

Dvara Research | Practitioner Brief | July 2021

## Women's Mobile Phone Access and Use: Implications for Financial Services Providers<sup>1</sup>

*Dr. Lina Sonne, Inblick Innovation Advisory<sup>2</sup>*

### **Summary:**

We undertook a study of how digitisation through mobile phones plays out among women in India, based on a review of literature, semi-structured interviews with 21 key stakeholders, and 60 interviews with low-income women end-users across urban and rural locations in six states. The women are customers of group-based microfinance offered by [Dvara KGFS](#), which is an NBFC providing financial services at the last-mile in six Indian states.<sup>3</sup> The study offers a snapshot of what women's access to and use of phones looks like. Our findings suggest that nearly all women respondents have smartphones, have their own phone (rather than shared) and have a new phone (as opposed to a hand-me-down). Nevertheless, women primarily use the phone at home to avoid raising suspicion or gossip. Most respondents reported calling and receiving calls on a daily or weekly basis. Women used WhatsApp more than conventional SMS. Very few women said their phones were monitored, though some noted that they have serious concerns about the risk of harassment online. While women are able to operate their phones for everyday purposes, they struggle with adequate digital literacy when it comes to advanced features such as using digital payment applications and online banking applications. There was little difference in the way women use their phones across rural-urban locations and across the six states. In this brief, we summarise our findings and, based on these insights, provide practitioner-oriented recommendations.

### **About the Research and the Future of Finance Initiative:**

This practitioner brief presents independent research commissioned by the [Future of Finance Initiative](#) at Dvara Research in furtherance of the Initiative's research agenda. The Initiative's work focuses on the impacts of digitisation and technological innovation in Indian finance, leading from the low-income consumer perspective on these issues. The study could not have been carried out without the support of financial service provider Dvara KGFS, which connected us to women across six states via their regional offices.

<sup>1</sup>This policy brief is based on Dvara Research Working Paper titled "Women's Mobile Phone Access and Use: A Snapshot of Six States". [See here](#).

<sup>2</sup>Corresponding author's email ID: [isonne@jgu.edu.in](mailto:isonne@jgu.edu.in) and [ffi@dvara.com](mailto:ffi@dvara.com)

<sup>3</sup>Dvara KGFS provides financial services solutions to women and men across the country and has regional offices in the six states covered in this study. As customers of Dvara-KGFS, the respondents may therefore be used to certain models of thinking and financial behaviour that people who do not use financial services may not be accustomed to.

## 1. Background

India has seen a rapid increase in mobile phone access in the last few years fueled by the rapidly increasing availability of cheap mobile phone handsets and access to cheap mobile data.<sup>4</sup>

However, while availability and access to phones have increased overall, women lag on access, usage and ownership of mobile phones in India.<sup>5</sup> This study set out to better understand how women access and use phones, as well as the barriers they face in phone access and usage.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. About This Study

The objective of this study is to provide a snapshot of what mobile phone access and use look like for low-income women in India. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 21 key stakeholders and structured interviews with 60 low-income women end-users across six states in India. The women are all customers of financial services provider [Dvara KGFS](#).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the findings highlighted below are based on interviews with women who can be considered to have some level of pre-existing agency, financial discipline, and mobile phone know-how.

## 3. Key Insights

### 3.1. Access

Our interviews point to increased access to mobile phones with advanced features for women in the sample. All women respondents have access to a mobile phone, and 88% have their own phones. Nearly all of them (79%) have smartphones and were able to operate them reasonably well. The rest have basic and feature phones.<sup>8</sup>

About half of the women stated that they bought the phone themselves. The other women have phones primarily gifted by the husband. Overall, about half of the women top up their credit themselves or jointly with their husband.

### 3.2. Phone Use: Talking and Texting

When asked about phone use, 25% of the respondents reported using their phone hourly, and 68% reported using it a few times a day. Almost 9 out of 10 women make calls daily, while all the women bar one receive calls daily. Women most commonly make calls to the husband and other family members. 72% of women make calls to their family on a daily basis, and another 20% do so on a weekly basis.

In contrast, only 28% of all respondents make a work or business-related call daily, while 22% of all respondents make a call weekly. Only 63% of women who work, make a business call at least weekly.

---

<sup>4</sup>GSMA (2019). Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019. GSMA Report.

<sup>5</sup>GSMA (2019). Connected Women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019. GSMA Report.

<sup>6</sup>This paper sets out to provide a snapshot of how women use mobile phones. It does not make inferences on whether the type and amount of usage is attributable to gender-based barriers or other matters such as preferences or personal choice. This is out of scope and merits further larger and more in-depth studies.

<sup>7</sup>Dvara KGFS provides financial services solutions to women and men across the country and has regional offices in the six states covered in this study. As customers of Dvara KGFS, the respondents may therefore be used to certain models of thinking and financial behaviour that people who do not use financial services may not be accustomed to.

<sup>8</sup>A smart phone is a phone with internet access and advanced feature while in our sample, basic phones include basic feature phones (feature phones are not understood as a separate category by respondents).

When it comes to messaging services, WhatsApp overtook conventional SMS (on both smart and basic phones), and the majority of women use WhatsApp much more frequently than SMS. 70% of the respondents send or receive a WhatsApp message daily, compared to 8% and 15% receiving and sending, respectively, an SMS daily.

### **3.3. Digital Financial Services Usage**

About half of the women use their phones to manage their finances, including mobile payment applications such as PayTM and PhonePe, and to receive OTPs. Some women noted that this use has increased during the pandemic. It is worth bearing in mind that these women were members of a microfinance provider, and therefore that may contribute to this usage pattern.

42% of women reported using mobile payment applications, such as Google Pay, PayTM or PhonePe. Mobile payment applications are used across the country, and 18% of the respondents reported using mobile payment applications at least once a week, and 23% reported doing so once a month. Out of the women using smartphones, 53% use mobile payment applications. No women with basic phones claimed to use mobile payment applications. Breaking down mobile payment application usage by education level, three-quarters of women with university degrees, and almost half of women with education levels between 10th and 12th standard use such applications. However, only about one-sixth of women with less than 10th standard education use them.

The women use mobile money for a variety of tasks, including to:

- i. Repay loans and instalments;
- ii. Transfer money to/ from family;
- iii. Pay at a restaurant and in shops;
- iv. Make chit fund payments and pay bills, and
- v. Recharge phone credit.

Many women use the phone to receive SMS messages with OTP while shopping (52%) or with their bank balance (63%). A much larger share of women with higher levels of education use SMS-based OTP authentication services or receive bank balance via SMS on their phones. Two-thirds of women with at least 10th standard education use them, while only one-third of women with less than 10th standard education do so.

In addition, out of the 48% of respondents who reported that they do not receive an OTP, ten respondents mentioned that their husbands receive their OTPs and other messages.<sup>9</sup>

### **3.4. Digital Literacy and Learning**

Most women (around 90% of respondents) were happy with the level of knowledge they have about using the phone and felt it was adequate for their daily use. Some women have spent significant time familiarising themselves with more advanced features, while others are content with knowing more basic tasks like making and receiving calls and playing music.

---

<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that it may be that the card used for the transaction belonged to the husband.

However, a major impediment to mobile phone use is the lack of knowledge about how to use the mobile phone. What poses an additional challenge for women is that they often do not have anyone to teach them. 37% of women stated that they taught themselves how to use their phone. The second most common way for women to upskill was to learn from their children – as did 28% of respondents. Only 17% of women learnt from their husbands despite the large proportion of women reporting that their husbands gifted them the phones.

When asked about how they navigate their phones, the majority stated that they could navigate the phone by reading. This is primarily when respondents could read in their regional languages rather than English on the phone. Those who cannot read English memorise the last two digits of a phone number to find it, use Truecaller to find the number, or navigate by identifying app logos and memorising the steps.

### 3.5. Constraints on Use

Most women remain constrained in the location and the type of phone use. Women primarily use their phones at home, with only one-third of women saying they are comfortable using the phone outside. Even when they use phones outside, they do so primarily for urgent calls. There were mixed reasons for not using the phone outside. While some women were not allowed to use their phones outside, others worried about what their neighbours would say.

Very few women in the study said their phones were monitored. The monitoring took the form of checking the phone. A couple of women additionally noted that their husband handles all important affairs, including finances, so the women do not receive this information over the phone. Likewise, other women noted that their husbands receive SMS with bank balance or OTPs. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the literature<sup>10</sup>, as well as our expert interviews, highlighted that monitoring of phones and surveillance through phones is a significant challenge.

Additionally, the women have serious concerns about the risk of harassment online, primarily through random calls.

## 4. Recommendations for Practitioners

While more research at a greater scale and depth is required to fully understand women's mobile phone usage dynamics, some implications can be drawn from this snapshot.

**1. Gender blind design may not be gender inclusive.** Programmes tend to consider and design for phone usage from a gender-neutral angle, not considering differences in usage patterns between genders. The literature suggests that women and men may use their phones differently. Practitioners need to be cognisant of the different usage patterns of women and men, and design for these in mind. Therefore, practitioners should, for example, consider whether movements tracked via mobile phone makes sense when women often leave the phone at home.

<sup>10</sup>See for example (Kovacs, A. Ranganathan, N. (2017) Chupke, chupke: going behind the mobile phone bans in North India. [https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone\\_ban/](https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone_ban/); Barboni G., Field, E., Pande, R., Rigol, N., Schaner, S., Troyer Moore, C. (2018). A Tough Call: Understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in India. Cambridge, MA: Evidence for Policy Design, Harvard Kennedy School.; CGAP, Dalberg & Dvara (2017). Privacy on the Line: What people in India think about their data protection and privacy. Dvara Report.

Additionally, women report limited digital literacy, which financial services providers should keep in mind when designing programmes. While women in our study were able to do basic everyday tasks on the mobile phone, they noted an inability to operate more sophisticated tasks such as mobile payment applications. Financial services providers should consider how they design for women customers in their applications and programmes: How can phones become more intuitive to women's use? Given that women have fewer support groups from who to learn, how can women easily upskill to take full advantage of phones?

**2. Who has access as services move online?** Various forms of monitoring and surveillance is a major challenge to gender-equal phone use and digitisation. This may be actively checking phones regularly, receiving information on behalf of women (such as SMS with OTPs or bank balance) or constraining women's geography of use. Practitioners need to recognise and be mindful of the side-effects of digitisation in terms of monitoring and control. For example, how do financial services providers contribute to the empowerment of women if their husbands receive updates on their bank balance and OTPs? Can programmes and protocols be designed in a way that caters to both women who wish to be the sole users of their information, as well as to women who may not feel confident on their own to manage OTP and may therefore want their husbands' support (for example by OTP going to two numbers)?

**3. Women face significant constraints as to where and when they can use their phones and clear expectations on the kind of use that is considered appropriate.** Even where women have enough agency to be customers of financial services, they often feel unable or uncomfortable using their phones outside of their homes. Likewise, when women are expected to operate the phone in the evening (for example, female field agents sending reports or interacting with customers), they may raise suspicion from household members, which men do not face. Financial service providers need to consider such restrictions when designing programmes that rely on engaging with women via mobile phones.

**4. We need more and better data to understand women user patterns and constraints.** This is one of the first, if not the first, publicly available study on women's mobile phone use in India since the introduction of Jio. Furthermore, there are no studies on women and digital finance in India. We, therefore, need to collect significantly more and better data on how women access and use mobile phones, and the constraints they face. This includes women and girls of different backgrounds and lived experiences. For example,

- Given the challenges of monitoring and surveillance, what happens when we digitise financial services and / or support for financial services? Can we provide evidence that enables providers to design solutions that manage the monitoring?
- What are the links between the ability to operate phone features (literacy and digital literacy) and the ability to use (digital) financial services?

When we collect data, we should do so mindfully:

- Numbers are important, but we need conversations, interviews, and focus group discussions to really understand gender issues.
- Women may be better placed to collect qualitative data of sensitive nature. Further, having women in the office can help in collecting high-quality data.

## Contact Us

Dvara Research, Chennai  
10th Floor-Phase 1,  
IIT-Madras Research Park,  
Kanagam Village, Taramani  
Chennai 600113

Dvara Research, Mumbai  
Red Bungalow, 3, Palli Village,  
Bandra (West),  
Mumbai 400050  
India

E-mail: [ffi@dvara.com](mailto:ffi@dvara.com)

Twitter: @dvararesearch  
@\_FutureFinance

Website: [www.dvara.com/research/](http://www.dvara.com/research/)