



From Access to Agency: Media Literacy and Digital Inclusion as Pathways to Empowerment in India

¹ Tanveer Ahmad Lone, ² Sadiya Hamid Najar

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Women Education, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

²PhD Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication & Journalism, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India

Email - ¹tlone745@gmail.com, ²coorsaboor@gmail.com

Abstract: *The present study attempts to examine the intersection of media literacy, digital inclusion, and women's empowerment in India. It tries to understand how media literacy contributes to strengthening women's agency and participation in social, economic, and political domains. In the present scenario, digital technologies play a vital role in shaping access to information, opportunities, and avenues for expression. Consequently, women's capacity to navigate digital spaces safely and effectively has emerged as a crucial factor of their empowerment. This study explores the role of digital inclusion as a transformative tool that enables women to access information, opportunities, and platforms for self-expression and collective action. The study reveals that media literacy is a compulsory prerequisite for women's empowerment and highlights the persistent challenges that hinder women's digital participation, such as online harassment, misinformation, structural inequalities, and the gendered digital divide which disproportionately affect women to limit their potential for empowerment. Further the findings of the study emphasises that achieve gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development requires the implementation of targeted interventions which strengthen women's digital competencies, expand women-led digital initiatives, and ensure the creation of safe and inclusive online environments across India. The study recommends that government, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions should prioritise the promotion of media literacy and digital inclusion to bridge the gendered digital divide and to advance the broader goals of gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development.*

Key Words: *Media literacy, Women's empowerment, Digital inclusion, Gender equality, India, Gender digital divide.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of digital technology and information, media literacy has become essential for democratic participation and individual empowerment. In India, particularly those from rural or marginalised backgrounds, media literacy provides a pathway not only to knowledge but also to voice, agency, and resistance against gender-based inequalities (Tamuli & Mishra, 2022). The development of media remains largely male-dominated and urban-centric, which continues to under-represent women's perspectives. However, grassroots initiatives have begun to fill this gap by empowering women to produce and interpret media that reflect their lived realities (Guardian, 2025).

This study aims to examine how media and digital literacy initiatives impact women's empowerment in India. It analyses the role of media initiatives and digital inclusion programmes that enhance women's access to information and opportunities. It emphasises the transformative potential of digital inclusion in fostering education, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement, and addresses the challenges that hinder women's participation. Further, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection of media, digital literacy, and gender equality in the



Indian context. This study situates digital media as a transformative resource for empowerment of women in the contemporary information age. In India, the expansion of internet connectivity and the widespread availability of smartphones have enabled digital platforms to penetrate both urban and rural areas, which transforms social and economic dynamics of the society. For women, especially those from marginalised communities, digital media provides access to information, education, skill development, and livelihood opportunities. Thus, digital media has become a tool for women's empowerment, which enabling them to participate in decision-making processes, enhancing their digital literacy, and improves financial independence through online entrepreneurship, e-commerce, and social networking. Furthermore, digital spaces have aware women to challenge stereotypes, express agency, and advocate for gender justice, that makes digital media as essential tool of social change in contemporary India. Through digital platforms women enabling to access opportunities, shape social capital, and challenging patriarchal structures in society.

Digital media on one hand has opened new spaces for women's voices, participation, and opportunities, creating pathways for inclusive growth and equality. On the other hand, without deliberate strategies, the digital gender divide may exacerbate existing inequalities. The United Nations has therefore emphasised not only promoting access to digital tools but also addressing structural inequalities by integrating gender-sensitive digital policies, expanding digital literacy training, and ensuring protections against online violence. United Nations Women's Global Digital Compact (2024) highlighted empowering women through digital media requires a multidimensional approach that combines infrastructure, education, safety, and policy reforms. This study explores the transformative role of digital media in empowering women globally, while critically examining the challenges, strategies, and future directions proposed by international frameworks, particularly those led by the United Nations. It also highlights various challenges, such as digital divides, online harassment, and misinformation, which adversely affect women's lives in society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of media literacy and women's empowerment has garnered significant attention in recent scholarship, especially in the context of India's evolving digital development. Digital platforms increasingly mediate access to information, communication, and civic participation, and media literacy has emerged as an essential tool to enhance women's agency. Scholars have explored digital inclusion, and media literacy that challenge gender hierarchies and foster empowerment. Padmaja and Kaushik (2022) study emphasised the transformative potential of media literacy in empowering women across India. Their study highlights how the ability to interpret and critically analyse media enables women to navigate socio-political discourses, challenge misrepresentations, and assert their voices in public spaces. According to the study of Hajira Bano (2021), which draws attention to the importance of critical digital skills among youth and highlights that media literacy not only promotes discernment in the face of online misinformation but also encourages civic participation among marginalised populations, including women. Mukherjee et al. (2021) examined the dual role of social media in women's empowerment. Their study highlighted how social media platforms create opportunities for women's self-expression, advocacy, and participation in civic discourse, while at the same time highlighted online harassment and advocates for a gender-sensitive digital environment where women are empowered through media literacy and protected through policy safeguards. Sowmya and Ramesh (2025) explored the economic dimension of digital inclusion and assessed that digital tools contribute to the entrepreneurial empowerment of women in India's informal sector. Their findings revealed that access to digital platforms has increased, however effective empowerment requires integrated training in digital and media literacy. From a theoretical standpoint, Gajjala (2019) critically examined that online platforms shape the discourse of women's empowerment in South Asia. Through a feminist lens, she argues that digital media provide new narratives of resistance and identity formation. The study emphasises the need to integrate media literacy awareness as a core component of digital inclusion strategies for promoting women's empowerment. Thus, the reviewed scholarship establishes that media literacy extends beyond the acquisition of technical competencies to encompass a transformative dimension essential for women's empowerment in digitally connected societies. The literature highlights the multifaceted role of media literacy which enables critical engagement, fosters self-expression, and promotes civic participation among women in India.

3. OBJECTIVES

- ❖ To understand media literacy and women's empowerment.
- ❖ To study the role of digital inclusion for women empowerment in India
- ❖ To explore the challenges and barriers faced by women that hinder their acquisition of media literacy and active participation in digital platforms.



4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

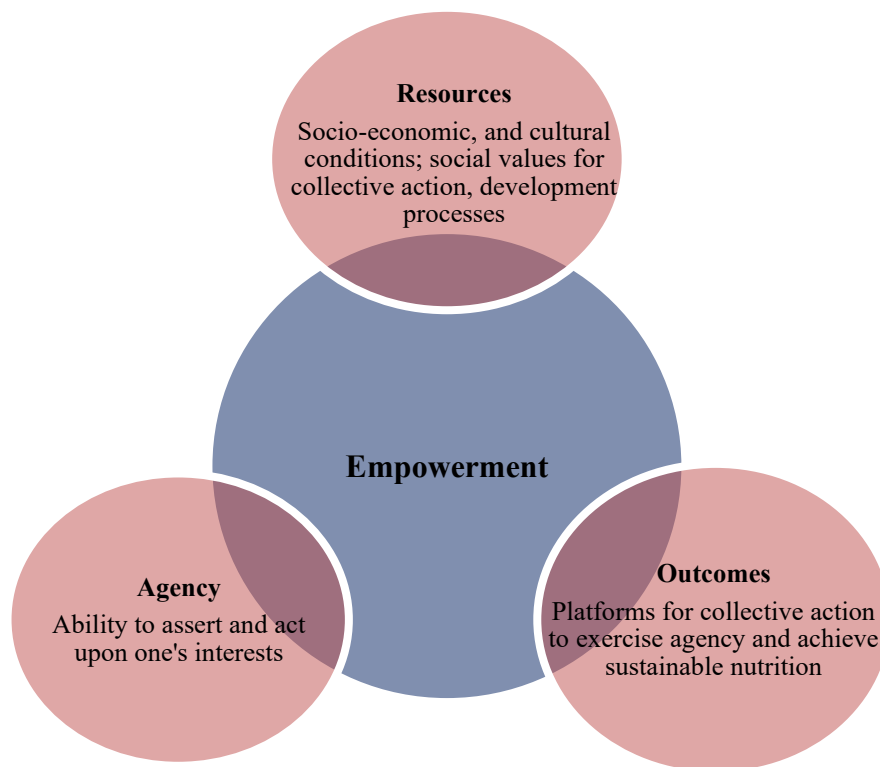
This study employed a qualitative literature to explore the intersection of media literacy, digital inclusion, and women's empowerment in India. The study relied exclusively on secondary data, which consolidated a wide range of evidence without the constraints of primary fieldwork, thereby facilitating a comprehensive and contextually rich understanding of the study. It is grounded in the analysis of secondary sources and adopted a descriptive and analytical approach. It synthesised existing scholarly perspectives to identify thematic patterns and critically evaluate the role of media literacy initiatives in gender equality. The secondary data collection was conducted through systematic literature review techniques, which involved keyword-based searches in academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The study prioritised literature from the last 10–15 years, with particular emphasis on post-2015 studies to capture the contemporary trends and applied selection criteria based on relevance, credibility, and scholarly rigour. The analysis employed thematic content analysis to categorise the findings into core themes, including digital access, media literacy education, empowerment outcomes, and barriers to participation.

5. MEDIA LITERACY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

Media Literacy: Media literacy is increasingly recognised as a vital competency in the 21st century, especially in an age where digital technologies dominate the landscape of communication, education, and civic engagement. Media literacy entails the capacity to access, analyse, evaluate, and produce media across diverse formats (Aufderheide, 1993). It empowers individuals not only to critically engage with media content but also to understand the underlying power structures, ideologies, and socio-political influences embedded in digital communication. Livingstone (2004) conceptualises media literacy as an essential set of skills and understandings that allow individuals to navigate the increasingly complex and convergent media environments. The importance of media literacy in promoting critical thinking enables citizens to decode, question, and reframe dominant media narratives. This becomes particularly relevant in the context of misinformation, political polarisation, and digital surveillance. Furthermore, media literacy is not limited to technical skills such as operating a smartphone or navigating a website. Instead, it includes critical consciousness, what Paulo Freire termed “conscientisation”, the capacity to reflect on social realities and act to transform them. This conceptual framing situates media literacy as a tool of empowerment and social justice (Hobbs, 2010). Scholars argue that individuals with higher media literacy are better positioned to participate in democratic processes, resist manipulative content, and advocate for their rights in digital spaces (Kellner & Share, 2007).

In global development discourses, media literacy is now seen as a fundamental component of digital inclusion. It serves as a bridge between access to technology and meaningful use, particularly for marginalised populations such as women in rural India. However, there remains a significant digital divide in terms of gender. The women are often excluded from digital literacy programmes due to lack of awareness, socio-cultural barriers, and limited educational opportunities. Scholars have emphasised the importance of integrating media literacy within broader frameworks of education and development, especially those oriented toward empowerment, participation, and rights-based approaches. They emphasised that effective media literacy should be context-specific, culturally responsive, and intersectional in both its design and implementation.

Women Empowerment: The empowerment of women is a multidimensional concept that encompasses social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. It has been widely studied across disciplines such as development studies, gender studies, political science, and sociology. Broadly defined, women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain greater control over their lives, make informed decisions, access resources and opportunities, and influence the systems and structures that affect them. Empowerment involves three interrelated dimensions: resources (preconditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes) (Kabeer, 1999).



Conceptualisation of Women Empowerment (Naila Kabeer, 1999)

Naila emphasises that empowerment is not just about access to resources but also about the expansion of agency, the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. She argues:

“Empowerment refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”

Empowerment of women is recurrently remarked through both individual and collective lenses. At the individual level, it encompasses increased self-confidence, decision-making power, mobility, and access to education and health services. At the collective level, it involves participation in community activities, representation in governance, and advocacy for rights. The United Nations (UN) and various global development frameworks have identified women's empowerment as a cornerstone of sustainable development. UN Women defines empowerment as the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic choices that affect one's life and well-being. It focuses on the key areas of women's empowerment, such as ending violence against women, enhancing economic empowerment, increasing political participation, expanding access to education and health, and promoting legal rights and protections (UN Women, 2015). In feminist theory, empowerment is closely linked to concepts of patriarchy, intersessionality, and structural inequality. Scholars such as Batliwala (2007) argue that empowerment must challenge and transform existing power relations, not just enable women to participate in them. From this perspective, empowerment is inherently political and must address intersecting oppressions of gender, class, caste, religion, and ethnicity.

6. ROLE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

The previous studies confirmed that digital inclusion significantly contributes to women's empowerment in India by expanding access to information, economic opportunities, education, and civic participation. Digital inclusion provides equitable access to and meaningful use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). It addresses multiple dimensions of empowerment, particularly in contexts where women have been historically excluded from technological spaces (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Various studies demonstrated that women with access to digital tools and connectivity were able to engage more effectively with online learning platforms, government welfare schemes, e-commerce, and health services, thereby enhancing their social and economic mobility. Heeks and Shekhar



(2019) findings of the study highlighted that digital access enables marginalised women to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly access resources and opportunities. Moreover, digital inclusion was found to strengthen women's agency by enabling them to participate in social media discourse, express opinions on public issues, and mobilise community action. The studies also highlighted that digital inclusion expands women's ability to shape narratives and influence decision-making processes. Thus, digital literacy increased confidence among women in interacting with digital platforms, using them not only for personal communication but also for advocacy, awareness campaigns, and entrepreneurial ventures (Rashid & Qaisar, 2020). Significantly, digital inclusion fosters resilience and self-reliance by equipping women with essential digital skills for navigating online spaces safely. Women who received digital literacy training demonstrated greater awareness of privacy settings, online fraud prevention, and cybercrime reporting mechanisms, reflecting UN Women's (2020) assertion that safe digital participation is integral to empowerment.

Media and digital inclusion have emerged as powerful tools for women's empowerment in India by opening new spaces for participation, representation, and opportunity. First, they provide women with unprecedented access to information and knowledge, which strengthens their ability to make informed choices regarding education, health, livelihoods, and rights. Digital inclusion programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA) have significantly expanded digital literacy among rural and marginalised women. It enables them to engage with e-governance services, online marketplaces, and financial technologies. This access enhances not only individual agency but also household-level decision-making and socio-economic mobility. Second, media literacy initiatives foster critical thinking and communication skills, empowering women to interpret, evaluate, and produce media content. Grassroots and community media platforms allow women to narrate their lived experiences, challenge stereotypes, and participate in public discourse, thereby increasing their visibility and influence in the socio-political sphere. Such inclusion helps challenge patriarchal narratives and amplifies women's voices in shaping community priorities and development agendas. Third, digital inclusion plays a transformative role in expanding women's economic opportunities. Affordable mobile connectivity, digital payment systems, and e-commerce platforms enable women entrepreneurs and self-help groups to reach wider markets, diversify income sources, and gain financial independence. These opportunities not only foster economic resilience but also enhance confidence, leadership, and participation in decision-making processes. Fourth, digital platforms and media literacy contribute to civic and political empowerment, which reinforces participatory democracy and encourages the formation of solidarities across diverse geographic and cultural contexts. Thus, digital and media inclusion cultivate intergenerational benefits. When women gain digital and media skills, they transmit knowledge to their children and communities, creating a ripple effect that advances literacy, inclusion, and empowerment on a broader scale. By enabling women to become both informed consumers and active creators of digital and media content, these initiatives foster autonomy, confidence, and agency, contributing to more inclusive and equitable development outcomes in India.

7. CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS OF MEDIA LITERACY AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

The findings of the present study reveal that, despite the growing importance of media literacy in advancing women's empowerment, various structural, socio-cultural, and individual barriers continue to impede women's acquisition of media literacy and their active participation in digital platforms in India. One of the most prominent challenges is the persistent gendered digital divide, where women, especially in rural and low-income communities, face limited access to affordable internet, digital devices, and technological infrastructure (UNFPA, 2023). The infrastructural gaps are compounded by affordability issues, with the cost of devices and data plans acting as significant deterrents for women's sustained digital engagement. Beyond infrastructural constraints, socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes also play a critical role in limiting women's media literacy acquisition. In some parts of the country, women's use of digital devices is restricted by family or community norms, which hinders their personal and professional development (UN Women, 2020). The other major barrier is the low baseline of digital literacy among women with limited formal education. This lack of digital literacy not only affects the ability to interpret and evaluate media content but also increases vulnerability to misinformation and online manipulation. Furthermore, safety and security concerns significantly limit women's active participation on digital platforms. Fear of cyber-harassment, online abuse, privacy violations, and non-consensual sharing of personal content deters many women from publicly engaging on social media or producing digital content. It creates a paradox where the very platforms that could amplify women's voices also become sources of exclusion due to hostile online environments. Therefore, to overcome the barriers that hinder women's media literacy and digital participation in India, it requires not only better infrastructure but also gender-sensitive approaches that address cultural norms, online safety, language diversity, and skill development. Without the



comprehensive measures, women may not be able to achieve their full potential in digital spaces, which continues their cycle of exclusion.

8. CONCLUSION

Media literacy and digital inclusion are essential resources of women's empowerment in India which functions not merely as technological tools but as transformative social processes. Digital media acts as a catalyst that expands opportunities for participation in social, economic, and political spheres by equipping women with access, critical digital skills, and safe online environments. It enhances women's capacity to critically engage with information, overcome misinformation, navigate risks, and use digital platforms for education, entrepreneurship, advocacy, and civic engagement which amplifies their voices and agency in society. However, persistent barriers such as infrastructural deficits, affordability challenges, linguistic divides, online harassment, and socio-cultural restrictions continue to limit equitable participation in India particularly for rural and marginalized women. The study highlights addressing these barriers through inclusive policies, digital safety measures, and capacity-building initiatives is vital for ensuring that technology fulfils its potential as a tool of empowerment. Therefore study affirms that fosters media literacy and digital inclusion strengthens women's agency, accelerates gender equality, and contributes to building a more inclusive and equitable society. The study recommends that targeted interventions be designed to strengthen digital literacy among women, particularly those from rural and marginalized communities, so they can effectively utilize digital platforms for education, livelihood generation, and civic participation. It is recommended that governments, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions prioritise the promotion of media literacy and digital inclusion among women by designing and implementing structured training programs. Furthermore, the creation of safe and inclusive digital environments is essential to foster women's active participation in the digital sphere, while simultaneously addressing critical challenges such as online harassment and the spread of misinformation. Policy frameworks must integrate digital literacy into broader gender empowerment strategies, which ensures inclusivity by considering linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivities, and socio-economic barriers. To shape a sustainable digital ecosystem, awareness campaigns and women-led digital initiatives constitute critical strategies which not only enhance media literacy but also provide platforms for amplifying women's voices, strengthening their agency, and advancing the broader objectives of gender equality and inclusive development.

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