Gender Gap in Social Media and Digital World in India: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract: This study examines the gender disparity in social media and how it affects Indians' willingness to participate in politics. The research investigates the variables behind this disparity, including rural-urban divide, financial discrepancies, and intra-household discrimination, drawing on data demonstrating disparities in mobile ownership and internet usage. The study looks into how women's political participation is affected by the gendered digital divide. The study then suggests several possible remedies to close the gender gap, highlighting the significance of expanding access to digital devices, putting digital literacy programmes in place, and encouraging women's involvement in the digital world.

Keywords: Gender gap, Social media, Women's participation, Digital divide, Digital literacy, Online engagement, Underrepresentation

Introduction:
A major change in citizen activity and participation has been brought in by the widespread integration of social media inside political discourse. Despite these changes, there is still a persistent gender gap, which limits women's access to these powerful platforms and their ability to participate fully. In-depth analysis of the dimensions and nuances of the gender gap in cell phone ownership and internet usage that exists in India is done in this article. The ensuing examination of this gap's effects highlights its potential to limit women's active participation in political discourse, hindering their representation and amplification of pressing issues. This study aims to illuminate the crucial interactions between the gendered digital divide and women's political participation through a keen analysis of these relationships.

1. Gender Disparities in Mobile Ownership and Internet Usage:
Public engagement and activism have undergone an evolution as a result of social media's widespread inclusion in political debate. The gender gap still exists despite this transition, which limits women's access to these powerful platforms and their ability to participate fully. In-depth analysis of the dimensions and nuances of the gender gap in cell phone ownership and internet usage that exists in India is done in this article. The ensuing examination of this gap's effects highlights its potential to limit women's active participation in political discourse, hindering their representation and amplification of pressing issues. This study aims to illuminate the crucial interactions between the gendered digital gap and women's political participation through a keen analysis of these relationships.

The disparity grows significantly in states like West Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana while remaining narrowest in states like Goa, Kerala, and the Northeastern regions. Multiple factors contribute to this divide's amplification: first, the rural-urban divide reinforces unequal access to digital resources; second, income disparities worsen the problem by making digital engagement a privilege primarily enjoyed by the wealthier; third, intra-household discrimination promotes and widens this digital divide. Together, these factors create a gendered digital divide that restricts women's technological independence and puts at risk their potential involvement in online politics.

The gendered digital divide is made worse by intra-household discrimination because women are frequently denied equal access to digital gadgets. This discrimination intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with sons being given priority access to digital gadgets and data packs while daughters were left behind. Additionally, women entrepreneurs were prevented from moving to online marketplaces by their lack of digital literacy and familiarity with digital platforms.

2. Factors Contributing to the Gender Gap:
A. Rural-Urban Divide: The rural-urban divide in broadband penetration and mobile ownership creates unequal access to digital platforms. States with wider rural-urban gaps experience greater disparities in women's mobile ownership.
B. Income Disparities: The cost of data disproportionately affects low-income households, making it challenging for them to access digital platforms.
C. Intra-Household Discrimination: Discriminatory practices within households limit women's access to digital devices and online spaces, further deepening the gender gap.

3. Implications for Women's Political Engagement:
The gendered digital divide yields substantial implications for women's active participation in political discourse and engagement. These implications have far-reaching consequences that hinder their ability to contribute meaningfully to the democratic process and shape public opinion. The following points elaborate on the ramifications of the gendered digital divide for women's political involvement:

1. Limited Access to Political Information:
Access to essential political information is impeded by the gender divide in smartphone ownership and internet usage. Due to their limited access, women are at a disadvantage when online news sources and political debate forums become more prevalent. Women's capacity to participate in educated political discourse is hindered without regular exposure to various political opinions and current events. As a result, individuals could find it difficult to make educated decisions and contribute meaningfully to political discourse.

2. Underrepresentation:
The lack of female voices on social media platforms results in an alarming underrepresentation of their viewpoints, experiences, and concerns in political debates. This gender gap not only perpetuates women's voices' historical marginalization, but it also distorts the diversity of opinions inside political discussions. This underrepresentation biases the narrative, thereby obscuring crucial issues affecting women disproportionately, such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and economic inequalities.

3. Barriers to Online Advocacy:
The digital gap creates significant obstacles for women who want to campaign for political causes online. Access to digital platforms and a lack of digital literacy can limit their ability to effectively communicate their points of view and engage in strategic online activism. Women may experience difficulties in articulating their opinions, using digital tools, and navigating online political debate settings. As a result, individuals may be less interested or equipped to engage in internet campaigns, petitions, or political activities.

Proposed Solutions:

A. Easing Access to Digital Devices:
Implementing initiatives to provide free mobile devices to various segments of the population can significantly bridge the digital divide and promote women's inclusion in the digital sphere. Distributing free mobile devices to school-going girls can not only enhance their access to educational resources but also introduce them to digital platforms at an early age. Equipping female health workers with mobile devices can improve healthcare delivery, data collection, and communication. Similarly, providing mobile devices to teachers can facilitate digital teaching methods and improve the quality of education. Targeting rural communities with free devices can empower women to connect with the digital world and access essential services.

B. Digital Literacy Programs:
Investing in digital literacy programs tailored for women and girls, coupled with integrating digital literacy into school curricula, can empower women to confidently navigate online spaces. Creating comprehensive digital literacy programs that specifically address the needs and challenges faced by women and girls can enhance their skills and confidence in using digital technologies. These programs can cover topics such as internet safety, online communication, digital tools, and critical thinking. Integrating digital literacy into school curricula ensures that young girls are equipped with essential digital skills from an early age, enabling them to become proficient users of online platforms.

C. Corporate and Government Initiatives:
Offering affordable smartphone loans for women through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and government schemes can enhance accessibility to digital devices. Corporations can play a pivotal role by collaborating with financial institutions to provide affordable smartphone loans exclusively for women. These loans can come with flexible repayment options and lower interest rates, making smartphones more accessible to women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Government schemes can also subsidize smartphone costs or provide financial incentives to encourage women to own digital devices. By reducing the financial barriers, women can overcome one of the major obstacles hindering their digital inclusion. Gender equality and inclusive development, fostering a more equitable digital future for all.

D. Rural Digital Connectivity:
Prioritizing the expansion of digital infrastructure in rural areas is essential to ensure equitable access to mobile networks and internet services. This includes the establishment of more cell towers, broadband connections, and Wi-Fi hotspots in rural communities. Improved connectivity will create a conducive environment for women to access
and utilize digital technologies. Investing in rural digital connectivity and expanding the PM Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) scheme can significantly enhance women's digital inclusion and bridge the gender gap in mobile ownership and internet usage.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, the unequal use of social media and involvement in politics between men and women in India creates major issues for women's political participation. Solving this problem involves making sure women can use technology easily, teaching them about the digital world, and giving them more chances to join online conversations. If we put the suggested solutions into action, the people involved can help make the digital world fairer. This will empower women to engage more actively and knowledgeably in discussing politics and making important decisions.

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