Gender Intentionality
In Digital Skilling Programs
In India

Quicksand

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Background**.**

Globally, digital transformation is benefiting men and boys more than women and girls, creating a gender digital divide. This divide includes disparities in internet access, mobile phone ownership, digital literacy, and representation in STEM fields, including AI. Oxfam's 'India Inequality' report in 2023 shows that India accounts for half of the world's gendered digital divide. Only a third of India's internet users are women and 33% less likely to use mobile internet services than men. As per GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023, in LMICs women are 1.6 times more likely than men to report a lack of skills as a barrier to internet use. Despite concerted efforts by UN agencies, governments, the private sector and civil society organisations to bridge this gap, it persists.

To better address the factors that constrain women's and girl's participation in the digital world, including both material and normative barriers, Quicksand undertook a research study to:

Build on prior work and conduct a gender analysis of select digital skilling programs to identify practical and promising approaches that can assist practitioners in both the public and private sectors in designing more impactful digital skills programs to bridge the gender gap at scale. To this end, the promising approaches would include guidelines for a program's strategy, pedagogy and learning approach, content and curriculum and monitoring and evaluation, specifically for those programs targeting women from low literacy and low-income backgrounds.

Unpack the challenges of digital literacy and its intersection with other influencing factors such as prevailing normative barriers, issues on safety and security, and the relevance and perceived utility of digital skilling.

Approach.

Leveraging Human-Centered Design to Conduct Gender Analysis

The study takes a program-based research approach by first conducting a landscape mapping of ongoing digital skilling programs, conducting a gender analysis of a selection of those, conducting key informant interviews with relevant personnel, and a series of consultations with industry experts and ecosystem partners. Moreover, the study also takes a journey-map-based approach to analysing programs (as illustrated in the image below). For instance, gender intentionality at the program strategy stage may manifest as establishing clear women's economic empowerment goals, and during the pedagogy and learning approach, it may manifest as employing women trainers for women learners.

Key components of a Digital Skilling Program

PROGRAM STRATEGY
Defining program outcomes, indicators of success, activities and target audience.

PEDAGOGY/ LEARNING APPROACH
Identifying training methods, tools, contexts and delivery formats.

CURRICULUM & CONTENT
Create the syllabus, course material and tools to support the pre-learning and post-learning journeys.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
On-ground deployment, observation and evaluation of the program during and post learning.

Given India's unique context with several intersectional issues that impede learning, testing existing gender audit frameworks and learning from digital skilling programs is essential to identify effective approaches. The first step in the study was to create a framework that allows for gender analysis of a program from the unique socio-cultural, economic and financial lens of India. The gender analysis framework has been created by building on existing literature, particularly the ILO's Participatory Gender Audit Framework, and the gender transformative digital skills education framework and guide developed by the EQUALS Global Partnership. Using this framework, a thorough gender analysis has been conducted of all content and modules of the chosen digital skilling programs including, but not limited to, aspects of content (all formats), mode of instruction (facilitated/ self-directed), tools and artefacts of delivery (type of device, training collaterals), the context of delivery (duration, time, physical infra) etc.

Collaborating with a Diverse Mix of Programs

The study has partnered with three programs that include a mix of standalone and embedded methods of teaching digital skills. The programs include:

MANJARI FOUNDATION

A non-profit organisation working with women from marginalised communities to help them overcome social injustice, poverty and exclusion by learning basic internet & digital skills, taught by a cadre of Digital Sakhis, selected from women Self Help Groups (SHG). Manjari Foundation has a presence in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

DIGITAL GREEN

An AI-powered, gender-inclusive digital platform to aid farmers in co-creating sustainable farming practices, used by agricultural extension agents to reach women farmers most in need of technology tools. Digital Green is present in over 11 states including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Odisha.

JAGRITI ENTERPRISE CENTRE PURVANCHAL (JECP)

A non-profit organisation in Uttar Pradesh that works in the domain of Education, Employment, Gender and Livelihoods. Its TechShakti program (part of the Women's Center of Excellence or CoE) trains women entrepreneurs in digital skills and provides access & assistance to gender-non-conforming digital business models, such as Drone Didi.

Insights and Recommendations.

Connecting digital skills to everyday use cases for women and their families can encourage meaningful adoption and application.

- In the Indian context, women learners need buy-in from their families to participate in skilling programs. Tech Shakti by JECP, for instance, makes learning a household affair by speaking to the family's decision-makers during mobilisation drives and making them see the big picture of how digital skilling can benefit the household. Involving families can reduce access barriers, provide opportunities to meaningfully apply learnings, and influence norms positively. The curriculum thus needs to situate digital competencies in familiar use cases that are relevant not just for women and girls but also for their families and communities.

- For instance, while some digital skilling programs may provide a basic outline of Google Maps and its key features, they do not elaborate on how women may apply these learnings in their day-to-day lives in the context of their families and lives (like informing family members about their location, finding public transportation options to take themselves or other family members to the nearest town) or in which situations this skill may be applicable (such as finding the nearest hospital or CSC). Covering the applied dimension of learning these topics can help with improving women's mobility and assuaging their families' concerns about their safety and whereabouts.

Creating a compendium of digital competencies relevant to the needs and barriers of women in the Indian context can significantly enhance learning outcomes.

- Using relatable examples of digital use cases, role models from similar contexts and stories from the field, can have a strong impact on women's motivation and attention towards learning digital skills as a pathway to empowerment. Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society.

Examples from the field: To encourage women entrepreneurs, a digital skilling program uses stories of women business owners from similar contexts, such as Sapna Shah who runs a successful petha (an ash gourd-based dessert) shop in Harpur, Uttar Pradesh or JhaJi Pickle, which is a traditional pickle and chutney business from Mithila, Bihar, that was featured on Shark Tank India. Such stories can build women's sense of self and inspire entrepreneurship.

Due to the newness of digital services, innovative approaches to navigating device shortages and encouraging learning by doing can build familiarity and confidence in women users.

- Access remains a key barrier to women's use of digital tech. Even though learners are informed before sessions that carrying smartphones is mandatory, often they are unable to do so because they may either own only a feature phone or have shared smartphone access, unavailable at the time of training.

- Addressing this in innovative ways, such as sharing rented training devices among groups, using paper prototypes for teaching, and organising field days to digital facilitation or service centres, can provide temporary access to devices to meet learning outcomes. Encouraging group-based learning to navigate the shortage of devices in a classroom can enable increased device usage amongst women and help circumvent access-based barriers.

Segmentation of the target learners based on their predisposition to digital skills and learning is crucial to map relevant competencies and pedagogical methods to motivations for learning.

- While having relatable use cases in a curriculum is important, it is also crucial to segment learners and map relevant competencies to their motivations and capacities. A one-size-fits-all approach can unknowingly exclude women due to inequalities in levels of confidence, digital skills, agency and scope for economic participation. Having a beginner and an advanced learner in the same group can affect the confidence of the beginner, making her vary of asking questions freely. Additionally, it runs the risk of stunting the learning curve of advanced learners, making them lose interest in the session. Adopting a cohort-based approach that can segment learners based on needs and motivations, existing competencies, and relevant use cases can help identify appropriate digital skills and make each session productive and meaningful.

Examples from the field: A digital skilling program conducts a session covering a range of digital skills, such as messaging apps, navigation tools, email, and social media, aimed at a heterogeneous group of learners. However, the session experiences drop-offs as some learners struggle to understand the relevance of these tools to their lives, while more advanced learners remain disengaged, even though they stay in the classroom.

Continued support, a degree of hand-holding post-training and access to refresher material for doubts clarification, have emerged as key needs for women.

- A continued learning journey and measurement of long-term impact, including how women are using the competencies learnt in their daily lives to achieve various empowerment goals, is an area of opportunity for programs to ensure meaningful and long-term uptake of digital skilling. Often programs 'graduate' learners but cannot provide continued support due to insufficient funds and resources. This kind of support thus remains limited to Digital Sakhis or FLWs, who as community-based trainers, are responsible for conducting training sessions. At present, however, programs try to achieve this goal by providing 1-on-1 support to any driven learner who proactively reaches out to them for doubts and opportunities.

In the Indian context, curricula on digital literacy and skilling need to address women's and their families' fears and concerns about being online and its potential harms.

- While access remains an issue, when it is granted, it hangs by a thin thread. Given the advent of digital services in India, there is also an observed rise in digital financial and identity scams. It is important to point out that digital fraud affects women much more adversely than it does men. As per GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024, women are disproportionately targeted by cybercrimes, such as phishing and identity theft, which can lead to financial losses and discourage them from using digital technologies. These factors contribute to a cycle where women, after falling victim to digital fraud, may face increased restrictions on their access to digital technology, further hindering their digital empowerment. Therefore, focusing on both preventive and remedial methods against digital fraud becomes important.

Examples from the field: For instance, one digital skilling program works closely with the local cyber cell to stay up to date with the latest scam ploys and shares prevention tactics with its learners. These prevention methods are shared regularly during the sessions and also on the learner WhatsApp groups.