

# Girls at Crossroads



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## Abstract

The purpose of the “**Girls at Crossroads**” project—a research extension (of a literature review I penned early into the internship) for the S M Sehgal Foundation that was directed by Shipra and myself—is to determine society’s effect, if at all, on rural Indian girls’ access to technology. In doing so, the research examines possible barriers obstructing girls’ access to technology, as well as the reason such barriers exist in three Digital Literacy Centers (for both boys and girls separately) studied in three Muslim-majority villages named Ahmadbass, Khalipur, and Badkhal. The basic design of the study utilizes purposeful sampling of digitally-literate girls and boys in the aforementioned villages; though individual, one-on-one profile interviews with several of these boys and girls (one boy and five girls), as well as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with all students of each gender-disaggregated class visited, a comparison was able to be made between girls’ and boys’ access to and use of technology and digital literacy. Other than access to technology, red threads explored in this research include: **mobility, confidence, power, desires, and barriers**. True to many previous studies conducted on a similar topic as the one at hand, it has been found through “**Girls at Crossroads**” that gender stereotypes and social norms which relegate women to a lower position than that of men, are clearly reflected in the digital world, as evinced by the prominent digital gender divide in the region of Mewat; for reasons of mobility and fear of breaking norms, rural Indian women have little to no access to technology, and those who are digitally-literate to some degree are largely unable to practice the skills they’ve learned due to this lack of physical access.



## Introduction and Statement of the Problem



*In a developing nation like India* that is home to less than 25 percent of digitally-literate women with access to technology, the digital gender divide is an ever-present phenomenon directly reflective of the country's deep-rooted patriarchy and gender stereotypes. In such a context, however, it becomes crucial to note that access to technology must not be interpreted from predominantly a physical or practical perspective; rather, access to technology is in itself a multifaceted concept embodying an array of many complicated and intricate nuances, not to mention emotional implications that largely stem from girls' ingrained fear of breaking prefabricated gender stereotypes that oppress women, chaining them to the untouched and unquestioned world of monotonous household chores and child rearing.

As a result of the dramatically-skewed gender power relations across rural Indian villages (specifically Mewat), women have little to no mobility or opportunities to pursue their dreams of higher education or social freedom, for they are constantly being scrutinized, suspected, and spied on by the public eye on the basis of their sex, even to the extent of being viewed as mere material objects solely useful for certain roles.

The victims of such oppression, many of India's rural women suffer from a lack of confidence and power. Further, even the digitally-literate of this demographic are unable to practice or apply what technological knowledge they've learned in their training outside of school **because of two key reasons: 1.** They do not have physical access to digital technology and **2.** They are scared to seek technology on their own, though some are well aware of technological hubs in the village or have male family members who own some form of technology.

## Methodology

As previously mentioned, purposeful sampling is a technique undertaken by “**Girls at Crossroads**”; **focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual, one-on-one profile interviews were conducted with digital literacy (DL) and life skills education (LSE) students from Ahmadbass, Khalipur, and Badkhal village.** Conclusions were then drawn after a careful qualitative and quantitative comparison between the responses of boys and girls to the same questions. **Further, the body language of interviewees at the time of the interview were observed and analyzed** in order to provide a more nuanced and insightful explanation of their responses.

**Below is the official script for the individual interviews;** questions that were asked for the FGDs (both quantitative and group discussions) can be found under the following “**Results and Discussions**” section.

**The following questions were translated into Hindi by Shipra, Anjali, and Satvik (a fellow intern at S M Sehgal Foundation).**

### Script for Individual Interviews

#### 1. Profile

- a) Tell me what a regular day in your life is like
- b) Tell me what you do for fun/hobbies
- c) Do you get to choose what you want to do?
- d) How much time do you have to study every day?
- e) What do you study?
- f) What is your favorite subject and why?
- g) How long are school hours and how far away is school from home?

#### 2. Mobility

- a) How much freedom of mobility do you have?
- b) Do you feel safe in the village?
- c) Where do you feel safe to go to?
- d) Do you ever venture out alone with your friends?
  - i) If so, where do you go to and when do you come back?

#### 3. Access to Technology

- a) How much access, if at all, do you have to technology?
  - i) What might be the reason for your lack/other level of technological access?
- b) Do your brothers have access to technology?
- c) What kind(s) of technology do you have access to?
- d) Going back in time, do you feel that access to technology in your village/community has generally increased?
  - i) Is so, how and why?
  - ii) How has the change/lack of change in access impacted the community?

iii) What has been the general role of women within that change/lack of change?

**4. Power**

- a) What does power mean to you?
- b) Do you feel powerful in your life?
- c) Do you think you are powerful in your village ?
- d) Do you think you have as much power as the village boys/girls of your own age?
- e) Do you feel powerful when you use technology?
- f) Do you feel your mother is powerful?
- g) Do you feel your mother and you are equally powerful?
- h) Do you feel the girls who do not come to Sehgal's DL classes are less powerful than you?
- i) What are some of the differences between the digitally-literate and digitally-illiterate boys and girls of your village?

**5. Dreams/Aspirations + Desires**

- a) What is your dream and why?
- b) How do you plan on achieving your dream?
- c) How likely do you think is it for you to achieve your dream?
- d) If you were born in Gurgaon, how might your life/dreams be different from today?
- e) If you were a boy/girl, how might your life/dreams be different from today?
- f) Does your family decide your life (dreams, mobility, access, education, marriage, livelihood, etc.) for you?
- g) How has technology shaped or aided your dreams?
- h) What is your idea of an ideal lifestyle?
- i) What is it that you truly desire in life?

**6. Digital Literacy**

- a) How long have you attended digital literacy classes for
- b) How long are classes?
- c) Did you seek digital literacy out on your own?
- d) What do other villagers think of you attending these classes?
- e) What do you think are the differences between the digital literacy training girls receive and boys receive in your village?
- f) What is your favorite part of digital literacy?
- g) What have you learned in the classes?
- h) Has DL benefitted you and how?
- i) Have you done anything with what you learned?
  - i) Have you helped members of your family or community with your DL knowledge?
- j) What is your goal in taking these classes?
- k) Is digital literacy important to you and why?

**7. Confidence**

- a) Do you feel confident?
- b) Has DL helped you to become more confident?
  - i) Please provide specific instances or stories
- c) Do you feel more confident about achieving your dream?

**8. Barriers**

- a) What are some of the barriers that you face in your life?
- b) How have you overcome them?
- c) What are your greatest fears?
- d) What is your biggest barrier to access to technology?
- e) Do you feel your life would be any different, if these barriers were to be removed?

## Results and Discussion

### PART 1: FGD (RAISING HANDS ACTIVITY)

**Note:** N/A indicates the question is not applicable to the corresponding group because it was not asked at the time of survey.

**Blue figures** signify the number of girls or boys who raised their hands to the questions, and **Red figures** signify the percentage of those individuals out of the total number of participants.

Questions	Khalipur Girls (12 total)	Ahmadbass Girls (17 total)	Ahmadbass Boys #1 (15 total)	Ahmadbass Boys #2 (11 total)
How many of you feel that you have control over your lives?	0	14; 82 percent	6; 40 percent	6; 55 percent
How many of you are confident?	6; 50 percent	16; 94 percent	11; 73 percent	All 11
How many of you have people who care about you?	10; 83 percent	3; 18 percent	All 15	8; 73 percent
How many of you have a dream?	5; 42 percent	15; 88 percent	13; 87 percent	9; 82 percent
How many of you want to go to school?	All 12	All 17	All 15	All 11
How many of you feel safe in the village?	10; 83 percent	9; 53 percent	All 15	6; 55 percent
How many of you have more power than boys/girls of your own age?	1; 8 percent	0	All 15	5; 45 percent
How many of you have technology at home?	N/A	3; 18 percent	6 (2 laptops and 4 smartphones); 40 percent	All 11

How many of you have your own technology?	0	0	3 (all have mobile phones)	2 (both have mobile phones)
How many of you have benefitted from the Digital Literacy classes?	11; 92 percent	All 17	All 15	All 11
How many of you have applied what you learned in the classes outside of school?	6; 50 percent	8; 47 percent	13; 87 percent	9; 82 percent
How many of you have helped others with the knowledge you gained from these classes?	1; 8 percent	6; 35 percent	7; 47 percent	9; 82 percent
How many of you want to pursue a career that requires digital literacy?	8; 67 percent	2; 12 percent	2; 13 percent	3; 27 percent
How many of you have brothers or fathers who own technology?	All 12	16; 94 percent	12; 80 percent	All 11
How many of you have female family members who own technology?	0 (one girl has an older girl cousin who will be getting a mobile phone soon)	4; 24 percent	6; 40 percent	1 (elder sister has mobile phone); 9 percent
How many of you have digitally-literate female family members?	NA	8; 47 percent	NA	3; 27 percent
How many of you use social media/have your own social media account(s)?	0	0	7; 47 percent	3; 27 percent



## **PART 2: FGD (GROUP INTERVIEW) Results**

### **Ahmadbass Girls' DL Center**

- Boys, many of whom have their own phones, have greater mobility and access to technology than girls do, and are able to practice or apply their DL skills. In addition, girls have less decision-making power and privacy than boys do, according to the girls
- According to the girls, girls in the village are not allowed to go out because parents get suspicious; they think the village is dangerous and unsafe for girls and are fearful of what men can do to their daughters. The girls are also scared to walk home from school alone. If girls were to have their own phones, parents would suspect that their daughters eloped with a boy and probably spy on them. This suggests society's mistrust toward women and their view of women as nothing to little more than sexual objects
- Only four of the 17 girls are currently attending school, which is about four to five km. away from home, in the DL class in the DL class. Ten girls have dropped out; three girls have quit school at 10th grade and one at 8th
- Interviewees feel strongly that girls should be able to enjoy same access to technology as boys do, and allowed to have their own phones without being suspected or spied on. Some of interviewees' brothers have their own phones but deny access to sisters
- According to girls, power is not physical compared to Fateh's definition of power (shown later) as brute power. Rather, power lies in individual capability and individuality

### **Ahmadbass Boys' DL Center (Grp. #2)**

- Society views girls as domestic servants who have no need for digital literacy, let alone education. Should girls be provided their own technology, society would view them as spoiled and suspect them, according to boys. Girls have less less technology or DL knowledge than boys do
- Only one boy among the interviewees has his own phone, but all Ahmadbass Boys #2 have an elder brother or father who owns technology. As for female members of the family, there is only one boy whose elder sister has her own phone. The boy with the phone doesn't let his sister use his phone
- Interviewees reported that girls should have technology and that gender stereotypes that limit girls are bad, though body language (unfocused eyes, playing with hands and feet, general inattentiveness) suggests otherwise. If they were girls, the interviewees think they would not be able to enjoy most, if not all, of the luxuries (leisure time, education, social life, etc. ) they currently indulge in as men
- Group consensus is that money is a reason why girls have little to no access to technology, except for one boy who thinks otherwise; even among the wealthiest families in the village, he believes that girls will never have as much technology/DL skills as boys do. At home, boys use technology primarily for entertainment purposes. Some of the

boys have their own social media (e.g. Facebook, Whatsapp, YouTube ... ) and use it on a daily basis. They also enjoy watching small, random clips for comic relief

- If the interviewees were raised in Gurgaon instead of Ahmadbass, they think their lives would have been better; there would be no farms to tend and they would learn English. Digital literacy is important to the interviewees and they feel there is nothing else for them to do at home besides attending the classes, where they are free to socialize

### **Additional Data: Badkhal Girls' DL Center**

#### **Total Number of Participants: 15**

- The Badkhal Girls, most of whom decided to attend the DL classes on their own, learned how to make files and notepads on computers, and are eager to learn more
- It has only been about a month since they've started attending DL class
- Interviewees learn significantly less DL skills than do their brothers/other village boys
- One interviewee feels more confident after having taken the DL class; learning how to handle computers has given her more power, and she finally gets to learn what her brothers already know
- Two girls have been taunted by their neighbors, who question the validity of the digital literacy classes. Even their own parents think the Badkhal Girls are attending the classes for fun and doubt that they are learning anything important. They would rather their girls stay at home and help with housework
- None of the Badkhal Girls have a smartphone, unlike most of their brothers
- One girl has a computer that her entire family shares, but she is barely allowed access to it. There is not much opportunity for the girls to practice what they've learned in the class

## **Group Interview Analysis**

Similar to the conclusions drawn earlier from the raising hands activity, the seemingly undeveloped gender power relations in Mewat seems to be a large contributing factor in girls' access to technology in the village; boys and girls acknowledged the common belief/social norm in Ahmadbass Village that women are mostly limited to the domestic sphere and are not expected to attain digital literacy, let alone higher education; girls' lack of access to technology, which naturally comes hand in hand with the little mobility and thus freedom/individualism they are allowed, in general has also been noted among both genders during the group discussions: such gendered expectations are further supported by the fact that of the 17 Ahmadbass Girls who participated in the group interview, only four of them were still attending school, with 10 of them being dropouts (mostly against their will). Therefore, based on the fact that both groups shared almost the same observations on girls' roles, which greatly contrasted from those of boys', in

Ahmadbass implies that the gender stereotypes and aforementioned gender power relations are strictly-established to the point that both genders had strikingly similar answers for the more contextualized and nuanced questions, which are intended to be slightly more difficult to answer hence their open-endedness that leaves room for increased possibilities and critical thinking.

The unique confidence and power levels of the village girls, two key themes the entire **“Girls at Crossroads”** research is centered around, were additionally easily traceable not only from their answers but also at the grassroots level, from their physical behavior and body movement throughout the group interviews. While the boys from the DL class generally seemed complacent throughout the interview, as shown by their lax sitting positions that sometimes involved other distracted motions like leaning against the wall, picking at feet, or gazing aimlessly around, the digitally-literate girls seemed more attentive, for they were constantly eyeing the male teacher who was present, as if they were scared of offending him. In addition to that, there was a bandwagon appeal that took place whenever the girls would respond to the questions being asked; in other words, there would be a small group of girls or a single leader (who turned out to a girl who was interviewed for the one-on-one interviews) who would actively speak their opinions out loud, and the rest would simply nod in agreement. Another physical behavior the girls exhibited which revealed their lack of confidence included their tendency to physically lean against a friend or two for not just physical but also emotional support; this behavior, in addition to nervous the interviewees’ anxious glances around their peers that seemed as if they were looking for a sign of justification/confirmation, demonstrated a fear to break social conventions by vocalizing their opinions—something they aren’t often allowed to do because of their marginalized sex.

Outside of the interview, physical displays of Ahmadbass Girls’ low confidence and social power were also observable, from the way young female students travelled around the school in little groups of fellow female friends, like how the digitally-literate girls who were interviewed for the group activity for the collective support of their peers, to the way they walked. The girls of Ahmadbass village had a noticeable gait that could be best described as slow and deliberate, with a slight shuffling of the feet against the ground; the girls would also walk in a disconnected chain of little steps that again suggests their low values of self-worth.

Finally, a meaningful and telling facet that the group discussion provided more insight into is the difference between the way technology and digital literacy is being utilized by the two genders in Ahmadbass village. From the information collected in the group discussions, it can be inferred that digitally-literate boys use technology primarily as a source of entertainment and socialization: when asked about their reasons for technological usage, several of the boys responded that they enjoy watching small, random videos and sports games on online platforms such as YouTube and connecting with friends through social media, namely Facebook and Whatsapp. More on the gendered technology usage in the conclusions derived from the one-on-one interviews.

## **PART THREE: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS\***

*\*Interviewee names have been changed to protect identity*

### **Khalipur Girls' DL Center**

#### **Interviewee 1**

**Name: Alia; Age: 18**

1. She wakes up, does house work, attends DL class (two minutes away from house) where she learns to operate computers, watches TV, then goes to sleep. She has completed up to Twelfth Class and her favorite subject is Hindi. She wants to continue learning until she's technologically-fluent
2. She has some mobility and a good support system with caring friends and family, though her family (particularly her father) does not support her DL education, for they think she should be using the time she studies to complete housework and marry early
3. She is confident that she will do something great in the future, and has set aspirations and goals for herself; she does what her mind dictates and makes righteous decisions. She is optimistic and feels as powerful than the boys because she eclipses them in terms of intelligence. Since taking the class, her power and pride has increased because she being taught what they already know and therefore feels closer to them
4. She wants to be a knowledgeable police officer who helps others and investigates crime scenes, which is the main reason why she attends school despite the criticism she faces

#### **Interviewee 2**

**Name: Foram; Age: 18**

1. She doesn't do any work at the moment because of her burnt hand (accidentally burned while brewing tea for her mom). Has lots of mobility, but is scared of being raped. Besides that, she feels powerful and relatively confident but less so than boys do
2. She wanted to complete twelfth class but mother didn't let her. Her parents argue that government schools are not nice, though the school closest to her has separate latrines for boys and girls and is relatively clean, and the family cannot afford her education. Also the school offers only up to tenth class. Her dream was to study "but [her] dream has failed."
3. She has learned how to create an email ID, send emails, and use Paint and MS Word, however she is unable to practice her DL skills outside of the classroom because has no technology. Because she can't practice at home, Foram thinks that DL has not benefited her but finds computer interesting

**Ahmadbass Girls' DL Center****Interviewee 1****Name: Vardah; Age: 15**

1. Wakes up at 5 A.M. to brush teeth, practices Namaz, reads the Quran, feeds buffalos and cows and buffalos, milks animals, goes to DL class, does chores, then sleeps
2. The only free time she has is on Sundays and when she doesn't have class; even during leisure time, she helps her mom with housework and entertains her younger brothers
3. Has almost no mobility and is only allowed to go to relatives' house, besides her own
4. Thinks boys are more powerful than girls by rule, but she feels she has greater power over them. Has good support system, though she only has one friend
5. Wants to be a math teacher and thinks school is important. She views education as a symbol of respect and social recognition and partly seeks education for that reason. However, she is criticized and taunted for attending school by other villagers, who question how DL will help her as a woman. According to her, there are much more uneducated girls in the village than educated ones
6. Lacks physical access to technology though she wants to practice the DL skills she has learned. The singular phone in her house belongs to her father, who strictly bars her from using it. Fortunately, father will buy her a laptop when she completes DL class
7. Learned about the Taskbar, importing and exporting, MS Word, and PowerPoint
8. She thinks boys, whom she is forbidden to converse with, have benefited most from DL class because they are able to practice the skills they've learned and have greater mobility than girls do. Due to denied access to technology, she is unable to share her DL knowledge with others
9. Digital literacy is meaningful to her because it has helped empower her; she says that in reality a laptop is just a mechanical box that can't do anything on its own, but she is the one who channels and provides power to the box. For these reasons, she feels value in the work she does for the DL class and is eager to learn more
10. Says her access to technology has increased since taking the digital literacy class because her parents have promised her to buy her a laptop and have more faith in the class
11. Feels a strong difference between herself and her uneducated and digitally-illiterate best friend, in that she is able to make decisions and talk to others when her friend can't
12. On the other hand, some people have shown respect toward her for learning DL. One of her success stories is that Vardah was able to help her sister-in-law call someone when she was being mocked by her husband for not knowing how to do so

**Interviewee 2****Name: Manaar; Age: 16**

1. Wakes at five and sleeps at 12

2. Digital literacy has helped make her chores faster; she can pay bills online now
3. Comes from a wealthier and more supportive family compared to other Ahmadbass girls—her grandfather is village Sarpanch, an elected village head who oversees the village infrastructure and civic amenities and ensures their maintenance. Manaar is not forced to do as many chores as the other girls do, and her family values education and supports her wish to become a doctor
4. Brother has an engineering diploma and helps her on her path to achieve digital literacy
5. Feels that DL has empowered her and has given her confidence, despite the little mobility she has like Vardah. She feels this lack of mobility is the reason why she has little power or control of her own life. Unlike before, she can talk to anyone she wants to since having taken the DL class. She feels more powerful than her digitally-illiterate mother
6. In biology class, she was able to help her peers using the knowledge she gained from the DL class, and was praised for doing so. She agrees with Vardah about education being a symbol of power and prestige
7. She also wants to be a computer operator, which is a job that requires DL. Wants to be a part of a progressive, modern society like in Gurgaon, where her Grandmother lives
8. Only her brothers and father have their own phones in her family, though they allow her to practice email, do online retail shopping, and practice booking a plane ticket
9. Watches news and keeps herself updated on worldly events. She is curious and likes learning English
10. Her neighbors have actually been inspired by her and have recently started to send their daughters to the same DL class she attends

### Interviewee 3

**Name: Taza; Age: 18**

1. Completed up to Grade 10 and then dropped out of school. Since then, she has taken on more housework, which includes helping her mother with the land and livestock. She is not allowed to study even though she wants to, because her father said education is unnecessary for girls. In her leisure time, she is told to play with her brothers' children
2. Has one friend whom she is not allowed to meet outside of school due to restricted mobility, but feels safe in the village. She has been obsessed with the city, ever since she went on a school tour to Delhi
3. Does not have a laptop like her sisters-in-law, but her parents both have phones; because her dad does not allow her to use his phone, she occasionally borrows her mother's, which she uses to surf Google, YouTube, and Yahoo. She is not particularly interested in practicing or applying her DL knowledge because she feels it is not useful to women in her village, though she has helped her family with the things she has learned

4. Says her father uses his phone more for entertainment purposes (e.g. Facebook, Internet, ... ) than out of necessity, unlike her mom, who only uses her phone to call or receive calls
5. She doesn't know where internet cafes are located in her village, however she does know of other DL classes nearby; she doesn't want to attend them because her parents would get suspicious. She can only go outside of her home with her older brothers, who both have their own phones and social media. Villagers don't criticize her for seeking DL
6. She has definitely noticed the advancement of technology and technological usage in her village; 10 years ago, there was only one landline near her house for all the villagers to share, whereas today some villagers have their own phones and gadgets
7. Thinks that 100 percent of boys have own technology, compared to 30 percent of girls. Thinks 50 percent of boys know how to use computer and 100 percent of boys use Internet, whereas only 20 percent of girls know computer usage and only 10 percent of girls know how to use Internet
8. Thinks she is powerful because she can do everything on her own. However, she thinks boys are much more powerful than girls, like how her dad is more powerful than her mom, due to increased mobility, freedom, and opportunities. She says girls' inferiority to boys in the aforementioned aspects are similarly reflected in terms of access to technology and DL. Feels more powerful and confident after taking DL class
9. Thinks education is beneficial to girls and can lead to increased mobility and opportunities for them; going to school in itself allows for more mobility. If she were a boy, she thinks she would have had increased access technology and a stable job in Delhi, so she would have studied more
10. Digital literacy is very important and meaningful to her; she feels more confident after having attended the class and is more open to people now. The class is also a place where she can socialize with friends and have conversations
11. Dreams of becoming an educated women living in Delhi with an educated husband who doesn't hit her. Wants to raise children in the city because village is bad for women, and doesn't want them to face same obstacles and limitations she did
12. Her greatest fear is getting sexually harassed because her neighborhood is unsafe

### **Ahmadbass Boys' DL Center**

#### **Interviewee 1**

**Name: Fateh; Age: 18**

1. Wakes at six, practices Namaz, and roams around in the forest before attending DL class, which his younger sister also attends
2. Plans to attend college and wants to be a lawyer who serves justice to his people. Does not know how he'll put his DL skills to use in the future

3. Has his own smartphone and practices what he's learned to a certain extent. Has social media such as Facebook and Whatsapp, and likes looking at memes
4. Says boys learn more computer skills than girls do in their DL class. Younger sister is not allowed access to technology at home, and neither he nor his father lets use their phones because women should not be able to enjoy the same privileges that men have
5. Defines power as brute strength and physical power; the more muscles a man has, the more powerful he is. Therefore, women are powerless by default. Likewise, he is free to go out whenever he wants to and choose who to marry, unlike his sister who is always subjected to the house
6. Not super passionate about education and digital literacy classes; if his parents gave him the option to choose, he would go to school, but if they told him not to, he would be perfectly fine with that order and not seek further education
7. The most important thing he has learned from school in general, including the digital literacy classes, is about social values and socialization, especially because he has met new friends through school
8. His favorite part is talking with friends during the digital literacy class
9. Says that about 70 percent of boys have their own technology and some even take private classes on top of digital literacy class in order to expand knowledge on digital literacy (10-12 boys who take these extra supplemental classes)
10. Thinks girls should be able to learn some degree of digital literacy and ways to manage computer though not as much as men
11. Feels more confident after having taken the digital literacy class
12. Wants to learn everything there is to technology, that is the extent to which he wants to become digitally literate
13. Says that less than 10 percent of the girls his age in the village have their own technology
14. In free time, he watches TV and goes out to play with friends, says he has a lot of free time in his schedule

### **Individual Interview Analysis**

Once again, much of the common themes and patterns identified in the two previous analyses conducted for the raising hands activity and the group interviews are applicable to the analysis on the individual interviews done for **“Girls at Crossroads”**, and align well with the testimonies given by the listed individuals, who are comprised of six digitally-literate girls and one boy from Khalipur and Ahmadbass village.

However, it is important to note that the three girls who were individually interviewed in Khalipur were markedly much more confident and self-assured than those in Ahmadbass,



possibility because all three of the girls have reported to be able to enjoy the luxury that comes with freedom of mobility, a privilege that none of the Ahmadbass Girls were given, and a good support system, according to them. Adding on to that, two of the three Khalipur Girls reported to feel as powerful as boys of their age in the village, unlike the third, who claimed to be fearful of boys and less powerful than them.

Even so, all three of the Khalipur Girls face some kind of an oppression due to the gender power relations in their village: like the Ahmadbass Girls, none of them are allowed to choose their marriage partner, access technology (if at all) without parental permission, or stray from their household responsibilities, which involve activities like clothes making and brewing tea. However, none of the three have attended DL classes for very long and have not been able to practice or apply their newly-learned digital knowledge outside of school very extensively, due to lack of physical access and criticism from neighbors and family members, who insist girls have no need for higher education or digital literacy.

Like two out of the three Khalipur Girls interviewed however (Foram felt she has not benefited from the DL class because she never got the opportunity to apply what she's learned), the Ahmadbass Girls who were interviewed all said to have benefitted from their DL training in some way or another; they reported to have experienced a boost in confidence levels and self-assurance and have said that their ability to make decisions has become more pronounced and efficient after having taken the DL courses. One girl has even said to have experienced an increased access to technology ever since she started attending the classes, as her father promised to purchase her a laptop upon her completion of the course.

Although Manaar does not have much mobility or control of her life, her family's respectable rank and their unique perspective on the importance of education, both of which dramatically differ from those of the typical family in the village, has contributed to the greater access to technology she enjoys. While Manaar does not possess her own phone or laptop at the moment, she is still allowed to borrow her brother's or sister's laptop and practice some of the digital skills she learned in the DL classes. Due to the greater opportunities she's been gifted, Manaar has been able to help others and hone her own technological skills. Therefore, based on the findings of Manaar's individual interview, it can be inferred that socioeconomic standing, as well as the unique values of the environment a girl is raised in, factors into girls' access to technology. On the other hand, Vardah's uneducated and digitally-illiterate friend neither has access to technology nor self-confidence.

Interconnectedness among a community is yet another social marker that can influence girls' access to technology. In Manaar's individual interview, she talked about the close-knit-ness of her community, then proceeding on to share a personal anecdote of her being a model for other young girls in the village who were interested in achieving digital literacy. After seeing her family sending off their daughter to digital literacy classes and acquainting herself with the ins and outs of digital technology, Manaar reported that there have been several other families that have been inspired to send off their own daughters to DL classes.

Referencing back to the earlier point made about the correlation between socioeconomic prosperity and girls' access to technology, the urbanness and progressiveness of society is yet another theme that falls under this category. To elaborate on this idea, the boys and girls from the two DL classes during group interviews said that they would have probably enjoyed greater individual advantages, along with freedom, mobility (especially concerning the digitally-literate girls of the village), and higher education that comes with more muted gender power relations and gender stereotypes, if they were to be raised in Gurgaon instead of a rural area like Ahmadbass. Once again, the group responses to the contextualized question highlights the reflection of societal gender norms and appropriation in girls' access to technology in a rural setting.

In terms of location, distance is a clear physical barrier that may interfere in girls' access to technology, besides financial affordability. As girls from the individual interviews and group interviews mentioned, school for the typical Ahmadbass Girl can be anywhere from approximately 0.05 km to 5 km away from their houses, which translates to a walking duration of about 31.5 seconds to 52.5 minutes, assuming that the average schoolgirl takes 10 minutes 30 seconds to travel a mile, which is the average mile time for women worldwide. Should the girl in the village be on the higher end of that distance from home to school, it would be safe to assume that they would face a greater chance of being denied permission to attend school, as walking to school and back would not only be physically tiring but also dangerous for them; girls' lack of mobility in Ahmadbass village must also be taken into consideration in this situation, as school, if too far away from home, may be a place that stray from the strict circle of mobility the girls are physically restricted to. This assumed impact of physical distance/role on girls' access to technology can be factually illustrated by responses given during the group interview with the Ahmadbass girls, who reported that walking back home from school, which is four to five kilometers away from their dwellings, is a daunting activity for them, exacerbated by their ingrained fear of men. As a result, the physical barrier served as part of the reason why ten of the 17 girls who participated during the group interview decided to drop out of school, though the majority of them wanted to go further into their education.

Following the same idea, societal oppression of women can become a means of motivation for the marginalized girls in the village to seek education. In their interviews, both Manaar and Vardah thoroughly acknowledge the lack of opportunities and mobility of females compared to males in the village, and how they felt compelled to attend the DL classes despite the persistent criticisms of their neighbors because of their individual association of higher education and digital literacy with power and status. In other words, they wanted to mitigate the limiting effects of the already-existing gender stereotypes in Ahmadbass village by earning the respect of others by achieving higher education and digital literacy. Therefore, the aforementioned suggests that though gender stereotypes and lack of respect for women may become reasons for the little to none access to technology girls have, such negative societal perceptions of women could also give rise to a form of ambition and determination among some

Ahmadbass Girls to gain digital literacy and, in doing so, transcend above many of the limitations that come with being a female.

Having identified gender stereotypes and skewed gender power relations as determining factors of girls' access to technology, it then becomes necessary to examine their effects on a closer level. One logical way in which such the correlation between the aforementioned cause-and-effect relationship can be measured is by comparing girls' use of technology and that of boys, as briefly introduced in the Group Interview Analysis. Clearly, it has been established that not specific to any particular age, males in the village have greater access to technology than women. But how is the technology being used?

Fateh, an Ahmadbass Boy who was interviewed individually, helps shed light on the stark contrast between technology and digital literacy usage between both sexes in the village; in contrast to his primary purpose of using technology, which is mostly entertainment-related such as looking at memes and socializing with friends on social media, girls like Manaar mainly view technology as a tool that can aid with the efficiency of everyday tasks; when asked to provide examples of her technology usage at home with her brother's or sister's laptop, all of her answers had to do with more serious tasks like online retail shopping, emailing, and booking a plane ticket. Similarly, Taza's father uses his mobile phone more for entertainment purposes rather than out of necessity, unlike her mother — leading her to reach the conclusion that her father's dominance over her mother and herself is linked to the gendered access to technology and digital literacy in her village.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, society does indeed have a profound influence on girls' access to technology in rural Indian villages, specifically in the region of Mewat, where the divisive gender power relations that govern its society are perfectly reflected in the digital gender divide of the concerned area; women are commonly viewed as nameless domestic servants chained to harrowing household duties and childrearing, whose voices are all too often dismissed for being “trivial” and “unworthy.” Judged as a waste of time and monetary investment, Girls' education, is a heavily-nuanced and sensitive subject that is typically met with beratement in the village, especially among males. Because gender stereotypes are so deep-rooted in the studied villages of Ahmadbass, Khalipur, and Badkhal, girls, the representative sample group of women in the village, are scared to break such social conventions in fear of offending men, who are automatically perceived to more powerful than them simply on the grounds of an uncontrollable, birth-given factor such as sex, and being abused or scrutinized by other members in the village. Consequently, the prevalence of fear and low confidence levels among rural village girls gives rise to a harmful cycle involving lack of mobility, power, and decision-making, among many

other things, that continues to preserve the tyrannical patriarchy that reigns over the remote, rural region.

Transitioning onto a less speculative and more technical, digital lens, it is evident that boys enjoy greater access to technology than girls do for the previously-mentioned societal reasons. Also telling is the gendered difference between technological usage in Mewat; unlike girls of the village whose digital usage is almost exclusively geared toward basic household chores, boys — most of whom have been found to use technology mainly for entertainment purposes, according to the interviews — have the luxury of accessing any online site they desire, whether it be an unfiltered search engine like Google or YouTube or a popular social media platform like Facebook or Twitter. The contrast is further exacerbated by the fact that village girls are restricted from accessing their fathers' or brothers' technology, and those who are digitally-literate are of none to very little exception.

Going back to the central themes previously pointed-out in the study, the financial status of a family weighs into girls' access to technology. The more financially better off a family is (more on this later), the more likely it is for the girls in the household to enjoy physical access to technology, and be educated or at least reach some degree of digital literacy. The same positive correlation applies to the influence girls' access to technology can have on figurative or emotional connectivity — such as in terms of person-to-person and, secondly, place to place.

Despite their limited chances of applying digital literacy at home however, digitally-literate girls of the village have clearly benefited from their technological training at both micro and macro levels; since taking digital literacy classes, all of the interviewed girls with the exception of one (Foram) reported to have experienced a boost in confidence and stronger decision-making skills, not to mention a positive increase in self-worth and power. Taking many factors into account, Vardah and her friend Manaar ultimately prove to be the best symbols of this positive change that digital literacy has brought upon the village girls of rural Mewat.

Digital literacy's suggested correlation with heightened confidence and power levels among girls is evident through Vardah, from the clear and concise way she carried herself throughout the interview to the eloquent responses she gave. Unlike the anxious fidgeting and shifting of the eyes that were detected among several of the other interviewed girls, Vardah remained visibly poised and calm, often stopping to evenly meet the gaze of the interviewer and taking time to produce careful answers that, like Manaar's, are much more in-depth and creative than not only those of the other female interviewees', but also those of boys like Fateh who are three years older than her.

Particularly telling about Vardah when putting Ahmadbass' skewed gender power relations into perspective, is her unique explanation for why she thinks she is powerful — more powerful than her male counterparts, in fact (“in reality, a laptop is just a mechanical box that can't do anything on it's own, but I [Vardah] am the one who channels and provides that power to the box to make it work and perform the useful functions programmed in it). While she is significantly younger (by three years) than Taza, Vardah was able to define power and provide

thoughtful explanations for her reasoning when the elder was unable to do the same; this observation supplies all the more evidence that, despite the many aforementioned barriers that village girls face in their daily lives, there are always outliers like Vardah and Manaar who test the norm and inspire change: a change that in this situation, has only been made possible through their exposure to and appreciation of the digital literacy they've actively sought for themselves.

In addition to expressing an impressive resolve to learn more about digital literacy and the technological world, Vardah and Manaar have aspirations that are just as far-reaching as their resolve: teacher and doctor, respectively. In the pursuit of becoming individuals of such respected status in society, both girls have also reported their interest in becoming knowledgeable digital citizens of today's modernized and constantly-fluctuating 21st century.

Like her friend Vardah, the same increase in confidence and power through digital literacy training has benefited Manaar, for she now feels comfortable talking in public since having taken classes with Vardah. Also like Vardah, Manaar was able to provide a keen example of how she has used her new digital literacy skills to help others in her community, such as the moment when she taught friends in her biology class about a specific technological function no one else knew, due to their digital illiteracy. Instead of the criticism Vardah sometimes finds herself victim to as a DL student, Manaar received praise and admiration for bestowing information she had learned from DL training upon her peers and other community members. Further thanks to through digital literacy, Manaar stated that she feels not only more confident, but also empowered and specialized in her abilities, as a girl in Ahmadbass village.

Just as Manaar (knowing I am American) felt compelled to utter a few words of English to the interviewers, and just as Taza has "been obsessed" with the idea of traveling to Delhi upon being informed about the field trip to the city, pivotal changes like digital literacy and greater access to technology which inevitably challenge gender stereotypes, wield the potential to inspire and fuel change among young girls in rural Mewat, which hopefully gives way to a larger, nationwide movement in the future. After all, the statistic (found in raising-hands activity) that a staggering 82 percent of Ahmadbass Girls felt they have control over their lives, compared to the mere 40 and 55 percent of Ahmadbass Boys Grps. #1 and #2 respectively, testifies that all, if not a vast majority, of village girls have the potential to experience the same self-confidence as Vardah and Manaar, when given the proper tools like DL training.

Given that gender stereotypes in rural Indian villages are a keystone blood-deep to its ancient and current construct, I realize how difficult it would be to even out their skewed gender power relations within the near future. Even a time frame as seemingly-generous as a century may not guarantee such revolutionary change. Instead, it is through small, micro-level steps, carved by remarkable trailblazers like Manaar and Vardah, that digital literacy truly begins to benefit rural Indian girls and, in doing so, alter the harmful gender norms of that area.

As for limitations or inherent flaws in the project, it is certainly probable that my role as interviewee skewed the data I collected. Because I am an American and, by default, an outsider to the villagers, they very well may have been intimidated, especially because almost all of the

interviewees had never seen a foreigner before before I came, according to them. Mild unease among the girls and boys (especially with the girls) was discernible in their tendency to avoid making eye contact with me, unlike with Shipra, Anjali, or Satvik when the three translated for me. As a result, other than the fact that a male teacher was present at the time of the Ahmadbass Girls' FGD, I may not have been able to collect all the data I could have (had I been Indian), due to the possibility that the participants were reluctant, skeptical, or perhaps even uncomfortable about opening up to a person as different as myself, let alone sharing their sensitive stories to the world they know so little about.

On my end, there is also a large margin of error, when culture — in addition to the physical, 8,133 mile distance between San Diego and Mewat — constructs such a huge barrier in between us, as well as in our understanding of one another. Therefore, due to my limited understanding of rural Indian villages and their political, economic, religious, and social systems, my unique perception/analysis of the participants' body language may actually embody a fragmented and/or undeveloped take on reality. In simpler terms, a generous portion of my analyses is heavily speculative and up to discussion.

Finally, additional suggestions or topics to consider for **“Girls at Crossroads”** are extending the current comparison between digitally-literate girls and boys to digitally-literate girls and digitally-illiterate girls or digitally-literate girls and digitally-illiterate boys; the first suggested comparison can provide deeper insight into whether technology or digital literacy have contributed to the advancement of girls when compared to their previous, digitally-illiterate selves. The latter suggestion would help answer the pressing inquiry of whether girls even possess the potential to access the same privileges as do boys or, at the basest level, their uneducated and/or digitally-illiterate male counterparts — shedding more light on the elasticity of rural Mewat's skewed gender power relations in regard to this incredibly timely and meaningful digital gender divide.

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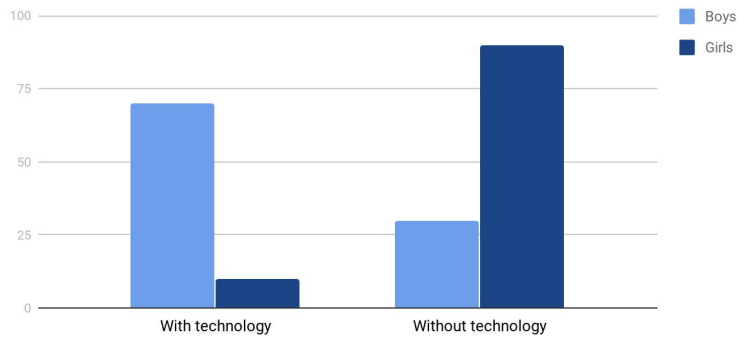
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## Supporting Information

### DATA FROM INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS: Fateh and Taza

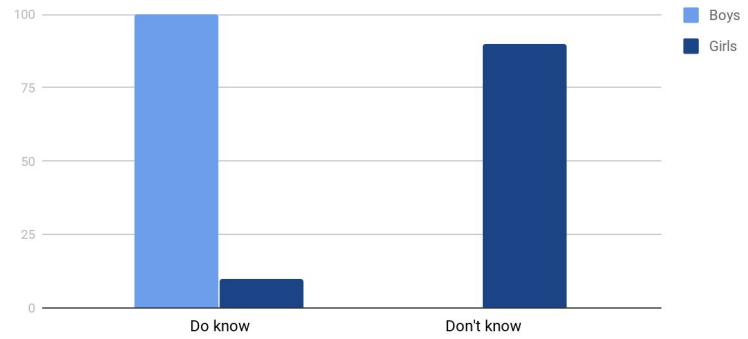
The Comparison: Boys and Girls with own Technology vs. without in Ahmadbass

According to Fateh



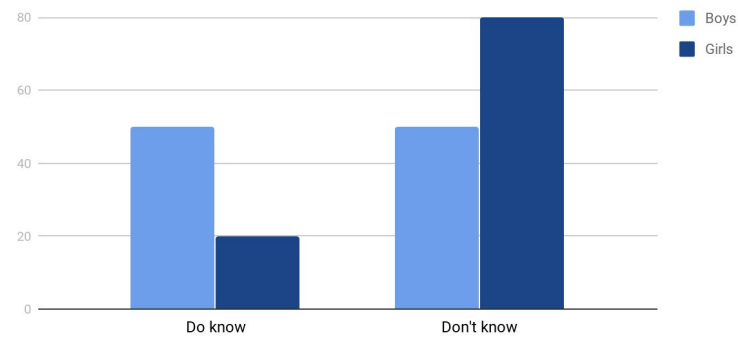
The Comparison: Girls and Boys who Know how to use Internet vs. Don't in Ahmadbass

According to Taza



The Comparison: Boys and Girls who Know how to use Computer vs. Don't in Ahmadbass

According to Taza



The Comparison: Boys and Girls with own Technology vs. without in Ahmadbass

According to Taza

