

NAVIGATING INDIA'S DIGITAL DIVIDE

Prepared for
[OHCHR Call for inputs](#)

15/02/2024

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Navigating India's Digital Divide

OHCHR Call for inputs on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats

Introduction

The rapid emergence of digital technologies has completely transformed the field of education, providing fresh prospects for learning and active involvement. However, despite the potential benefits this offers young individuals in India, there are still significant obstacles to ensuring fair access and safeguarding vulnerable groups from online dangers.

In this document, we will share some of our learnings and insights gained through our independent collaboration with Indian non-profit organisations that focus on youth and education. We have had the opportunity to work with some of India's largest organisations, like the Piramal Foundation, The Nudge Institute, Udhyam Learning Foundation, and NavGurukul. We have contributed to the design, testing, development and implementation of more than five digital educational products/solutions and several offline programs, with the aim of making a significant impact on a large scale. Our efforts have taken us across various regions of the country, allowing us ample opportunities to interact closely with young users, understand effective strategies, identify areas for improvement, and continuously experiment and refine our diverse solutions.

This document explores the main obstacles that young people, especially those living in underprivileged neighbourhoods or vulnerable, must overcome to obtain digital education and safely use online platforms.

To properly understand the subtleties of this digital gap, we must look at the unique challenges that different groups of young people face:

1. **Unequal Access and Affordability:** The digital gap remains, especially for rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions. Only 31% of rural Indian families, according to the [Oxfam Digital Divide Report](#), have access to the Internet, compared to 67% of Urban Indians using the Internet, underscoring a crucial infrastructure gap. In addition, the average price of a smartphone in India is more than INR 20,000, which is a major financial obstacle for households with low incomes, [according to IDR \(India Development Review\)](#) Millions of young people's access to digital learning platforms and resources is restricted by these inequities, endangering their educational possibilities.
2. **Limited Digital Literacy:** Navigating the digital world requires proficiency in essential skills like online communication, research, and critical thinking. Unfortunately, statistics from MeitY reveal that only 20% of Indians possess basic internet usage skills, and according to an [NSSO survey](#), only 27.5% of youth aged 15-29 are classified as "digitally skilled." This lack of digital literacy hinders young people's ability to leverage technology for learning, communication, and participation in the digital economy.
3. **Social and Cultural Barriers:** Harmful gender norms and cultural practices disproportionately impact girls' access to and engagement with technology. Over 61% of men in India owned a mobile phone in 2021, as opposed to 31% of women, according to a study by [Oxfam India](#), revealing the stark gender disparity in the country. [UNICEF](#)

[India](#) reports significant gender inequalities in education, while the [ESRI India Map](#) paints a stark picture of the digital gender gap. Early marriage pressures, lack of female role models in STEM fields, and strict cultural limitations on girls' use of digital devices further exacerbate these disparities, perpetuating inequalities and silencing their voices.

4. **Challenges in Online Teaching:** The transition to online learning has exposed the uneven preparedness of educators. More than 80 percent of teachers reported facing challenges in teaching online in the [Oxfam report](#). [Research](#) indicates that many teachers need more training and resources for effective online pedagogy. This hinders the quality of online learning experiences, particularly for students from underprivileged backgrounds who may already face access limitations.
5. **Online Safety and Security:** The digital world harbors its dangers, posing significant threats to young people's well-being. [The National Crime Records Bureau of India](#) reports a 63.48% increase in cybercrimes from 2018 to 2019, highlighting the prevalence of cyberbullying, harassment, and online exploitation. Furthermore, a lack of cyber safety education and reporting mechanisms leaves many young people vulnerable to these threats, causing psychological distress and hindering their online engagement.
6. **Marginalised Youth and Intersectionality:** The challenges faced by the marginalised sections are often intersectional and are compounded by their social location, such as caste, sexuality, disability, or living in conflict zones. The report, '[India Inequality 2022: Digital Divide](#)', found that 8% of people under the 'General' caste category have access to a computer or a laptop compared to 1 % of Schedule Tribes (ST) or 2% of Schedule Castes (SC). In the case of disability, [UNESCO](#) also highlights the need for inclusive digital education models for individuals with disabilities. [UNICEF](#) too emphasises the urgency of providing digital access and resources for children in emergencies. Recognizing these intersecting vulnerabilities is crucial for designing effective solutions and ensuring no one is left behind in the digital world.

Good Practices and Solutions:

Despite the challenges, inspiring initiatives demonstrate the potential of digital education and responsible online environments for all. These "good practices" offer invaluable lessons and pave the way for future progress:

1. **Bridging the Digital Divide:** Large-scale initiatives must be launched to connect rural villages with high-speed broadband and showcase the importance of infrastructure investment. Additionally, affordable data plans and subsidised devices can be instrumental in reducing financial barriers.
2. **Empowering through Digital Literacy:** Organisations like [Pratham Education Foundation](#) exemplify the power of community-based approaches in equipping young people with essential digital literacy skills. By integrating technology directly into school curriculums, these programs ensure students graduate prepared to navigate the ever-evolving online world and actively participate in a digital society.
3. **Challenging the Status Quo:** By giving girls access to technology and mentoring, organisations like [Girls Who Code](#) and [Technovation Girls](#) are attempting to remove

obstacles based on gender in STEM disciplines. These programs enable girls to thrive as inventors and creators in the digital sphere.

4. **Supporting Educators:** Online teacher training programs, like those developed by [Udhyam Learning Foundation](#), equip educators with the skills and resources to navigate online teaching effectively. These programs should focus on technological prowess and emphasise pedagogy for diverse learners, online safety awareness, and strategies for fostering inclusive and engaging online learning environments. Building capacity within the teaching community ensures quality education for all students, regardless of their background or access to technology.
5. **Measurement of data:** The collected data often quantifies the number of people with and without access. We need a data collection mechanism where people's narratives can also be considered, especially those on the last step of social hierarchy. This will ensure that the data is not just scientific but socially responsible as well.
6. **Low or no-tech solutions:** Understanding that technology is not always the answer to solving problems is crucial. Low or no-tech solutions are imperative in crises like the Pandemic.

Beyond these four pillars, several other promising practices are emerging:

1. **Combatting Online Threats:** Cyberbullying prevention programs, digital citizenship education, and robust reporting mechanisms are crucial for tackling online harassment and fostering safe online spaces. Initiatives like UNICEF's "[ASLI DOST #Staysafeonline](#)" campaign provides valuable resources and guidance for young people and educators.
2. **Promoting Inclusive Design:** Technology platforms and educational resources should be accessible to all, catering to diverse learning styles and abilities. This includes developing accessible interfaces, providing alternative formats for content, and incorporating features that address neurodiversity and other needs.
3. **Empowering Youth Leadership:** Engaging young people in the design and implementation of solutions ensures their voices are heard and their needs are met. Youth advocacy groups, digital storytelling projects, and mentorship initiatives can empower young people to become agents of change in the digital world.
4. **Building Global Partnerships:** Cross-border collaboration between governments, NGOs, tech companies, and educational institutions is vital for sharing best practices, scaling up effective solutions, and advocating for robust international standards for digital education and online safety.

Conclusion

The conclusion calls for a collective effort to ensure equitable digital education for the youth in India, who face various barriers such as lack of access, affordability, literacy, skills, resources, safety, and inclusion. It appeals to the UN Human Rights Commission and all stakeholders to implement targeted recommendations that address these challenges through a multipronged strategy.

The recommendations are divided into four categories: infrastructure, system incentives, safety, and empowerment:

1. **Infrastructure:** Increase rural connectivity by using low-cost technologies, extending network coverage, and utilising already-existing infrastructure.
 2. **System Incentives:** Monetary and non-monetary support for digital literacy solutions, such as certificates, scholarships, and recognition for students and grants and funds for solvers, could boost the ecosystem to access / build more powerful solutions.
 3. **Safety:** Ensure that curriculum, textbooks, and teaching strategies are free of preconceptions and biases around gender, caste, sexuality, and disability to promote inclusive education policy.
 4. **Empowerment:** Encourage affirmative action policies that provide the first access to girls and other vulnerable sections to pursue STEM education by setting up dynamic, interesting classrooms, giving them access to high-quality STEM resources, and assisting in peer-to-peer learning.
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About Authors

Authors are a part of 10x Impact Labs, an organisation dedicated to Co-creating a World where Social Impact organisations Thrive and Scale with access to Technology, Data and Design.

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