections and know a female leader in their community, their own public participation – attending village meetings, speaking in them or approaching an official – in public meetings, speaking to an official has been minimal in the last six months. Only half can explain what a Gram Panchayat actually does.
- **Perception:** Most respondents express interest in taking on leadership roles and believe young women like them can bring change to their community. However, current experience suggests a different reality – most feel they only have “some” voice in decisions affecting them, and feel “somewhat supported” to share their views publicly.
- **Attitudes:** A third of respondents are interested in taking on leadership roles but feel some fear, while a similar proportion feel more confidently interested. When it comes to finding worth in their ideas, the most common response – shared by half – is feeling only “somewhat confident.” Responses to what changes they would like to see in their community spanned from gender equality and safe spaces for women to civic issues and access to education and careers.

Leadership and community voice – Needs identified

The “somewhat confident / somewhat supported” pattern across multiple leadership-related questions suggests a need for structured, safe opportunities to practice voice and leadership.

Conclusion

The baseline paints a consistent picture across the Dream Desk cohort: confidence and aspiration run high, but this does not necessarily equate to lived agency, applied skill, and sometimes access itself, don’t match up. This gap between what respondents believe, perceive, and actually do, is the baseline’s central finding, and it’s also where the needs-assessment objective is most clearly

answered. There is motivation and awareness with the cohort. What's missing is equal access in some areas, structured opportunity, practical skill-building, and scaffolded pathways to act on aspiration in others. Dream Desk Academy's curriculum is envisioned as a step towards fulfilling this need.

While access to digital devices, social media, public spaces, educational opportunities and financial institutions may be growing for young women and girls, men continue to be decision makers, more active participants in public life, and disproportionately advantaged at the home and community levels.

This baseline's central finding is the gap between the beliefs and perceptions expressed by respondents, and their lived reality. The Dream Desk Academy's curriculum envisions to address this gap by creating structured opportunity for young women and girls, practical skill-building and scaffolded pathways towards greater personal, educational and economic empowerment.

Refer to Annexure 02 for Dream Desk Baseline Assessment: Responses [here](#).

Refer to Annexure 03 for Dream Desk: Participatory Needs Assessment Dialogues [here](#).

Refer to Annexure 04 for Curriculum for Dream Desk [here](#).

Implications

Dream Desk Academy should start from digital literacy, building on the interest and access it generates to move into the practical skills respondents already have some awareness of but haven't put into practice – financial tracking, resume-building, civic participation – while addressing gendered device access along the way.

Given how poor scholarship and government-scheme awareness is, the Dream Desk Information Repository is well placed to make an early difference. And since social media use is near-universal and daily, but concentrated on one platform and mostly passive, content creation training under Dream Desk Media should aim higher than generic skills, building the ability and confidence of participants to express their own lived realities and aspirations in their community.