Mobiles can save India’s poor women

Women at the bottom of the pyramid need health, education and empowerment information, but they are likely to need subsidized service, voice-based apps and training in using VAS

India ranks 122 out of 138 nations in the United Nations Development Programme’s gender equality index—and for good reason. Only 65% of Indian women are literate, compared with nearly 83% men. A third of the married Indian women are underweight. Maternal mortality rate is high (450 per 100,000 live births) in part due to inadequate antenatal care coverage. Women now account for 39% of HIV infections, and awareness of prevention and treatment still lags.

Can any technological or communication tool help change the scenario? The answer is the mobile phone. Mobiles are cheap, oral—they do not require users to be literate—and are already in the hands of more than 300 million Indian women.

“Women in India suffer from pervasive inequality and have distinct health, education, and economic needs not being addressed by current institutions and media,” says a research report prepared by Vital Wave Consulting for Vodafone India Foundation with which we work closely. “Mobile phones represent the largest opportunity to address these needs, with 225 million women owning phones and the female VAS (value-added services) market worth $1 billion and growing.”

These numbers are from the first quarter of 2011. There are far more women with access to mobile phones than to the Internet (60 million active women Internet users) or landline phones (50 million women with landline access).

Vital Wave further elaborates: “Female mobile phone owners generally prefer voice and use SMS less frequently than their male counterparts, but female subscribers already send more than 6.8 billion SMS per month.”

An average woman mobile subscriber in India sends 30 SMSes per month, uses voice service of 300 minutes per month and about 40% of women subscribers have found employment opportunities with their mobile phones. According to Vital Wave, “The most basic aspects of mobile phone ownership are already empowering Indian women, with over 90% saying they feel safer and more connected just owning a phone.”

Thankfully, we have several torch bearers to show us how mobiles are already being used in the hinterland for empowering women and, in effect, achieving gender equality with equitable economic opportunity. Barefoot College at Ajmer in Rajasthan has been using mobiles along

with community radio to serve 25,000 women from 200 villages in training, livelihood programmes and health services—50% of these women have their own mobiles that they are using to interact and convert opportunities into economic gains. Members of the well-known organisation SEWA (Self Employed Women Association) in Gujarat use voice-based system and symbol-based SMS system providing them access to market information.

India's number one VAS provider, IMIMobile, realizing the scale of women mobile subscribers, has created a suite of services targeting women, including health information that is specifically tailored for women and children's health issues and information related to career opportunities, including entertainment. Mobile operator Uninor partnered with the department of telecommunication to launch the *Sanchar Shakti* voice-based service for women to deliver information, expert advice and news alerts on health, education, self employment and finance, in cooperation with self help groups (SHGs), NGOs, and educational institutions.

Catholic Relief Services and Dimagi are using mobile phones to enable Asha workers to collect information on pregnant women and their communities and improve coverage of pre-natal and neo-natal services and convey information on healthy practices directly to expecting mothers and their families. The Commonwealth of Learning and the Vidiyal SHG created 500 audio messages on a variety of topics that were sent to women on a daily basis to promote lifelong learning, with the specific aim of supporting their businesses. In Jeend in Haryana, Kisan Sanchar has been serving women farmers group through mobile for agriculture extension services and they use voice-based as well as SMS-based platform to reach out. In Konark in Orissa, Young India has achieved 100% attendance of girl students in Gop Block schools through the integrated use of Mobile and community radio.

These are some examples we have received in the nomination process for Women & Innovation in Mobile Award, under which funding will be provided to the three best initiatives with support and mentoring for two years. The award is supported by the Vodafone Foundation and is being conducted under the framework of Manthan Awards. What we need is extensive scaling up of these projects, nationwide adoption by government and private sector and active participation of the social institutions to integrate mobile into their daily operations across all sectors targeting women.

Women at the bottom of the pyramid need health, education and empowerment information, but they are likely to need subsidized service, voice-based apps and training in using VAS, because 25 million mobile phone owners belong to the poorest income brackets and all use low-cost basic handsets. Similarly, we can target women at home, schools and colleges, offices and agricultural fields. Some 60% of all women in rural areas already own mobiles, but almost all of them are low-cost phones. Half of all women who live in homes, irrespective of urban or rural settings, own mobile phones. Also, 80% of all women in colleges and schools use mobile phones and 50% of all women in jobs in urban areas own smartphones and spend Rs. 3,000 per month on usage. Let me know how we can be of any help to accelerate your idea to give a better life to the better halves of India.

Osama Manzar is founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chairman of the Manthan award. He is also a member of the Working Group for Internet Governance Forum at the ministry of communications and information technology. Tweet him @osamamanzar