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Digital empowerment and intimate partner violence among women in India: Evidence from the National Family Health Survey

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Why This Matters

- A substantial body of evidence has investigated the prevalence and underlying risk factors of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the last two decades using successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) in India.^{1,2}
- Evidence suggests that women's empowerment can reduce IPV risk. For example, economic empowerment, in the form of having bank accounts or joint spousal decision-making on financial matters, has been associated with decreased IPV.³ Further, women's empowerment through exposure to media (i.e., reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching TV) has also been found to be negatively associated with IPV.⁴
- Women's digital empowerment is a sub-type of empowerment defined as a woman's increased capacity of information and communications technology, such as mobile phones and internet.⁵
- To our knowledge, to date, there are no studies examining associations between women's digital empowerment and IPV using nationally representative data of women in India.

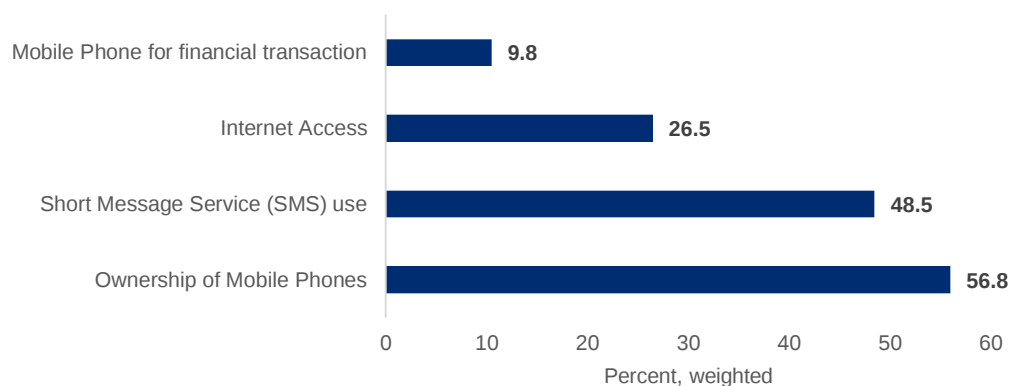
Key Findings

Digital empowerment was low among married women ages 15-49 in India.

- Less than one in ten (9.8%) used mobile phones for financial transactions.
- About a quarter (26.5%) reported internet access.
- Slightly less than half (48.5%) used text message services.
- Just over half (56.8%) had a mobile phone for their own use.

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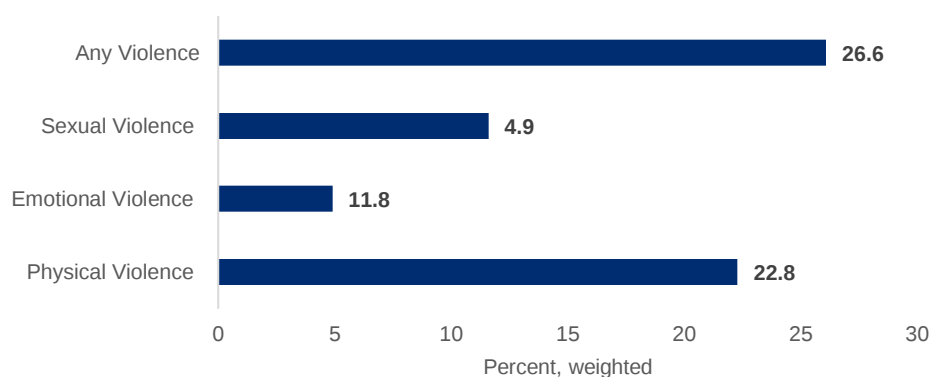
Figure 1: Women's digital empowerment, among married women ages 15-49 (n=56,916)



Over a quarter (26.6%) of women reported experiencing any IPV in the past year.

- 4.9% experienced sexual IPV.
- 11.8% experienced emotional IPV.
- 22.8% experienced physical IPV.

Figure 2: Prevalence of past-year sexual, physical, emotional and any IPV, among married women ages 15-49, weighted (n=56,916)

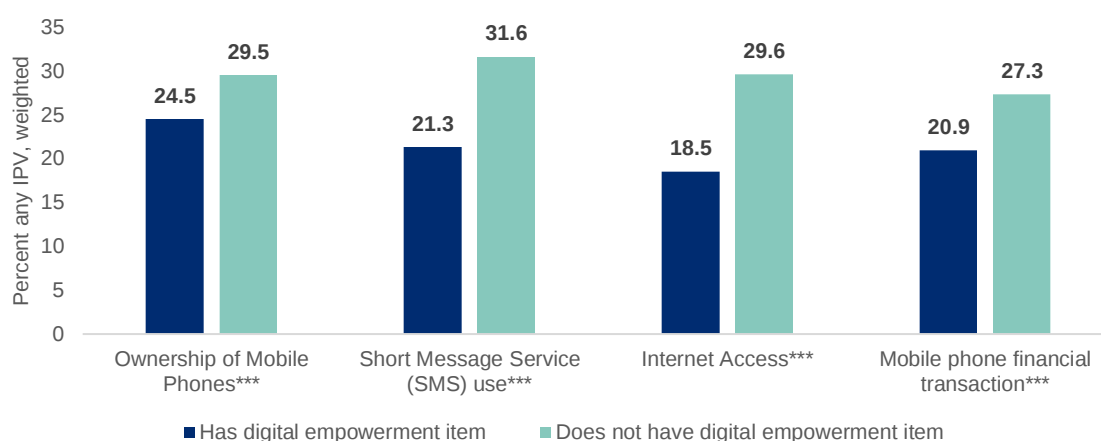


Bivariate analysis revealed that digital empowerment was protective against IPV experience. These patterns are consistent across emotional IPV, sexual IPV, and any IPV overall, with statistically significant differences (p-value<0.001).

- IPV was reported by 24.5% of women who owned mobile phones, compared to 29.5% without phones, and by 21.3% of SMS users, compared to 31.6% of non-users.
- 18.5% of women with internet access experienced IPV versus 29.6% among those without access, while those who used mobile phones for financial transactions reported IPV at 20.9%, compared to 27.3% for non-users.

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Figure 3: Prevalence of any past-year IPV by digital empowerment status, among married women ages 15-49, weighted (n=56,916)



***p<0.001

In multivariable regression, adjusting for demographic measures:

- Owning a mobile phone was associated with reduced sexual IPV but was not associated with other forms of IPV or IPV overall.
- SMS use was associated with decreased emotional and sexual IPV.
- Access to internet was associated with decreased experience of IPV overall.
- Using a mobile phone for financial transactions was associated with increased IPV overall.

Table 1 Multivariable logistic regression of IPV and digital empowerment, adjusting for demographic variables, among married women ages 15-49, weighted (n=56,916)

Digital empowerment variables	aOR (95% CI)
ANY IPV	
Ownership of mobile phones	1.04 (1.0, 1.1)
Short Message Service (SMS) use	1.0 (0.9,1.1)
Internet access	0.8 (0.7,1.0)*
Mobile phone for financial transaction	1.2 (1.0, 1.4)*
PHYSICAL IPV	
Ownership of mobile phones	1.0 (0.9, 1.1)
Short Message Service (SMS) use	1.0 (0.9, 1.1)
Internet access	0.8 (0.7, 1.0)*
Mobile phone for financial transaction	1.2 (1.0, 1.4)
SEXUAL IPV	
Ownership of mobile phones	0.8 (0.7, 1.0)*
Short Message Service (SMS) use	0.8 (0.6, 1.0)*
Internet access	0.8 (0.6, 1.0)*
Mobile phone for financial transaction	1.7 (1.3, 2.3) ***
EMOTIONAL IPV	
Ownership of mobile phones	1.0 (0.9, 1.2)
Short Message Service (SMS) use	0.8 (0.7, 1.0)*

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Internet access	0.9 (0.7, 1.0)
Mobile phone for financial transaction	1.2 (1.0, 1.5)*
Adjusted OR (aOR) model includes all four digital empowerment variables together in addition to sociodemographic variables: age, rurality, respondent education, number of living children, caste, respondent father beat her mother, women's working status, husband education, husband alcohol consumption, region	
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05	

Action Steps

- Given mixed results in this analysis, understanding the mechanisms behind various types of digital empowerment and different forms of IPV is critical for future research, practice, and prevention.
- Further research on mechanisms between mobile phone financial transactions and sexual and emotional IPV, specifically, is needed.
- Measurement development surrounding different types of digital empowerment, as well as exploration of ways to construct digital empowerment scales would be useful, with the caveat that this study finds variable relationships between different types of digital empowerment proxies and IPV.
- Investment in evidence-based programs to increase women use of digital devices should concurrently seek to understand potential effects on violence risk.
- Policy-based efforts can simultaneously increase the awareness of women on using digital devices for empowerment and prevention of IPV.

Methods

This study draws on the National Family Health Survey-5, which was conducted in India between 2019 and 2021 and is equivalent to the Demographic Health Survey in India. NFHS is a population representative survey of all states and union territories in India. NFHS adopted a multi-stage sampling process for selecting households. The NFHS-5 samples violence against women questions among women aged 18-49 years. For this brief we have restricted the sample to currently married women aged 18-49 who completed the domestic violence module (n=56,916).

For our analytic sample, about half were aged 18-34 and most live in rural areas (69.4%). Around 28% had no education, 13.4% had primary education, 46.7% had secondary education, and only 11.7% had higher than secondary school education. Almost three-quarters (74.2%) of women had two or more children. The majority identify as Hindu (82.4%), with 45.6% belonging to Other Backward Castes (OBCs).

We conducted secondary analysis with the outcomes of physical, sexual, and emotional IPV, respectively, and any IPV in the last 12 months. Independent variables considered were women's mobile phone use (yes/no), internet access (yes/no), short message services (SMS) use (yes/no), and mobile phones for financial transactions (yes/no). Statistical analysis included the design-based F statistic for bivariate associations, as well as logistic and multivariable regression models. Covariates included in multivariable analysis were age, rurality, respondent education, number of living children, caste, respondent father beat her mother, women's working status, husband

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education, husband alcohol consumption, region. DHS domestic violence survey weighting was applied to all analysis.

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