

# THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN-LED DIGITAL SOLUTIONS

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To enjoy additional benefits

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A farm woman talks on her phone at a village in Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu. | Photo Credit: SRINATH M

The theme for International Women's Day 2023 is 'DigitALL: Innovation and Technology for Gender Equality.' The transformational and all-encompassing role of digital technology is growing even faster in the post-pandemic world. But sadly, the digital revolution also poses the challenge of perpetuating gender inequality, which is increasingly noticeable in the manner in which women are left behind in knowledge of digital skills and access to technologies.

In the small holder farming sector, for instance, boosting female ownership of mobile phones and training on how to use them is crucial given that agricultural and market information are increasingly being delivered through digital platforms. The need for inclusive technology and digital education is essential for a sustainable future. In this context, the challenge and opportunity we have are not just about leveraging digital tech and innovation for creating gender equality but also placing women as the torchbearers of digital innovations and leaders in the community.

A case in point is the introduction of digital training and mobile tablets for the cook-cum-helpers who drive PM POSHAN. Ninety per cent of them are women.

Nearly, three million cook-cum-helpers play a critical role in preparing and providing hot, cooked meals to millions of schoolchildren under the scheme. Nutritional improvement through the mid-day meals scheme is inextricably linked with food safety. Unsafe food served in schools has the potential to create a vicious cycle of disease and malnutrition, impacting school children who eat these meals.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in partnership with the Governments of Odisha and Rajasthan has rolled out technology-based training modules housed in an application, and mobile tablets for strengthening the capacity of the community in ensuring that proper hygiene and safety measures are followed so that children reap the full benefits of the nutrition that these school meals offer. The FoSafMDM application is available on the Google Play Store and can be used on any android device.

By bringing together access to a digital device, digital literacy, and community ownership for

women, the initiative has infused fresh energy and confidence in how women perceive and deliver their roles as nutrition champions.

Unleashing women's economic power helps to lift millions out of poverty and food insecurity, and one of the keys to achieving this is digital literacy. This strengthens financial inclusion and creates potential new income streams.

We see this transformation in communities that are under-served in terms of access to digital services and opportunities. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) indicates that 54% women and 64% children in India's urban areas are anaemic.

In a pilot on financial literacy and digital literacy being implemented by the WFP with women self-help groups across low-income groups in Delhi's urban slums, nearly 70% of women wanted to acquire new skills. Most were aware of the potential of digital platforms to start businesses and add to family income. A needs assessment conducted by the WFP among urban poor women in Delhi showed that few had a bank account. Many had smartphones but were dependent on family members to help them use the devices. Women were, however, aware of the benefits of financial and digital literacy in advancing their businesses and incomes, and therefore were keen to learn.

The women participating in training said that going forward, they will prioritise access to financial services to manage their own economic activities efficiently and take informed decisions to enhance their livelihoods, food security, and nutrition.

India accounts for half the world's gendered digital divide given that only a third of all Internet users in the country are women. In Asia-Pacific, India has the widest gender gap of 40%. Less than 32% of women in India own a mobile phone compared to over 60% of men. Women generally have handsets that cost less and are not as sophisticated as those used by men, and their usage of digital services is usually limited to phone calls and text messages. Owning and using a digital device is a household decision taken by the man.

The NFHS-5 shows that more than 18% of women between 15 and 49 years have a low body mass index while more than half the pregnant women in the same age group are anaemic. Access to digital literacy and platforms would create awareness about the gap and needs in the populations that are often on the margins of the digital revolution.

Women can harness digital tools for improving nutrition schemes and initiatives, while also using them to create economic opportunities that ensure long-term food and nutrition security.

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