



Women's Financial and Digital Inclusion in India: Progress, Challenges, and the Path Forward

Eti Goswami ¹, Sunita Gupta ² & A.C. Gupta ³

¹ Research Scholar Agra College, Agra

² Department of Economics Agra College, Agra

³ St. John's College, Agra

ABSTRACT

Financial inclusion of women is mainly essential for gender equality and women's economic empowerment worldwide. With greater control over their financial lives, women can help themselves and their families move out of poverty, reduce the risk of falling into poverty, eliminate exploitation in the informal sector, and increase their ability to engage in measurable, productive economic activities fully. This research examines the state of women's financial and digital inclusion in India, exploring the progress made through policy interventions and the determined barriers that continue to hinder significant participation. While India has achieved near-universal bank account ownership, significant gender disparities persist in account usage, digital literacy, and access to credit. This paper identifies critical gaps in digital literacy, mobile phone ownership, and financial agency that hinder women's economic empowerment, and proposes evidence-based recommendations to achieve inclusive, sustainable financial inclusion.

Keyword: Financial inclusion, Digital inclusion, Women Empowerment, Credit Access.

1. INTRODUCTION

Financial inclusion has emerged as a critical enabler of economic development and gender equality worldwide. The World Bank defines financial inclusion as "ensuring individuals and businesses have access to useful and affordable financial products and services that meet their needs delivered responsibly and sustainably" (World Bank, n.d.).

India's journey toward financial inclusion began in 1956 with the nationalization of life insurance companies, followed by bank nationalization in 1969 and 1980, and general insurance nationalization in 1972 (Chauhan, 2022). However, the transformative shift occurred in 2014 with the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and the Digital India campaign in 2015, which introduced the JAM Trinity Jan Dhan Yojana for universal banking, Aadhaar for biometric identification, and Mobile services for direct transfers (Chauhan, 2022). Despite remarkable progress in account ownership rising from 35% in 2011 to 89% in 2024 (World Bank Global Findex, 2025), critical questions remain about the quality and meaningfulness of financial inclusion for women. For women, financial inclusion represents more than access to banking services; it is a pathway to economic empowerment, decision-making autonomy, and breaking cycles of poverty, reducing vulnerability to economic shocks, eliminating exploitation from the informal sector, and increasing their ability to engage in measurable and productive economic activities. An inclusive financial system supports stability, integrity, and equitable growth.

However, despite great efforts, there still exists a persistent gender gap in financial literacy and access. According to research on the gender gap in financial literacy, worldwide, 35% of men are financially literate compared with 30% of women (GFLEC, 2017). This five-percentage-point gap exists across developing and advanced economies alike, independent of a country's income level. In India, the disparity is even more pronounced, with only 21% of women being financially literate compared to 29% of men (ACCESS, 2024).

1.1 Financial Inclusion

Defining Financial Inclusion

Financial inclusion refers to providing affordable and accessible financial goods and services to all individuals, as well as businesses, in a sustainable manner. It catalyses entrepreneurship, permits business expansion, authorizes women, and supports people in managing risks, all of which reinforce economic activity and initiate productivity growth. The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals framework recognizes financial inclusion as essential to achieving 7 of its 17 goals. Specifically, SDG 5 on gender equality identifies women's economic empowerment, of which financial inclusion is critical as a key target, while the World Bank views it as fundamental to development.

Financial inclusion has a multiplier effect in boosting overall economic output, reducing poverty and income inequality at the national level.

Financial inclusion as defined by the National Strategy for Financial Inclusion (2019-2024), by the Reserve Bank of India, refers to the process whereby "access to basic financial services and timely and adequate credit where needed by vulnerable segments like weaker sections and low income groups at affordable costs is ensured" (RBI, 2019). According to the Rangarajan Committee Report (2008), it is clear that financial inclusion is a process and not an end, where people can adapt themselves to changing financial instruments and services. Broadly speaking, financial inclusion involves the participation of the individual in the financial system, thus having the capability to utilize the financial system efficiently in borrowing, spending, saving, and investing, while covering himself or herself through insurance facilities (Chauhan, 2022).

1.2 Three Dimensions of Financial Inclusion

1 ACCESS <i>Supply-Side</i>	2 USAGE <i>Demand-Side</i>	3 QUALITY <i>Sustainability</i>
Financial Infrastructure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bank branches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ATMs • Banking correspondents • Points of service • Digital payment infrastructure • Insurance offices 	Active Utilization <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savings behavior • Investments • Insurance uptake • Credit availability • Digital payments • Pension participation • Remittances 	Service Standards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of service access • Financial literacy • Fraud prevention • Consumer protection

Table 1: Financial inclusion encompasses three critical dimensions:
 Source: Author Compiled

1.3 Digital Financial Services

Digital financial services (DFSs), enabled by fintech innovations, have emerged as a critical driver of financial inclusion in emerging markets

and developing economies (EMDEs) in recent years. According to the World Bank, “digital financial inclusion involves deploying cost-effective digital solutions to reach financially excluded and underserved populations with formal financial services tailored to their needs. These services must be responsibly delivered at prices affordable to customers while remaining sustainable for providers.”

The digital financial services ecosystem comprises three essential components that work in concert to facilitate financial transactions:

- **Digital Transactional Platform:** It enables customers to conduct financial operations using digital devices. Through these platforms, users can make or receive payments and transfers.
- **Retail Agent Networks:** Agents equipped with digital devices connected to communications infrastructure serve as the vital link between the digital and physical economies. They enable customers to convert cash into electronic stored value and vice versa.
- **Customer Devices:** These can take various forms, including digital devices (such as mobile phones) that transmit data and information.

1.4 The Interaction of Financial and Digital Financial Inclusion

Digital financial inclusion represents the convergence of financial services and digital technology, offering unprecedented opportunities for reaching underserved populations. For women in India, digitally enabled bank accounts have positively facilitated digital inclusion (SPRF, 2021). However, the intersection of digital and financial inclusion also compounds existing gender gaps. Women who lack digital literacy face double exclusion from both financial services and the digital economy. As financial services increasingly migrate to digital platforms, women without digital skills risk being left behind, even if they have formal bank accounts.

The gender digital divide exists in multiple dimensions:

- **Access:** Lower ownership of smartphones and internet-enabled devices among women.
- **Skills:** Lower digital literacy and confidence in using digital platforms.
- **Usage:** Lower frequency and diversity of digital service usage, often limited to receiving government payments.

- Agency: Limited control over devices and online activities due to household dynamics and social norms.

1.5 JAM Trinity and Digital India

The JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, and Mobile) laid the groundwork for implementing Direct Benefit Transfers and expanding digital payments (SPRF, 2021). The Digital India campaign launched in 2015 proved significant for bringing the unbanked population into the mainstream economic system with a formal financial net (Chauhan, 2022).

The foundational work done for JAM helped in transferring money directly to bank accounts and incentivized women to use their accounts (SPRF, 2021). This digital infrastructure has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling the government to provide economic relief directly to beneficiaries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cabeza-García, Del Brio, and Oscanoa-Victorio (2019) analyzed the relationship between female financial inclusion and economic development across developed and emerging countries. The study examined three dimensions of financial inclusion: bank account access, credit access, and payment measures, finding that bank account and credit card access significantly explain economic development. Results demonstrated that reducing the gender gap in financial inclusion positively impacts economic and social wellbeing globally, as women's participation in financial systems drives economic growth and reduces poverty and vulnerability through greater financial independence. The research emphasized the importance of eliminating barriers to women's financial access and promoting financial education and literacy, noting that women face discouragement from their environment and families that prevents financial autonomy.

Bhatia and Singh (2019) studied the empowerment special effects of India's Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) scheme on 737 women living in urban slums. The study revealed that PMJDY successfully brought women into the formal banking system, demonstrating positive influences on social, political, and economic dimensions of women's empowerment, with even less-educated women showing sound awareness of financial inclusion schemes. However, the research identified persistent challenges in digital payments and mobile banking application usage. The study found that urban slum women faced not access problems but rather economic risks, financial risks, and

social risks, highlighting the multifaceted nature of financial exclusion beyond mere institutional access.

Fareed et al (2017) investigated determinants of women's entrepreneurship in Mexico using micro-level data from 2009 to 2015. The research demonstrated that financial inclusion indicators, including banking branches, POS terminals, banking agents, ATMs, and microfinance banks, positively correlate with women's entrepreneurship, alongside education, age, income, and marital status factors. The study revealed a significant gender gap, with women 56% less likely to be formal sector entrepreneurs and 63% more likely to be informal sector entrepreneurs compared to men, with higher concentrations in micro-enterprises. Critically, the positive relationship between financial inclusion and women's entrepreneurship did not hold for informal sector entrepreneurs, rural areas, or women in the commerce sector, indicating that financial access alone does not uniformly benefit all categories of women entrepreneurs.

Goel and Madan (2019) examined the relationship between financial inclusion schemes and women's entrepreneurship in Uttarakhand state, India, surveying 250 women entrepreneurs from self-help groups and RSETI programs. The study established a statistically significant impact of financial inclusion on women's entrepreneurship, with financial inclusion schemes explaining approximately 50% of entrepreneurial activity among women. Research findings revealed poor awareness of available financial schemes among women, emphasizing that improving scheme accessibility and reach is critical for enhancing women's entrepreneurial participation. The authors advocated for a multipronged approach involving society, government, and business associations, recommending gender equality at the mindset level, increased government incentives, and enhanced awareness of financial inclusion schemes, marketing opportunities, and resources to boost women's entrepreneurship.

Oyasar (2026) analyzed the impact of digital financial services on women's empowerment and financial inclusion across Asian countries, revealing significant gender disparities in mobile money adoption. The study found that while mobile money is increasingly popular in low-income countries, it has not enhanced female representation proportionally, with considerable disparities across income levels and regions. Women in high-income countries preferred traditional banking over mobile money, indicating that digital financial services are not yet viewed as alternative banking methods. The research emphasized that

digital financial inclusion's role in empowering women extends beyond mere access to encompass usage, efficiency, and perception of financial solutions, recommending gender-sensitive policies and integration of mobile money with conventional financial sectors, particularly in high-income Asian countries, to promote equal opportunities for women.

3. THE STATE OF WOMEN'S FINANCIAL INCLUSION IN INDIA

The financial inclusion of women plays a very significant role in ensuring financial stability and sustainability. With an increase in inflation and climatic changes taking place in the global financial system, financial frameworks can be improved and made stable by applying gender inclusion policies. The inclusion of women into the financial system will bring about more stability within the financial systems. By having access to banking, credit and investments, women will bring economic development and stabilize the institution that they interact with.

Women are expected to save constantly, repay loans on time, and invest in durable financial well-being. Their participation in financial markets helps diversify risks, increase deposit bases, and expand economic activity. Studies indicate that financial institutions with more women in leadership positions tend to perform better, exhibit lower risk profiles, and promote responsible financial management.

3.1 India's Progress in Financial Inclusion

India has made remarkable strides in bringing women into the formal banking system, with account ownership reaching 89% in 2024, up from just 35% in 2011 among both men and women, driven largely by the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and digital delivery of government benefits (ACCESS, 2024; World Bank Global Findex, 2025). This advancement in financial inclusion is further evident in the Reserve Bank of India's Financial Inclusion Index 2025.

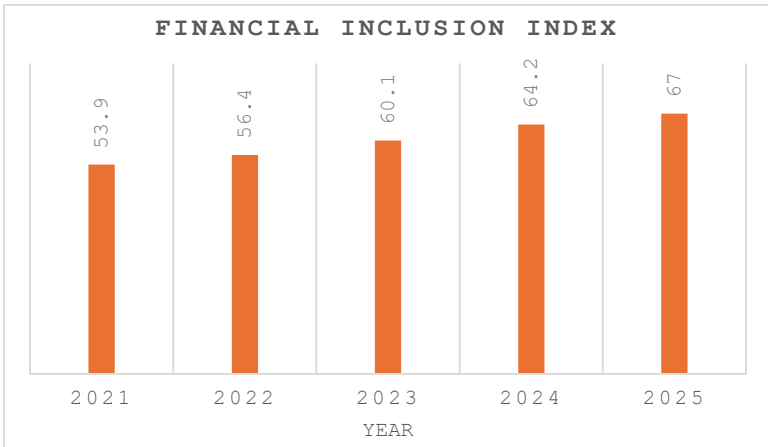


Figure: 1 The financial inclusion index reached 67.0 in 2025, representing a significant growth of 24.3 percent from 2021. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) data also corroborates this progress.
 Source: Author Compiled

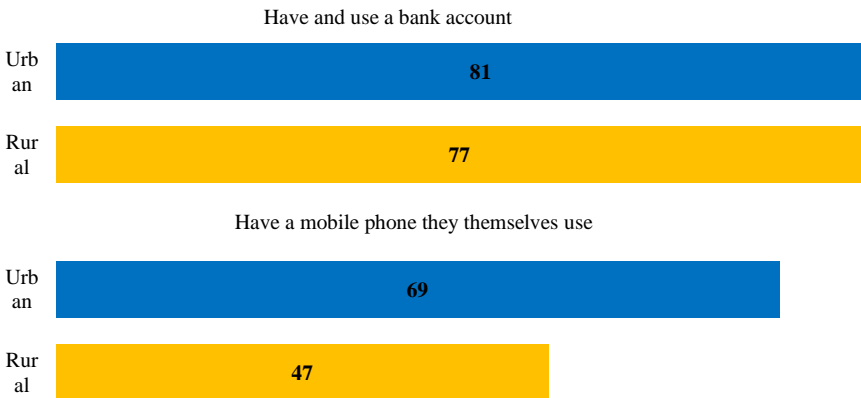


Figure: 2 Percentage of women age 15-49
 Source: NFHS-5

The recent finding shows that the percentage of women aged 15-49 who own and use a bank or savings account surged from 53% in NFHS-4 (2015-16) to 79% in NFHS-5 (2019-21). However, this progress is not uniform across all financial services. While 81% of urban women and 77% of rural women have and use bank accounts, only 69% of urban women and 47% of rural women own mobile phones that they themselves use (NFHS-5). Among mobile phone owners, 71% are able to read text messages. Although awareness of microcredit programmes

is moderate at 51%, actual utilization remains quite low, with only 11% of women having ever obtained a microcredit loan. Despite substantial progress in women's bank account ownership and usage, this disparity in mobile phone access particularly in rural areas remains a significant obstacle to achieving comprehensive digital financial inclusion, as mobile phones serve as critical enablers for accessing digital financial services and participating fully in the digital economy.

3.2 The Usage Gap: Account Dormancy and Inactivity

Despite impressive account ownership statistics, a significant gap exists between access and meaningful usage. The World Bank report on account inactivity revealed that the share of account inactivity was observed at 35% in India the highest in the world with a 12-percentage-point gap in terms of gender difference, making women's financial inclusion more difficult (World Bank).

The Inclusive Finance India Report 2024 highlighted that around 17% of PMJDY accounts nearly 82 million accounts are inactive, and women are more likely than men to hold such dormant accounts (ACCESS, 2024). The Global Findex 2025 report noted that 14% of adults in India, representing 16% of account owners do not have an active account (World Bank Global Findex, 2025). This phenomenon of account dormancy raises critical questions about the quality and meaningfulness of financial inclusion. Access alone does not translate into economic empowerment if accounts remain unused, highlighting the need for interventions that address the underlying barriers to active engagement with financial services.

3.3 The Savings and Investment Divide

The gender division becomes even sharper once savings and digital financial behaviour are tested. Between 2021 and 2024, formal savings among men doubled from 15% to 31%, while women's savings rose more slowly from 13% to just 23%, widening the savings gap over time (ACCESS, 2024). This disparity in savings behaviour reflects deeper structural inequalities in income, financial literacy, and decision-making autonomy. Women's lower participation in formal savings mechanisms limits their ability to build financial resilience, invest in productive activities, and exercise economic agency.

3.4 Digital Financial Inclusion: The New Frontier

Digital financial inclusion contains the deployment of cost-saving digital means to extent currently financially left out and underserved populations with an array of formal financial services suitable to their needs that are correctly delivered at a cost reasonable to customers and supportable for providers. Digital financial services present both opportunities and obstacles for women's economic participation. Direct Benefit Transfers (DBTs) have strengthened banking engagement, mobility, and negotiating power among women. The JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhaar, and Mobile connectivity) created the infrastructure for digital payment expansion and enabled DBTs to transfer funds directly into bank accounts, encouraging women to actively use their accounts.

Yet substantial barriers remain. NFHS-5 data demonstrate that about 60% of women across 12 Indian states and union territories have certainly not accessed the internet. Only 30% of women hold debit cards versus 45% of men, and merely 15% use mobile money for savings. Women's primary interaction with digital financial services has been receiving government payments through DBTs, underscoring a critical digital divide that hampers true financial inclusion.

According to the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, 2025, reveals that nearly half of rural women lack mobile phone ownership. In rural areas, 51.6% of women aged 15 and above don't own mobile phones, compared to 80.7% mobile ownership among men. Urban areas show better rates, 71.8% of women and 90% of men own mobile phones, but gaps persist. Men demonstrate 13.7 percentage points higher likelihood of conducting UPI transactions (62.6% versus 48.9%), indicating greater confidence and autonomy in digital finance. Women's lower participation signals ongoing barriers to financial inclusion and independent economic engagement. Moreover, only 56.6% of women own smartphones compared to 73.7% of men, making men 1.3 times more likely to own one. This ownership-access gap suggests many women depend on shared or household devices, revealing the deeper realities behind surface-level usage statistics.

3.5 Access to Credit: The MSME Financing Gap

Positive trends are emerging in women's access to credit in India, according to NITI Aayog's report. Women seeking credit grew approximately three times between 2019 and 2024, reflecting increased demand among female borrowers. About 60% of women borrowers availing credit are from semi-urban or rural areas, indicating that

financial services are reaching previously underserved populations. However, Women-led Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) appear a financing gap of approximately 35%, exactly double that of male-owned enterprises (ACCESS, 2024). This disparity reflects both supply-side and demand-side barriers. On the supply side, financial institutions may have unconscious biases or risk perceptions about women borrowers. On the demand side, women entrepreneurs may lack collateral, credit history, or awareness of available financing options.

Nonetheless, the PMJDY has facilitated women's access to credit through complementary schemes. As of November 2023, out of 44.46 crore loans sanctioned under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY), 30.64 crore (69%) were granted to women, with the average credit amount increasing from Rs. 39,000 in 2015-16 to Rs. 1 lakh in 2023-24. Under the Stand-Up India Scheme, 2.40 lakh loans amounting to more than Rs. 53,600 crores have been sanctioned to women entrepreneurs and SC/ST members.

4. POLICY INITIATIVES AND GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Since independence, the Government of India has progressively recognized financial inclusion as a cornerstone of equitable economic development and social empowerment. Beginning with the nationalization of banks in 1969 and the establishment of regional rural banks in the 1970s, policy efforts have evolved from basic banking access to comprehensive digital financial inclusion. The journey has witnessed landmark initiatives such as the Lead Bank Scheme, Self-Help Group-Bank Linkage Programme, and the transformative Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, each addressing specific barriers to financial participation. These interventions have been complemented by insurance and pension schemes like PMJJBY, PMSBY, and APY, creating a multi-dimensional framework for inclusive growth. More recently, the integration of technology through the JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile) ecosystem has revolutionized service delivery, enabling direct benefit transfers and reducing intermediation costs.

Scheme	Total Number of Accounts	Total Number of Women Accounts	Percentage of Women Accounts
Women PMJDY Accounts	54,57,80,806	30,37,10,652	56%

Scheme	Total Number of Accounts	Total Number of Women Accounts	Percentage of Women Accounts
Women PMJBY Enrolments	22,52,20,758	10,00,95,919	45%
Women PMSBY Enrolments	49,12,25,285	22,84,37,446	47%
Women APY Enrolments	7,25,77,540	3,44,15,361	41%

Table: 2 Women's accounts as of 15.01.2025

Source: Author Compiled

- Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY): Launched in 2014, PMJDY is the cornerstone of India's financial inclusion strategy, ensuring universal access to banking facilities with at least one basic bank account per household. The scheme also provides financial literacy and social security coverage. As of recent data, more than 56 crore (560 million) Jan Dhan accounts have been opened in the last 11 years, with total deposit balance reaching Rs. 2.68 lakh crore (PIB, 2025). Significantly, women own 56% of these accounts, and 67% of accounts were opened in rural or semi-urban areas, successfully bringing underprivileged individuals from far-flung areas into the formal financial sector (PIB, 2025). Only 22.5 percent of women with mobile phones use them for financial transactions.
- Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY): Launched on May 9, 2015, this scheme provides accident insurance coverage with an annual premium of just ₹20. It offers ₹2 lakh coverage for accidental death or disability. As of March 19, 2025, it has achieved cumulative enrollment of 50.54 crore individuals.
- Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY): This life insurance scheme covers death due to any reason with an annual premium of ₹436, offering ₹2 lakh life cover. Over 23 crore Indians have been covered in ten years, with more than 9 lakh families receiving financial support.

- Atal Pension Yojana (APY): Targeting workers in the unorganized sector aged 18-40 years, APY provides guaranteed monthly pensions ranging from ₹1,000 to ₹5,000 at age 60, depending on contributions.
- Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY): Launched on April 8, 2015, this scheme facilitates loans up to ₹20 lakh to micro and small enterprises. As of August 4, 2025, 53.85 crore loans totaling ₹35.13 lakh crore have been sanctioned, with 70% of borrowers being women. The new Tarun Plus category supports repeat borrowers with loans between ₹10-20 lakh.
- Stand up India Scheme (SUI): Launched on April 5, 2016, this scheme promotes entrepreneurship among SC, ST, and women entrepreneurs for greenfield enterprises. By March 17, 2025, ₹61,020.41 crore has been sanctioned, with ₹72,859 lakh disbursed to women beneficiaries.
- Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY): Focused on women from socially and economically weak backgrounds, this scheme provides training for groups of 20 women in craft activities, forming them into Self Help Groups (SHGs) with loans up to ₹1.4 lakh and a 3.5-year repayment timeline.
- Kisan Credit Card (KCC): This banking product provides farmers with timely and affordable credit for agricultural inputs and allied activities.
- Unified Payments Interface (UPI): Launched in 2016 by NPCI, UPI has revolutionized digital payments in India. In June 2025 alone, it handled over ₹24.03 lakh crore across 18.39 billion transactions, accounting for 85% of all digital transactions in India and nearly 50% of global real-time digital payments.

5. BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S FINANCIAL INCLUSION

The global gender digital divide has been widely documented, with women more likely to face digital exclusion across multiple dimensions (Richardson & Wilson, 2024). Economic constraints serve as the primary access-level barrier, digital literacy gaps present critical usage-level challenges, and socio-cultural factors further restrict women's digital engagement, with these divides manifesting differently across regions. (Singh et al. 2025). On the supply side, inappropriate product offerings present a significant barrier to women's financial inclusion. Many financial service providers merely incorporate superficial gender elements such as "pink marketing" without genuinely addressing women's specific needs and preferences. Meanwhile, on the demand side, the most fundamental barriers remain women's limited access to and control over assets and independent income (Gammage et al., 2017).

Some of the Barriers are as follows:

- **Low Financial Literacy:** Financial literacy remains a major roadblock to meaningful financial inclusion. Only 21% of women in India are financially literate, compared with 29% of men (ACCESS, 2024). This eight-percentage-point gap limits women's ability to make informed financial decisions, understand the benefits of formal financial services, and effectively manage their financial resources. The gender gap in financial literacy is not unique to India but exists worldwide. Globally, 35% of men are financially literate compared with 30% of women, with this gap persisting across countries regardless of income level (GFLEC, 2017). Low financial literacy among women results from multiple factors, including lower educational attainment, limited exposure to economic activities, and social norms that exclude women from financial decision-making.
- **Mobile Phone Ownership and Digital Access:** Despite growing internet use among women, barriers such as low digital literacy, social norms, affordability issues, and online harassment limit women's adoption and use of the internet (SPRF, 2021). Low ownership of mobile phones gravely impacts women's engagement in digital activities (SPRF, 2021). Research on a government program to distribute phones and roll out mobile towers in rural communities found that nearly 40% of women had lost control over their devices within a month after distribution, even though 98% of women said they had received the phones (World Bank Global Findex, 2025). Five years later, researchers found no persistent effects in ownership, gender norms, and economic outcomes in areas eligible to receive free phones compared with other areas (World Bank Global Findex, 2025). This research suggests that interventions to overcome barriers to mobile phone ownership must account for intrahousehold dynamics and entrenched gender norms. Simply providing devices is insufficient; sustained usage requires addressing the social and cultural factors that determine women's access to and control over technology.
- **Socio-Cultural and Psychological Barriers:** Women's financial inclusion is closely linked to their integration into the labor market, where two vicious cycles can be identified. First, women's integration into the labor market faces multiple obstacles: they are overrepresented in less productive sectors of the economy, face barriers to decision-making positions, are concentrated in informal jobs and small businesses, and receive

lower salaries (UN Women, 2022).: Second, women-led enterprises face gaps in access to productive credit that limit their investment capacity and growth potential (UN Women, 2022). These labor market inequalities directly impact women's ability to generate income, accumulate savings, and access formal financial services. Additionally, women face excessive burdens of domestic and unpaid care work. This time poverty limits their ability to travel to bank branches, attend financial literacy training, or engage in income-generating activities that would increase their financial engagement.

- **Lack of Trust and Security Concerns:** Women tend to have low levels of trust in digital services, stemming from concerns about security, privacy, and the risk of fraud (OECD, 2018). These concerns are not unfounded, as online harassment, cybercrime, and data breaches disproportionately affect women, creating legitimate barriers to digital financial adoption. Building trust requires not only technical solutions for security but also creating an enabling environment where women feel safe and confident using digital financial services. This includes consumer protection mechanisms, responsive customer support, and products designed with women's needs and concerns in mind.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S FINANCIAL INCLUSION

- **Intensify women's labour market integration:** Work on equal and formal access to employment, including equal salaries, parity in decision-making posts, equal opportunity training, policies for positive work-life balance, and sharing care tasks. Support female entrepreneurship through access to productive capital, market opportunities, and resources.
- **Address excessive care work burden:** Promote universal access to quality services such as childcare, early childhood education, and care for older persons or people with disabilities through public-private approaches, enabling women to dedicate more time to economic activities and financial management.
- **Build financial and digital capacity:** Provide incentives for using financial instruments through digital and financial capacity building. This necessitates analyzing public policies that promote ICT access for women across different global regions and conducting studies that validate the use and benefits of ICTs through current technological resources (Peláez-Sánchez & Glasserman-Morales, 2023).

- Improve digital infrastructure: Ensure affordable and robust internet connectivity, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where 60% of women borrowers reside.
- Account for household dynamics: Interventions to overcome barriers to mobile phone ownership and usage must account for intrahousehold dynamics and entrenched gender norms, as simply providing devices has proven insufficient.
- Build trust in digital services: Introduce products that help build trust and improve women's engagement, addressing legitimate security concerns through robust consumer protection mechanisms.
- Regular awareness campaigns: Make women aware of the benefits of using digital financial services at regular intervals to ensure absorption of information and sustained engagement

7. CONCLUSION

India has made remarkable progress in expanding women's access to formal financial services, with account ownership rising from 35% in 2011 to 89% in 2024 (World Bank Global Findex, 2025). The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and complementary schemes have successfully brought hundreds of millions of women into the banking system, representing a significant achievement in financial inclusion.

However, access alone does not constitute empowerment. The persistent gaps in account usage, savings behavior, digital financial engagement, and credit access reveal that millions of women remain connected to the banking system in name but not in practice. The 17% inactivity rate among PMJDY accounts (ACCESS, 2024), the widening savings gap between men and women (ACCESS, 2024), and the 35% financing gap for women-led MSMEs (ACCESS, 2024) demonstrate that meaningful financial inclusion remains incomplete.

The intersection of financial and digital inclusion presents both opportunities and challenges. Digital financial services offer unprecedented potential for reaching underserved populations, reducing transaction costs, and enabling women's economic participation. However, without addressing the digital divide in access, skills, usage, and agency digitalization risks creating new forms of exclusion.

Achieving meaningful financial inclusion for women requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both supply-side and demand-side barriers. On the supply side, this includes reviewing eligibility

requirements, designing gender-responsive products, improving digital infrastructure, and generating data-driven solutions. On the demand side, interventions must focus on financial and digital literacy, labour market integration, reducing care work burdens, and addressing socio-cultural barriers to women's economic participation.

Financial inclusion is not merely a technical or infrastructural challenge it is fundamentally about transforming power relations, challenging gender norms, and creating enabling environments where women can exercise economic agency. Without stronger political will, targeted policy action, sustained investment in financial and digital literacy, and confrontation of structural inequalities, the promise of financial inclusion will remain unfulfilled for millions of Indian women.

As India moves forward, the question is not whether women have bank accounts, but whether they have the knowledge, resources, confidence, and autonomy to use these accounts to improve their lives and the lives of their families. Only by addressing this deeper challenge can financial inclusion truly serve as a pathway to women's economic empowerment and gender equality

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