BBC MEDIA ACTION
INSIGHT

How do gender norms affect digital use amongst young women from small towns in India?

BBC Media Action India undertook a project to identify key barriers to women's digital use **and to develop targeted strategies to effectively address these.** This involved understanding the mindsets and behaviours of gatekeepers of women's phone use. Research findings showed that young men are more regressive than older men and women, and young women, on gender roles (a trend observed globally [1]). Further, women have internalised these regressive gender norms. However, young men have progressive digital attitudes — providing a lever for change; and an entry point for interventions.

Context

Women in India are 11% less likely than men to own, and 40% less likely than men to use internet services [2]. This gender-digital divide significantly impacts women's socioeconomic empowerment, autonomy, civic engagement, and livelihoods.[3]

The project

To bridge this digital gender divide, it was crucial to ascertain the gender norms at play to draft a tailored communications strategy. Previous BBC Media Action research showed that to empower women to use mobile phones, further research was needed to understand the 'gatekeepers' of women's phone use and the 'gender norms at

play'. Thus, supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, BBC Media Action undertook this project to **identify gender norms limiting women's mobile phone ownership and usage in peri-urban cities across three states in India.**

Research Methodology

Before conducting in-depth primary research, our cross-functional team (creative, research, and programmatic) carried out immersions to understand the target population better across three cities in the three study states - Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. The immersions involved transect walks, in-depth interviews, and mini-group discussions with youth (men and women in the 18-25-year age group), older adults (men and women in the 26-50-year age group), and community leaders. The information areas included phone usage, aspirations, media habits, influencers, and day-to-day lives.

Literature review around trends in social and gender norms, findings from immersions, consultations with Cristina Biccheiri from the University of Pennsylvania Social Norms Group, discussions with youth advisory councils from EMpower[4] fed into the overall research design and development of the research tools. The research was conducted in collaboration with the research partner, Oxford Policy Management.

A mixed-methods approach, comprising quantitative and qualitative data collection was used, with a sampling approach that ensured representation of the intended target population at the state level. A total quantitative sample size of 1085 households were covered

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/news/2024/feb/01/gen-z-boys-and-men-more-likely-than-baby-boomers-to-believe-feminism-harmful-says-poll
[2] Mobile Gender Gap Report, GSMA, 2024

[3] Hilbert (2011) *Digital Gender Divide or Technologically Empowered Women in Developing Countries?*
[4] https://empowerweb.org/

where 1085 women aged 18-25 years old and 998 gatekeepers[5] were interviewed. In addition, 18 gatekeeper IDIs, 73 women IDIs, and 35 FGDs with male and female gatekeepers were conducted.

Key findings

Findings of the immersion sessions:

Key cultural insights emerged: the importance given to what society might think, including the role of 'uncles' and 'aunts' in decision making; glamourisation of puppy love/early sexualization - tendency to role-play older couples, exhibiting possessiveness in relationships; romanticism of victim syndrome among young men, finding others to blame for their failures and association with 'alpha man' imagery.

Primary research findings:

Gatekeeping behaviour: Parents were the main gatekeepers for unmarried women, and husbands were important gatekeepers for married women. 71% of women reported monitoring or seeking permission while using phones as compared to 29% of men in the 18-25-year age group. Similar trends were observed among married and unmarried women. The research also found that permission and monitoring are internalised behaviors and normalised among young women, who try to conform to societal scrutiny/ notions about being a 'good girl/woman'. The reasons behind monitoring and permission seeking were 'reputational risk' and 'relationship with bad friends' (combined at 52%) that were the biggest concern around phone usage, followed by 'time-wasting' and 'risk of financial fraud'.

Based on the key findings, the following priority norms exist when several individuals **prefer to act in a certain way because they expect others to do the same** (empirical expectations) or/and because they think that others expect them to act in this way (normative expectations)[6]:

a. High adherence to gendered roles and responsibilities
b. Limited voice and agency for women across communities
c. Sexual and marriage norms, fear of breaching family honour, gendered codes of conduct underpin all areas of a girl's and woman's life
d. Women need to be protected and are vulnerable.

Segmentation and levers of change: Based on the gender attitudes and priority norms discussed above, gatekeepers largely fall under three categories: Norm-aligned, Norm-ambivalent, and Norm-progressives.

Norm-aligned form 22% of the sample, Norm ambivalent are the majority at 68% and Norm progressives are 10%. Young men, 18-25-year-olds have the most regressive gender attitudes (a trend observed globally in several countries) but have more progressive attitudes towards digital usage than older gatekeepers and young women.

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[5] Gatekeepers are members of the household which restrict women's usage of phones, these could be parents, siblings, husbands or in-laws. They give permissions for mobile phone usage or they monitor the activity on mobile phones.

[6] Cristina Bicchieri (2016) *Norms in the Wild. How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 264 page.

Key implications

Gendered roles indicate that men assume the role of protector and provider and women are seen as beneficiaries, in need of protection. Young men aged 18-25, who are transitioning into adulthood, either getting married or preparing for it strive to establish their identity and assert their manhood, often by endorsing existing gender hierarchies. However, these men are more open to women using digital technologies. This is due to their familiarity and ease of using mobile phones, being 'with the times' (fuelled by social media) and acknowledging the increasing economic independence of women. Consequently, interventions need to target young women and men (18-25 years) and to encourage early allyship with the ultimate aim of increasing women's digital usage.