



PANDEMICERA - WOMEN AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT:

Pandemic-induced economic downturn resulted in rising unemployment which disproportionately affected women. From information technology to hospitality, most sectors saw massive layoffs. The pandemic pushed 43% of employed women out of the workforce, as compared to 30% men. By some estimates 19.3 million women,3 of which 6 million were white-collar workers, lost their jobs. Nearly 22% of women in the informal sector were out of jobs in the pandemic. Working professionals were not the only ones who had to face the problem. Significantly more women-owned businesses suffered due to the epidemic. Nearly 15.7 million businesses in India are owned by women, accounting for one-fifth of all businesses in the nation. 20% of all medium, small, and micro businesses in the nation are owned by women. The paper recommends the following approach for social media platforms to enhance positive impact on women: firstly, to enhance online user safety and education. User safety can be strengthened by continuing to strengthen platform level safeguards. Moreover, women can be sensitised on existing tools and features to ensure online safety. This will encourage digital adoption and promote progressive campaigns that address issues of gender norms and safe behaviour. Ultimately, this will encourage more women to thrive online.

Keywords: Digital inclusion, Female Entrepreneurs, Online education, Pandemic, Social media platform

INTRODUCTION

Women have used social media extensively in both their personal and professional life over the past year, which has been marked by increased public health dangers and related global lockdown measures. Social media platforms have made it possible for women professionals, independent contractors, and business owners to engage in economic activities. The platforms have made it possible to interact with communities, families, and interest groups.



Social media helped women during the COVID-19 pandemic to feel better about their social and emotional welfare. Women reconnected with their families, friends, and interest groups through social media platforms to create a sense of community. By rallying support for humanitarian help and social concerns, women felt a sense of purpose and made a good contribution to society. By developing their passions, creating peer groups, and using social media for self-expression and leisure, women made an investment in their physical and psychological health. While social media platforms have had good effects on people's social, economic, and emotional welfare across a range of social groups, there are new issues that need to be addressed. Some of the limitations and difficulties that are present in our society still show themselves on social media sites. One of these is the digital isolation of women, particularly those from rural and disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Online violence against women poses serious concerns as well and has become more severe as a result of the epidemic.

The following strategy is suggested in the article for social media platforms to increase their beneficial effects on women: improve online user education and safety first. Continue to improve platform-level security measures to improve user safety. Women can also be made aware of the features and resources that are already in place to safeguard their online safety. This will support progressive programmes that deal with issues of gender norms and safe behaviour and stimulate the usage of digital technology. In the end, this will motivate more women to succeed online.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY:

- The effect of social media on women in the pandemic-affected world is discussed in this discussion paper.
- It also describes how social media platforms benefit women's economic, social, and emotional welfare.
- The article also identifies the crucial factors that would allow social media platforms to reach and impact a larger demographic of Indian women.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research paper is an attempt of descriptive research, based on the secondary data sourced from journals, magazines, articles, newspapers annual reports and media reports. This study demonstrates how women used social media for a variety of economic purposes, from business expansion to networking. They looked for new chances and overcame economic hardship via social media networks. Social media platforms are practical and attractive instruments to raise women's economic status because of how simple and affordable they are to utilise.



❖ **ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY AND POWER**

Working professionals were not the only ones who had to face the problem. Significantly more women-owned businesses suffered due to the epidemic. Nearly 15.7 million businesses in India are owned by women, accounting for one-fifth of all businesses in the nation. 20% of all medium, small, and micro businesses in the nation are owned by women.

1. IMPROVING WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JOBS

Social media platforms allowed women who are in the formal workforce to stay connected, find new possibilities, and create effective networks both inside and outside of their organisations despite the pandemic's restrictions.

➤ **Networking:**

Women used social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn to share their blogs, essays, and op-eds. They had in-depth, meaningful conversations with both their professional networks and subject-matter experts, which promoted ongoing learning, increased their prominence in their fields, and widened their networks.

➤ **Finding employment chances:**

At a period when job security was and still is poor and unemployment rates are high, women looking for employment prospects used social media networks for their job hunt. Depending on the women's intentions and vocations, different purposes were served by using social media. Closed WhatsApp groups allowed for chats unique to a given industry, while LinkedIn assisted with networking and job searches. Twitter was used for news and information and was effective in professional contexts.

➤ **To collaborate and work as a team:**

Collaboration and teamwork were made easier for women who worked from home thanks to social media platforms. Women were allowed to participate in virtual meetings, online events, online work sessions, webinars, and other digital communication channels. These techniques were widely utilised by both employers and employees to exchange knowledge for recruitment, training, and organisational change.



2. AIDING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Email and social media platforms were actively used by small company owners to advertise their goods and services. A poll indicated that 25% of respondents used social media and 18% used email to communicate with clients.

➤ Expanding enterprises using online marketplaces:

Women were encouraged to operate businesses on social media platforms because they demand little start-up money, little inventory, and straightforward marketing strategies. Social media helped women-owned businesses contact customers worldwide, grow their clientele, and find new markets.

➤ Creating employment opportunities:

Possibilities for employment increased as a result of social media economic activity for women. Women were able to earn money in addition to traditional jobs because to social media platforms that offered online seminars, workshops, recorded tutorials, and teleconsultations.

➤ Driving branding and marketing initiatives:

During the epidemic, female-led start-ups like Wovoyage and SOHO gained popularity on social media sites. Facebook and Instagram were utilised by female business owners to advertise their goods and services. Because of how easy-to-use and aesthetically pleasing its interface is, Instagram continues to be widely used. Women utilised WhatsApp to communicate quickly and easily with clients and suppliers.

3. ASSISTING WITH CONTINUOUS LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Women used social media platforms as information resources and for skill development as a result of the decline in career prospects and lack of job stability. Social media sites and digital resources aided women in developing their talents and accelerating their career development.

➤ Utilizing knowledge resources:

Prior to the epidemic, learning opportunities mostly consisted on active engagement. Women now have the option and a fair playing field to choose their educational paths based on interests and requirements thanks to social media networks. Women attended webinars and workshops on subjects including social media marketing tactics, creating LinkedIn content, utilising YouTube marketing, and other popular professional training materials.



➤ **Building professional skills:**

Using the e-learning resources offered on social media, women improved existing abilities or picked up new ones. Through social networking sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, they discovered new resources and looked for additional reading material, podcasts, and other types of content. Social media sites were also used by stay-at-home moms who had free time to learn new skills. To accomplish these goals, they mostly employed Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube. On social media platforms, women viewed content like cosmetic tutorials, grooming techniques, cooking, and sewing. Professionals in the IT sector and development consulting used social media to advance their technical expertise, keep up with market trends, and follow key stakeholders. Through social media platforms, women were able to access online training for coding and software tools.

➤ **Attending knowledge events:**

Webinars and e-learning events provided excellent insights from professionals all around the world. For instance, companies like DigiGrad, Simplilearn, and NIIT offered webinars on digital marketing for Indian marketers that included subjects including social media advertising. Another illustration is the curated information on digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and Gen-Z online brand building that is hosted by top FMCG companies in India. Social media platforms, however, were not just utilised by online businesses for training and event hosting. They were widely utilised by government and civil society organisations to connect with their constituents during the pandemic's problems as well as the relief and support efforts that followed.

❖ **MENTAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING**

1. REESTABLISHING SOCIAL BRIDGES

Lockdowns brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic have interfered with daily activities, social connections, and access to areas for physical activity. The mental health of women has been negatively impacted by these upheavals. Women of the time relied on social media platforms to participate with their communities and make social connections, which helped them become more psychologically resilient. During times of isolation, women used social media platforms for networking, virtual get-togethers, and psychosocial support, all of which had a positive impact on their wellness.



➤ **Utilizing social media for psychosocial support:**

By enabling connections with friends, long-lost school friends, family, and acquaintances, social media platforms have become a source of psychosocial support for women. In times of lockdown, social media provided women with a way to maintain and grow their social capital. Domestic violence victims and people in need of mental health care used social media to connect with peer groups and reputable specialists for support.

➤ **Utilizing to communicate with families:**

Women kept in touch with their grown children and elderly parents who lived elsewhere to inquire about their physical and mental health. They virtually meet their friends and family at get-togethers and parties, as well as their relatives at weddings and other online events. Women provided and received encouragement to be brave during the pandemic in these warm and welcoming settings.

➤ **Networking:**

Compared to men, women are systemically excluded from powerful networks. But throughout the pandemic, women used social media to get in touch with classmates, long-lost acquaintances, and colleagues. Women in the workforce used social media to promote communication, lessen unpleasant interactions, and clear up misunderstandings among co-workers in the absence of face-to-face meetings.

➤ **Interest-based social networks:**

Women used social media sites to join communities and groups according to their interests. Interest-based social networks with a bigger population were made possible by virtual meetup venues. Examples of women-focused social media groups are Her Trivandrum, Girl Boss Going Places, and Superb Women Agile

2. PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITIES

Social media networks and groups allowed women to interact based on their individual interests and promoted a feeling of greater good. Women participated in social activities, interest-based social networks, and knowledge groups.

➤ **Community-based knowledge access:**

Women have access to knowledge and information on social media platforms. Throughout the pandemic, they looked for and shared information about medical resources and needs. Social media platforms provided essential healthcare requirements like tele consultations and health



information gathering. Social media platforms were crucial in the epidemic for spreading information and mobilising medical resources.

➤ **Organizing support for humanitarian aid:**

Social media platforms served as a useful platform where organisations mobilised to ensure widespread communication and community engagement during such a crisis. Women actively participated in, amplified, and monitored supply and demand for several COVID-19-related relief supplies. Women in low-income and distant communities used the basic texting features offered by social media platforms to communicate with and highlight the needs of the local community for relief and rehabilitation.

➤ **Supporting social causes:**

Social media platforms are a crucial tool for raising awareness of domestic violence cases and disseminating hotlines. Campaigns like #YouAreNotAlone, #EndVAW, and #WhenHomeNotSafe share the testimonies of courageous women and inspire other women to do the same. Through support groups, women discussed their experiences as survivors, showed unity, and discovered strategies to deal with obstacles.

3. GUARANTEED PERSONAL WELL-BEING

Social media gave women a forum to express themselves more freely, improve their physical welfare, and boost their self-esteem.

➤ **Presenting techniques for self-expression :**

Women who participate actively in the digital world experience better mental health and avoid psychological anguish. These online spaces allowed women to create content that reflected their creativity and talent. Social media platforms' immediate response and feedback encouraged women to maintain their interests.

➤ **Improving physical health**

Women took part in exercise programmes through online fitness challenges, improving their physical welfare. They motivated one another to maintain their health and interact with other like-minded fitness aficionados. The number of social media influencers and platforms catering to women who want to enhance their physical wellbeing has increased.



➤ **Increasingly unwinding:**

Through amusement on social media, women were able to escape the grim realities of the pandemic. Entertainment can now be found through videos, pictures, games, articles, light reading, and other social media features. To unwind and manage stress, women also participated in and pursued hobbies including cooking, dance, yoga, and others. Along with establishing social ties, entertainment and taking part in hobbies helped people feel less lonely and isolated.

❖ **ENSURE SAFETY AND EQUITY**

1. **WOMEN'S DIGITAL INCLUSION**

About 500 million people use the internet in India. There were 26 million new female internet users in 2019 alone. More women than men are using the internet. However, there is a clear gender gap in social media use: female participation is just half what it is for men. In India, for instance, only 33% of women and 67% of men use social media. Social media platforms can increase women's engagement by fostering a secure and reliable online environment. Involving women from underrepresented groups and non-English speakers will help them build better networks, which will help them both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to poor internet connectivity, social media usage has been minimal in rural areas. In India, there are close to 43,000 villages without access to the internet or telecommunications. However, thanks to the government and industry's coordinated efforts, this is quickly changing. By 2025, India is expected to have 900 million internet users. However, social media usage and meaningful access are still gendered. Women are excluded from digital spaces due to a lack of device ownership and inadequate digital proficiency. Women from cities currently make up the majority of social media users.

2. **LANGUAGE RESTRICTIONS**

India is a multilingual nation with a wide variety of tongues. Women from all backgrounds are guaranteed involvement by providing social media experience in several languages. Lack of platforms in regional languages prevents effective social media use and leads to isolation. This is a major justification given by women who speak regional languages for why they use social media less. There are currently no regional languages used in online communication or content; everything is written in English. According to Facebook Audience Insights, 91% of Indian female users use English, followed by 6% of users who use Hindi and 1% of users who use Bengali. Such ladies are unable to comprehend English terms and conditions for using social media, privacy upgrades, and other software updates.



This makes it difficult to comprehend and use social media networks effectively. Their use of social media is hampered by poor literacy and digital abilities. In fact, this is cited as a major factor in digital exclusion by almost 36% of women from 18 low- and middle-income countries. Local language online abuse against women on social media also occurs, possibly undetected by algorithms and policies. Platforms must learn more about regional terminology and context-specific violence against women.

3. ONLINE HARASSMENT OF WOMEN

Online abuse and harassment of women on social media can take many different forms and have many different origins. For what constitutes gender-based violence on social media and other digital platforms, there are no established guidelines or norms. While social media companies cooperate on features and standards to combat online harassment, there is no consensus among international platforms on what constitutes gender-based violence online. 56 Information and communication technology-enabled violence against women includes impersonation, doxxing, non-consensual pornography, image-based sexual abuse/exploitation, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and most frequently, hate speech.

Social media sites saw a rise in online abuse and harassment as a result of the outbreak. Women who utilised social media for COVID-19 relief efforts, for instance, were the objects of online harassment or faced unwanted sexual advances. Gender prejudices can still be present in social media algorithms. In fact, according to recent studies, hate speech is mimicked by bots, and such patterns are reinforced by algorithms that favour material created by young, white heterosexual men.

❖ MITIGATION STRATEGIES

1. SAFETY ELEMENTS APPLIED BY WOMEN

Online safety is a concern, but it doesn't significantly restrict women's usage of social media. Women make use of social media platform capabilities to get around restrictions on using them. They make use of the tools provided by social media platforms to report bullying, harassment, and other potentially violent or dangerous behaviours. Additionally, they come up with alternatives to handle such actions. They only stop using social media when they are subjected to severe harassment and abuse.



➤ **Self-censorship:**

Women who are being harassed or abused online can use the safety measures and capabilities offered by social media websites. These tools provide women the power to take charge of their online interactions, maintain total control over their accounts, and engage in meaningful online communication.

➤ **Blocking and filing reports:**

Women can report and block people who are harassing them or invading their privacy. They employ tools like removing and reporting the profiles when women are impersonated online by false profiles. However, women worry about losing their social standing, especially when on-consensual pornography is involved. They worry that their photographs and photos could be permanently posted online across borders.

➤ **Utilizing safety features:**

Websites like Facebook and Instagram provide users the option to adjust their settings to ensure participation with a small audience, such as close friends and family. Such settings and safety measures are frequently used by women. Women are quick to adapt and switch to safer platforms when applications are reported to have data security vulnerabilities.

Social media firms, governmental organisations, and civil society organisations need to focus more attention on this issue given the scope of online abuse and cybersecurity breaches. This entails expanding existing tools and services that support women in overcoming such obstacles, as well as bridging the communication gap between law enforcement agencies and civil society organisations to spread knowledge about online gender-based violence.

2. GETTING OVER LANGUAGE RESTRICTIONS

Social media platforms can take the following actions to increase their inclusiveness, safety, accessibility, and representation in order to get beyond language barriers:

➤ **Improvement of digital literacy:**

Improved digital literacy Social media platforms and civil society organisations can work together to improve women's digital literacy abilities. Platforms can work with organisations like the Centre for Social Research, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), Point of View, S M Sehgal Foundation, CyberPeace Foundation, and Digital Empowerment Foundation to empower women from rural and underrepresented groups to speak out on social media. 70 These programmes can be implemented while taking the communities' sociocultural reality into consideration.



➤ **Advertising campaigns that are language-specific:**

Marketing campaigns are important and useful to engage viewers and build brand credibility. If platforms make use of vernacular mediums, such campaigns can be used more effectively by rural populations and people who are more familiar with vernacular languages. This will make sure that these populations can speak in their preferred language without difficulty.

➤ **language as a tool for**

Overcoming language difficulties can aid in ensuring the safety of women on social media. Platforms and their built-in safety mechanisms will be better able to prevent abuse when they have a deeper understanding of the context-specific language used against women. Therefore, eliminating language hurdles is crucial from a safety standpoint as well.

To help a larger spectrum of women, social media platforms can employ a three-pronged strategy, all of which calls for cooperation amongst social media platforms as well as with other stakeholders including non-profit organisations and the government.

❖ **SUGGESTIONS AND A WAY:**

- Boost gender-focused programmes and digital adoption to encourage more women to go online and succeed.
- Be a driving force behind progressive efforts that tackle issues with gender norms and responsible conduct.
- Continue to increase platform-level protections for online safety while educating women on the features and tools that are already available.

1. SUCCESSING IN DIGITAL ADOPTION

Through curriculums and educational resources that improve digital literacy, social media platforms can work with grassroots organisations, non-governmental organisations, and self-help groups to remove the fundamental barrier of digital literacy. Following the training, these organisations can provide ongoing assistance to use social media platforms through local and regional mentoring and coaching that is tailored to the cultural, social, economic, and geographic context of women stakeholders.

Public social media initiatives in local languages can aid in removing barriers caused by language. Social media can be utilised for advertising initiatives to overcome language problems. This reaches out to and raises awareness among marginalised women.



For instance, #FBPePoocho, which highlights the potential of contacting contacts on Facebook for support and solutions, is Facebook's second iteration of the "More Together" campaign. In order for rural communities to access digital solutions and communicate with people outside of their immediate area, it will be essential to scale such campaigns to include vernacular options.

2. AIDING FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS

Social media platforms can help social entrepreneurs increase their use of social media for business expansion. First, social media platforms should spend money on providing women with training materials so they can start enterprises and use the internet. Training assistance can be provided on a variety of subjects, including opening a business page, producing textual and AV material, and utilising tools like analytics and advertisements. Social media networks can collaborate with grassroots organisations to bring these courses offline for women from underprivileged backgrounds who have restricted access to the internet. Organizations can combine this knowledge with mentoring from successful online business owners and other IT professionals as well as training programmes.

Second, women business owners can take use of specialised features that are now offered to them on e-commerce platforms and aid in differentiating their goods and services. Entrepreneurs will benefit from special features including procedures and filters that show whether goods, services, and businesses are credible.

Thirdly, through dedicated chat groups, audio conversations, and other features that encourage peer-to-peer knowledge exchange among women who use social media platforms to grow their businesses, women-led micro-enterprises can receive support through social media platforms. Finally, social media platforms should keep raising awareness and disseminating information about the programmes and opportunities that are available to support women-owned businesses.

For instance, the Skilled Samaritan Foundation (SSF), which offers women and girls from underprivileged communities across India stable employment possibilities, was founded with assistance from Facebook's CSR effort Pragati. With the use of knowledge collaborations with design schools throughout the world, SSF offers them market access through their online platform combined with technology-based design support. This encourages these female craftspeople to produce eco-friendly home goods for the expanding conscientious market.



3. ENDORSING POSITIVE CAMPAIGNS

By supporting pertinent and successful initiatives and programmes, social media platforms can significantly contribute to the eradication of socio-cultural biases and misconceptions. Programs for gender sensitization that are run on and by social media platforms can increase awareness of the unpaid domestic and care work performed by women, support an equitable division of household responsibilities, and motivate men to take action to halt online abuse. For instance, "Dakhal Do" from Breakthrough India started a discussion about the value of "interfering" when you see sexual harassment occurring in public places. Dismantling gender inequality at home can be aided by encouraging youth, especially males, to interact with issues of gender imbalance on social media platforms. This will consequently assist in enhancing how women use social media sites.

4. IMPROVING SECURITY, LEARNING, AND DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

In April 2019, India had 451 million active internet users and 294 million active social media users, which is an impressive reaction to the digital revolution.

Additionally, by 2025, 1171 million Indians will own smart phones, making up 24% of all new customers worldwide (the largest share globally). In many important global indicators of adoption of digital technology, India ranks among the top two nations. The situation is less rosy when seen via a gendered lens, though. Men dominate the country's internet usage, with only 33% of women utilising social media.

In addition, 26% fewer women use their mobile devices to access the internet than males, and 52% of female internet users say they don't trust the internet with their personal information. This data illustrates the anxiety Indian women experience when trying to access the internet because of the misogyny and harassment they encounter online. Other factors contributing to their apprehension include unequal access to schooling for girls and, in turn, a higher prevalence of digital exclusion as a result of institutional biases. Due to this, social media sites must improve safety features by raising awareness and tightening regulations, as well as seek to encourage digital literacy among Indian women.

➤ Increasing safety on social media sites:

Social media sites should improve their present dispute resolution procedures to address new issues including explicit communications, pornographic images, cyberstalking, trolling, and doxing. Better assistance is required for reporting photographs, removing tags, flagging abusive profiles, and barring criminals. The safety and security of women will be improved



by investments in more sophisticated and nuanced algorithms to handle complaints about gender-based cybercrime, a skilled and gender-sensitive task force to address online safety issues, and call-back services for users dissatisfied with AI responses.

➤ **Sensitization:**

It's important to educate women about proper online behaviour and in-app security measures. The creation of awareness centred on interventions in the areas of social media, gender, and digitization can be aided by training programmes and researched learning modules that help focus on online safety and security. Women can learn by watching short videos and completing self-paced courses on social media in conjunction with incentives.

5. USING A COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY

It is obvious that all aforementioned proposals cannot be implemented by just one stakeholder due to the magnitude of the issues faced, but rather will require concentrated and multi-stakeholder collaborative efforts. To define, monitor, and prevent cybercrime, for instance, social media companies can work with one another, business, politicians, and governments to form a consortium or self-regulatory body. Since there is currently no universally accepted definition of harassment, abuse, and hate speech, social media platforms can work together to develop community standards and policies that do so. By collaboratively logging and documenting their efforts, social media platforms can further increase online safety. Social media companies can forge alliances with stakeholders like civil society groups and governments to advance digital adoption and literacy.

❖ **CONCLUSION**

Throughout the epidemic, it has been clear that social media platforms had the potential to enhance social, emotional, and economic wellness. By addressing the gaps in digital inclusion and ensuring that women can engage online in a secure environment, there is a significant chance to increase this impact. To make these advantages available to all women, focused, gender-sensitive activities and a collaborative approach are essential. There is never a better time to accomplish something than right now.



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