

THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

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A large proportion of Indian women remain cut off from the world's most significant phenomenon of recent decades

How bad is India's digital divide? Not between the rich and poor, we mean, but between men and women? At a recent session at the Indian Mobile Congress, Facebook India's head Ajit Mohan pointed out that only 35% of Indian women have access to the internet. Although Mohan didn't cite a figure for male access, the gap has always been vast. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India, for example, male users account for 67% of India's online population; women account for just 29%.

Clearly, a large proportion of Indian women remain cut off from the world's most significant phenomenon of recent decades. Given the great enabler that the internet has become, this should worry us. It is not just socially appalling, it is also terrible for the country's economic prospects, as some studies argue. According to the GSMA's The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019, for instance, closing the gender-gap in mobile internet use in developing countries could add \$700 billion to their combined economy over the next five years.

It isn't just about money, of course, but also the empowerment of women through information. Those who have the means to cross-check assertions made in social settings are that much more likely to exercise greater agency in their lives. Greater female presence online could also make the internet a nicer place, some analysts reckon, given the bad civic sense—think of trolls, fake news, and various misdeeds—that prevails in large parts of cyberspace. The divide may mirror India's structural inequities, but that doesn't mean we do nothing about it. A failure to address the gap will hurt us all.

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