

GENDERED DIGITAL DIVIDE IN RURAL RAJASTHAN: A STUDY OF DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG WOMEN

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Abstract

While rapid digitalization has revolutionized socio-economic landscapes, it has simultaneously widened the "digital divide" for rural Indian women, where exclusion is deeply intertwined with patriarchal norms, educational deprivation, and economic dependency. This study examines rural women's ICT access, usage patterns, and socio-cultural bottlenecks in Muhana village, Jaipur, Rajasthan, utilizing a random sampling framework of 50 respondents to evaluate physical access against functional capability. The findings uncover a profound "access-capability gap." Although mobile phone ownership is high (84%), active internet access drops to 68%, and advanced digital skills are virtually non-existent; 92% cannot execute formal emails and 98% cannot utilize internet banking. This exclusion is driven by low educational attainment (86% never attended college), total economic dependency (60%), and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, a severe policy gap persists: 82% are unaware of digital literacy schemes, and 96% report zero benefits from the Mukhyamantri Digital Seva Yojana, relegating devices to passive entertainment (42%). The study concludes that hardware penetration alone cannot foster empowerment. Bridging this divide requires a strategic shift toward localized, vernacular-based digital literacy training, targeted grassroots awareness campaigns, and policies that explicitly link digital proficiency with rural livelihood and micro-enterprise opportunities.

Keywords

Digital Divide, Gender Inequality, Rural Women, Financial Exclusion, Policy Implementation Gap.

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received: 25.08.2026

Approved: 16.09.2026

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RURAL RAJASTHAN: A STUDY OF
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Article No. 33

*RJPSS April - Sept. 2026,
Vol. LI No. 2,
Pg. 285-299*

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/
rjpss.2026.v51i02.033](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2026.v51i02.033)

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of RJPSS.*

Introduction

In the contemporary era, the rapid advancement of digital technology has revolutionized various aspects of life, including education. The digital divide describes the disparity between individuals or groups who have access to modern information and communication technologies (ICT) and those who lack such access. This divide is not merely about physical access to technology but also encompasses the skills and opportunities to effectively use these technologies (Hargittai, 2008). Bridging the digital divide is critical due to its profound influence on scholastic achievement, social inclusion, and economic advancement (Hargittai, 2002; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2012). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conceptualizes this divide as the disparity across varying socio-economic tiers—including individuals, households, enterprises, and geographical regions—regarding both their capacity to acquire information and communication technologies (ICTs) and their ability to utilize the internet for diverse purposes. Fundamentally, it describes the systemic inequality separating technological “haves” from “have-nots” in terms of digital and internet availability.

Literature Review

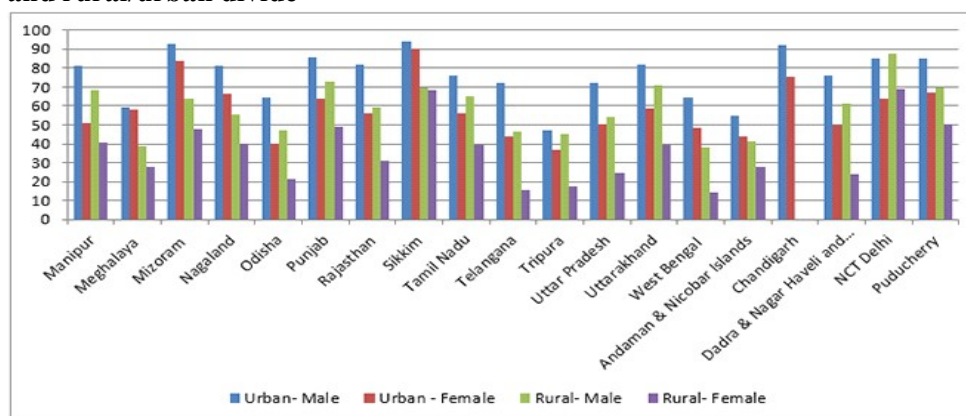
The UCLA Global Internet Project investigated the “Digital Gender Gap” across 14 nations and discovered an overall 8% disparity between male and female internet users. Interestingly, given the prevalence of global gender inequality, this gap was narrower than initially expected. However, the imbalance remains stark in certain technologically advanced nations, where the ratio of male to female internet users reaches approximately 2:1. Among the surveyed regions, Taiwan exhibited the narrowest gender gap, while Italy recorded the most significant disparity in internet usage between genders.

Studies indicate that in the United States, internet usage stands at 69.0% for women and 73.1% for men, representing a gender disparity that is narrower than the global average. (Moghaddam, 2010). In terms of internet literacy, India came up at position 73 out of 120 countries in 2021 (Basuroy, 2021, Maiti *et al.*, 2022). Here is a more concise version while retaining the main argument: India’s digitalization is hindered by unequal access to technology and digital literacy, especially between urban and rural areas. Rural women face additional barriers due to patriarchal norms, limited mobility, education, and decision-making power, restricting their ability to acquire digital skills and participate in the digital ecosystem.

According to Nielsen, rural India has approximately **352 million internet users**, nearly 20% more than urban areas; however, about **60% of the rural population remains offline**, partly due to limited digital literacy (Modi, 2022).

ITU data indicate that only **43% of India's population uses the internet**. The IAMAI-Kantar **ICUBE 2020** report records **58% male and 42% female internet users**, while **NFHS-5 (2019–21)** reports a wider gender gap, with **57.1% of males and 33.3% of females** having ever used the internet.

NFHS data reveal a clear rural–urban and gender digital divide. Internet use is highest among urban males (72.5%) and lowest among rural females (24.6%), while 51.8% of urban females and 48.7% of rural males have ever used the internet. **Figure1 (%) individuals who have ever used the internet- State-wise gender and rural/urban divide**



Source: Data from NFHS 2019-21 (Cont.)

Figure 1 highlights a significant gender and rural–urban digital divide. NFHS-5 (2020–21) reports that internet use in rural India is 49.6% among women compared with 68.5% among men. Rajasthan shows a particularly wide digital gender gap of 28.3%, reflecting persistent gender and educational inequalities.

Hence, although the gender gap in literacy has narrowed in India, the gender gap in digital literacy is rising, notably in rural regions rather than metropolitan ones. Increase in internet literacy increases women empowerment which may reduce the gender violence (Maiti *et al.*, 2023).

A review of contemporary literature underscores that digital literacy is an indispensable prerequisite for the socioeconomic upliftment and overall empowerment of women (Purohit *et al.*, 2015). However, the path to achieving this remains heavily obstructed, particularly in rural India, where entrenched socio-economic inequalities, a lack of digital infrastructure, and inadequate policy frameworks severely restrict women's interaction with technology (Kumar, 2015; Meenu *et al.*, 2025). While national frameworks like the “Digital India” initiative aim to democratize technology, its actual implementation has been deeply uneven

due to persistent structural, geographical, and cultural barriers that systematically isolate women in remote areas (Sinha, 2018).

Furthermore, research increasingly shows that bridging the digital divide requires looking far beyond physical device distribution. True digital inclusion is not merely about physical access; it hinges entirely on an individual's practical capability to utilize, adapt, and directly benefit from these digital resources (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2016). In practice, even when hardware is present, deeply rooted social and cultural barriers dictate usage patterns. For instance, Sundaram and Srinivasan (2018) observed that even when rural women possess mobile phones, the actual decision-making power regarding their use is frequently co-opted by male family members.

Despite these structural hurdles, recent scholarship highlights the transformative potential of increasing smartphone penetration in rural landscapes. Enhanced accessibility to smartphones has opened unprecedented avenues for informal learning, networking, and critical communication, serving as a vital lifeline for women who lack formal educational opportunities (Suresh & Indra Mani, 2024). When paired with internet access, these mobile tools actively catalyze economic empowerment by granting women direct access to fluid market information, diverse financial networks, and skill development spaces (Ömer Ate^o et al., 2024).

Ultimately, maximizing this potential requires addressing the baseline disparities that govern technological competence. Empirical evidence indicates that a woman's digital literacy, skill set, and operational confidence are directly tethered to her educational background (Suneel Kumar et al., 2024; V. Ceronmani Sharmila, 2024). Consequently, recent studies call for highly tailored, innovative training interventions that consciously dismantle socio-cultural hurdles, thereby transforming digital tools from objects of passive consumption into active instruments for personal, economic, and community advancement (Meenu et al., 2025; V. Ceronmani Sharmila, 2024).

The major causes of the digital divide include limited technical skills and education, cultural restrictions, poor connectivity and infrastructure, financial dependence, and limited exposure (Upadhyay, 2021). Policy interventions are therefore essential to improve digital literacy and reduce the divide (Khokhar, 2016). This study examines the gender gap in digital literacy and related barriers, focusing on two key dimensions: **internet use and mobile phone access**, to highlight the prevailing digital divide in Rajasthan.

Objectives of Study

1. The objective of study to examine the rural women access, uses and experiences various ICTs.

2. Another objective of the study is to examine the existing knowledge, digital skills, barriers and problems faced by rural women in the use of ICTs.

Research Methodology

The study on digital literacy and rural women is selected because it provides insights into how to empower women through technology, enabling access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and information ultimately contributing to gender equality and bridging the digital divide, especially in areas where rural women often face limited access to technology and information networks. The study area Muhana village is located in Sanganer tehsil of Jaipur district in Rajasthan, India. The literacy rate of Muhana village is 62.02% out of which 70.57% males and 52.73% females are literate. The sample size 50 women's was selected from a rural women population of 3,554. Whilst different parameters such as availability, affordability, and digital literacy can be used to measure the digital divide, this piece takes a simpler approach and explores the usage dimension and the physical access dimension, i.e., "use of internet" and "access to mobile phones" respectively. Using these parameters and **descriptive statistics only**, the study explores the prevailing digital divide in rural Rajasthan.

Key Challenges

Challenge	Description
Digital Divide	Limited access to devices and internet connectivity in remote areas.
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Gender norms restricting women's access to technology.
Skill Gaps	Lack of digital education in rural schools and limited training programs.
Safety and Privacy	Cyber security concerns and online harassment discourage participation.

Social and Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1.1-Age Group of the Respondents

Age Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage
20-30	18	36
31-40	15	30
41-50	11	22
Above 50	6	12
Total	50	100.00

The data shows that **36%** of respondents belong to the 20–30 age groups, followed by **30%** in 31–40, **22%** in 41–50, and **12%** above 50. The sample is

dominated by younger respondents (66% below 40 years), indicating that the study primarily reflects the perspectives of the **economically and socially active age group**, which is generally more receptive to digital technologies.

Table1.2- Caste Group of Respondents

Caste Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage
General	12	24
OBC	23	46
Scheduled Caste	15	30
Total	50	100.00

Out of 50 respondents, 46% belong to OBC, 30% to Scheduled Caste, and 24% to General category.

The majority representation of OBC and SC groups (76%) suggests that the study mainly covers socially disadvantaged sections, which is important for understanding inequalities in access to education and digital resources.

Demographic Patterns and Social Structure

The sample mainly comprises young and middle-aged women, while the smaller proportion of older women indicates a generational digital gap. The predominance of OBC and SC respondents highlights the role of social and structural inequalities in digital exclusion.

Table 1.3- Respondents Attended the School

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	36	72
No	14	28
Total	50	100.00

Above table shows that (72%) i.e., only 36 respondents attended the school while (28%) i.e., 14 respondents never attended the school. A total of **72% of respondents have education below 12th standard**, indicating a **low level of formal education**, which directly affects digital literacy and skill acquisition.

Table .1.4- Respondent's Education in School

Classes	No. of Respondents	Percentage
5th	10	20
8th	8	16
10th	5	10
12th	13	26
Never attended school	14	28
Total	50	100.00

Above table shows that (20%) of respondents studied till 5th class, (16%) of respondents studied till 8th class, (10%) of respondents completed their study till 10th class, (26%) of respondents completed their studies till class 12th and (28%) of respondents never attended the school.

Table 1.5 Respondents Education in College

College	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Graduation	5	10
Post-Graduation	2	4
Never joined college	43	86
Total	50	100.00

The table shows that only 10% of respondents are graduates and 4% are postgraduates, while 86% never attended college. Limited access to higher education restricts digital literacy, awareness of government schemes, and employment opportunities. Thus, digital exclusion reflects broader educational and social disadvantage.

Table 1.6 Average Monthly Income of Family

Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage
5,000-10,000	4	8
11,000-15,000	8	16
16,000-20,000	10	20
Above 20,000	28	56
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that (8%) respondent monthly income is between 5,000-10,000, (16%) respondents earn Monthly between 11,000-15,000, (20%) Respondents earn between 16,000-20,000 and (56%) of Respondents earn Monthly above 20,000.

Table 1.7 Occupation of Respondents

Occupation	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Making Earthenpot	4	8
Stitching Factory	7	14
Shop	2	4
Other work	7	14
No occupation	30	60
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that (8%) of Respondents involve themselves in making earthen-pot , (14%) of Respondents work in stitching factory , (4%) of

Respondents have their shop, (14%) of Respondents do other work like tuition teacher, work on daily wages and (60%) of Respondents are not involved in doing any work.

Table1.8- Personal Monthly Income of Respondents

Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Less than 5,000	6	12
6,000-10,000	10	20
11,000-15,000	2	4
More than 15,000	2	4
No earning	30	60
Total	50	100.00

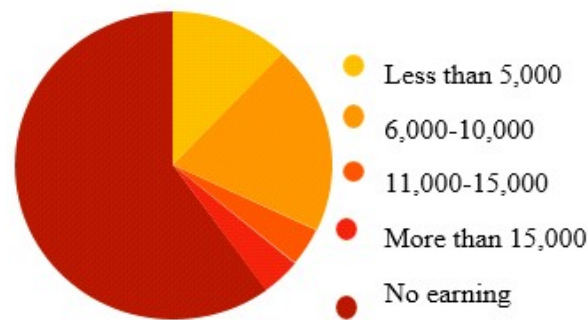


Figure 1.1 Personal Monthly Income of Respondents

The figure shows that 12% of respondents earn below ₹ 5,000, 20% earn ₹ 6,000–10,000, 4% earn ₹ 11,000–15,000, and 4% earn above ₹ 15,000 monthly, while 60% have no personal income. This reflects economic dependence and gender inequality, with limited access to formal employment, low economic empowerment, and restricted decision-making autonomy.

Table-1.9 Respondents Have Personal Mobile Phone

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	42	84
No	8	16
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that 42 i.e., (84%) of Respondents have personal mobile phone while 8 i.e., (16%) of Respondents don't have personal mobile phone. There is **high penetration of mobile devices**, suggesting that infrastructure is not the primary barrier.

Table-1.10 Internet Access to Respondents

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	34	68
No	16	32
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that 34 i.e., (68%) Respondents have access to Internet while 16 i.e., (32%) Respondents don't have any Internet access. Despite high mobile ownership, **one-third lack internet access**, indicating a **digital divide at the connectivity level**.

Table-1.11 Languages Known by Respondents

Languages	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Hindi	31	62
English	0	0
Both Hindi & English	3	6
None of above	16	32
Total	50	100.00

The table shows that 62% of respondents know Hindi, 6% know both Hindi and English, and 32% know only their regional language. Limited English proficiency may restrict access to digital platforms and services. Digital inequality is also influenced by traditional gender roles, limited employment opportunities, lack of family support, and the perception that technology is not essential for women.

Can you conduct online searches using your digital device?

Table 2.1 Respondents Searching Online Using Their Digital Device

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Agree	26	52
Disagree	17	34
Neutral	7	14
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that (52%) of Respondents can search everything online by using their device, (34%) of Respondents don't know how to search online while (14%) of Respondents behaved neutral that they can search few things but unable to search everything online by using digital device. There is an **extremely low level of formal digital literacy**, limiting access to professional and institutional communication. The majority lack the ability to engage in **e-commerce**, reflecting limited functional use of digital tools.

Can you send and receive e-mail on your own?

Table 2.2- Respondents can send & receive e-mail

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Agree	4	8
Disagree	46	92
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that only 4 i.e., (8%) of Respondents can send & receive e-mail while 46 i.e., (92%) of Respondents don't know how to send & receive e-mail.

Can you use digital platform for online shopping?

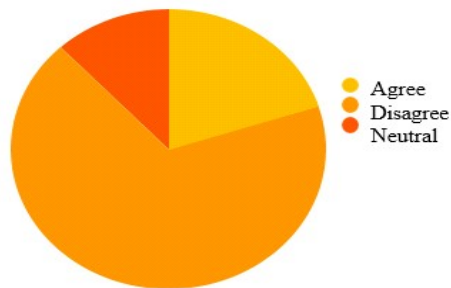


Figure 2.3: Online Shopping By Respondents

The above figure shows that (20%) of Respondents can do online shopping easily, (68%) of Respondents don't know how to shop online while few of respondents i.e., (12%) are neutral sometimes they shop online easily but sometimes they face problems.

Can you use Mobile Banking?

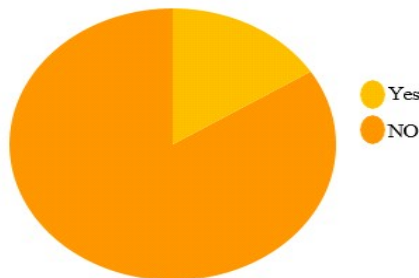


Figure 2.4: Respondents Using Mobile Banking

The above figure shows that out of 50 only 8 i.e., (16%) of Respondents use Mobile banking while 42 i.e., (84%) of Respondents don't use Mobile banking.

Table 2.3 Respondents Using Internet Banking

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	1	2
No	49	98
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that only 1 i.e., (2%) of Respondents use Internet banking while 49 i.e., (98%) of Respondents don't use Internet banking.

The study highlights a critical “digital access–capability gap” where device ownership fails to translate into meaningful utility. While 84% of women own mobile phones, internet access drops to 68%, and functional digital skills are scarcer still. Most respondents cannot send emails, shop online, or use digital banking, indicating a state of surface-level inclusion masking deep digital exclusion.

Table 2.4 Respondents Knows About the Schemes Provided By Government

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	9	18
No	41	82
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that only (18%) of Respondents knows about the schemes provided by government to boost digital literacy while (82%) of Respondents are unaware of it.

Have you ever benefited from schemes provided by government on digital literacy?

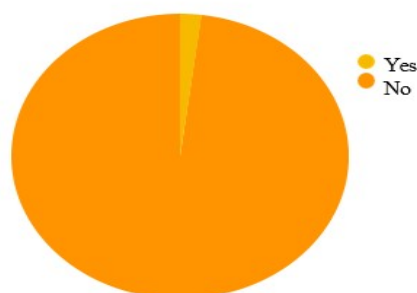


Figure 2.7: Respondents Benefited From Government Schemes

The above figure shows that only 1 respondent (2%) benefited from a government scheme related to digital literacy, whereas 49 respondents (98%) did not benefit from any such scheme.

Have you got benefit from Mukhyamantri Digital Seva Yojana?

Table 2.5 Respondents Benefited from Mukhyamantri Digital Seva Yojana

Response	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	2	4
No	48	96
Total	50	100.00

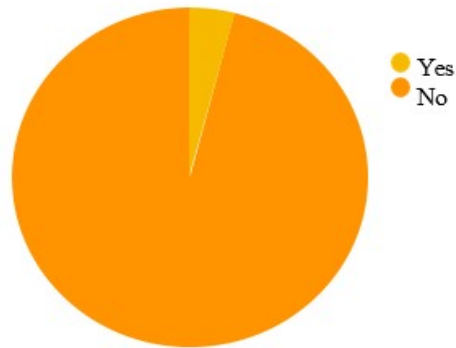


Figure 2.8: Respondents Benefited From Mukhyamantri Digital Yojana

The above figure shows that 4% of the respondents benefited from the Mukhyamantri Digital Yojana, whereas the remaining 96% of the respondents did not benefit from this scheme.

A critical outreach gap exists regarding state-led digital initiatives, with most respondents unaware of their existence and few receiving benefits. This failure to penetrate the grassroots level, compounded by low literacy, restricted mobility, and rigid social norms, creates a profound disconnect between progressive policy intentions and the lived realities of these women.

For what purpose do you use Digital Device?

Table 2.6 Purpose of Using Digital Device

Purpose	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Entertainment	21	42
Job	6	12
News	3	6
Religion	4	8
Call	8	16
No purpose	8	16
Total	50	100.00

The above table shows that (42%) of Respondents use digital device for entertainment, (12%) of Respondents use digital device for job purpose , (6%) of Respondents use digital device for news , (8%) of Respondents use digital device for religion purpose, (16%) of Respondents use digital device to attend calls only and (16%) of Respondents have no purpose of using mobile phone.

Research Findings: The Paradox of Digital Access vs. Empowerment

The Nature of Digital Engagement and Functional Illiteracy

Digital Access and Capability Gap

The findings reveal a significant gap between device ownership and meaningful digital use. Although 84% of women own mobile phones, their use is largely limited to entertainment and basic communication, with minimal engagement in online learning, e-commerce, or e-government services. This indicates functional digital illiteracy and limited productive use of technology.

Financial Exclusion

Digital financial inclusion remains low, with less than 20% using mobile banking and only 2% using internet banking. Limited awareness, fear of technology, distrust, and concerns about fraud contribute to this gap. Economic dependency further restricts digital empowerment, as 60% of women have no personal income and only 14% have higher education.

Structural Barriers and the Policy Implementation Gap

Digital inequality is a multidimensional issue shaped by caste, gender, class, and educational deprivation, as well as gaps in policy implementation. Although 82% of surveyed women were unaware of government schemes and only 2% received benefits, mere access to mobile phones has not ensured empowerment or livelihood opportunities. Bridging this divide requires digital skills training, awareness campaigns, gender-sensitive policies, and better links between digital literacy and economic opportunities.

Key Data Summary

The core metrics from research findings are structured below:

Metric Evaluated	Survey Result (%)	Implication
Mobile Phone Ownership	84%	High physical access, but low functional utilization.
No Personal Income	60%	High economic dependency limits digital opportunities.
Unaware of Government Schemes	82%	Massive information gap; policy implementation failure.

Higher Education Attainment	14%	Low education directly correlates with low digital literacy.
Mobile Banking Usage	< 20%	High financial exclusion and distrust in digital tools.
Internet Banking Usage	2%	Near-total exclusion from advanced digital finance.
Beneficiaries of Gov Schemes	2%	Marginalized impact of existing digital state support.

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