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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
COLLECTIVES AND THE POWER OF DIGITAL:
A RESEARCH AND LEARNING AGENDA

Connecting Empowerment:

How social network expansion in women's collectives helps bridge the gender digital divide

Authors
Dr Eric Rice
Sara Chamberlain

Editor
Alexandra Tyers

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About the Digital Women's Economic Empowerment project

Women's Empowerment Collectives and the Power of Digital: A Research and Learning Agenda (Digital WEE Project) is a 3-year project that aims to identify how digital technology could enhance pathways to women's empowerment in Women's Empowerment Collectives (WECs). The project is exploring how WECs could effectively harness digital technologies, including social media, while mitigating the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities. It is being conducted by BBC Media Action with a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About BBC Media Action

BBC Media Action is the BBC's international charity - we believe in media and communication for good. We reach more than 100 million people each year in some of the world's poorest and most fragile countries. Our projects and programmes save lives, protect livelihoods, counter misinformation, challenge prejudice and build democracy. In India, BBC Media Action has been delivering award-winning communications projects for almost 20 years, covering areas such as gender equality and inclusion; health; water, sanitation, and hygiene; and women's economic empowerment..

Acknowledgements

1. Background and methodology

In late 2019, BBC Media Action conducted qualitative research with six women's empowerment collectives (WECs) in the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu to explore the relationship between women's roles in collectives, the size and characteristics of their social networks, and their level of digital access and use. In total, 229 women were interviewed in focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The WECs were a mix of nascent and mature self-help groups (SHGs), joint liability cooperatives, rights-based groups and trade unions. Each of these collectives consisted of thousands of women, usually organised into small groups of 10–12, each with a leader, secretary and/or treasurer. These groups had come together to form wider collectives, often with hierarchical, federated structures. Some collectives were financially independent, while others continued to receive support from the government or non-governmental organisations, such as Chaitanya WISE (Women's Integrated and Synergistic Empowerment) in Madhya Pradesh and READ (Rights Education and Action Development) in Tamil Nadu.

2. Meet the women

Members of rural groups and low-income urban groups

The members of rural groups and low-income urban groups tended to have little education. Most were either illiterate or had dropped out after primary school. Since joining the collective, they had begun to develop friendships and connections with women outside their families for the first time. They described feeling isolated before joining the collective, and identified social support as one of the key benefits of group membership. As one woman put it, "being in the group felt like having someone else to help carry the luggage on my head instead of having to walk alone." The social networks of these group members typically consisted of their husbands, in-laws and other women in the group.

Most of the members of these groups had very low levels of digital access, mobile phone ownership or use. In Madhya Pradesh, only nine out of 117 women in 13 SHGs owned their own mobile phone, and only two of these were smartphones. Most women shared their husband's phone, which they used for up to 15 minutes per day, usually just to call their parents and siblings. Digital literacy was extremely low – many members only knew how to "press the green button to answer the phone when [my husband or family member] calls."

Many members joined the collective to find work, but often found friendship, social support and loans instead. In these groups, meaningful digital access was usually restricted to group leaders and secretaries, but group membership also offered new pathways to digital access, with some members reporting occasionally using their group leader's phone for calls.

> " Being in the group felt like having someone else to help carry my baggage on my head instead of having to walk alone."
>
> *Group member*

FIGURE 1

In rural groups, and in low income peri-urban and urban groups, meaningful digital access is restricted to group leaders and secretaries

Federation staff / Promoting agency

CLO*/BLO*

VLO*

Almost all leaders owned or had access to phones, about half had access to smartphones. Usage limited to 2 to 3 hours a day.

Most members in rural groups in MP only had 10 to 15 mins access to their husband's phone per day – usually just to answer his calls.

| Leaders | Secretaries | Members |

RURAL GROUPS

*VLO: Village Level Organiser. CLO: Cluster Level Organiser. BLO: Block Level Organiser.

Members of urban groups

In two-thirds of the urban groups that BBC Media Action observed, the members were similar to those in rural groups, in terms of limited mobile phone access and usage. However, some urban groups were strikingly different. For example, in a minority of groups in the city of Ujjain, 75% of members had smartphones, which they used throughout the day. It is noteworthy that these groups were joint liability cooperatives, and most members were earning incomes from paid work. They reported that their smartphones were indispensable to their daily lives and were willing to make sacrifices to buy data.

Madhu, who left school after Class 7, did stitching and laundry at home, making roughly $40–50 per month. She paid $1 for one GB of data per day for 30 days. However, she reported sometimes having to feed her family fewer vegetables at lunch so that she could afford data. Madhu and her fellow group members rarely used their phones for group purposes because they mostly lived on the same street, although they occasionally used WhatsApp to coordinate their meetings. Instead, most used their phones for work and entertaining their children. They used keypad phones to communicate with clients, and those with smartphones also used them to build their skills (for example, by watching videos on how to make baskets, jewellery, clothes, handbags, etc.). Madhu communicated with her clients on WhatsApp and looked for new blouse patterns online.

Lata, another group member, was a cook in a restaurant and did catering. She used her keypad phone to take orders from clients and to coordinate pick-ups and deliveries of the food she made.
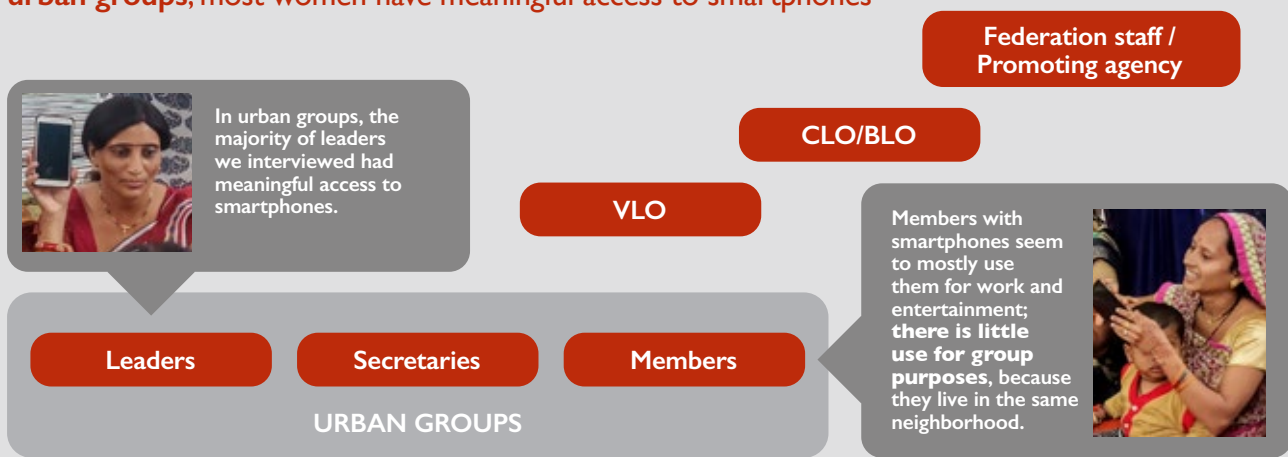
Some of the women interviewed were exploring the option of marketing and selling their products online. Shraddha, a member of a joint liability cooperative, where some of the members made jewellery together to sell, had studied to Class 8 and ran a successful sari-weaving business with her husband. Shraddha was on her smartphone all day long, managing communication with their factory of 10 weavers. She was thinking about selling on Amazon and wanted to market the group's jewellery via social media.

However, group members like Madhu,

FIGURE 3

In a small but growing percentage (as much as a quarter) of urban groups, most women have meaningful access to smartphones

In urban groups, the majority of leaders we interviewed had meaningful access to smartphones.

Federation staff / Promoting agency

CLO/BLO

VLO

Members with smartphones seem to mostly use them for work and entertainment; **there is little use for group purposes**, because they live in the same neighborhood.

Leaders | Secretaries | Members

URBAN GROUPS

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FIGURE 4

Typical network of leaders of specific WEC groups
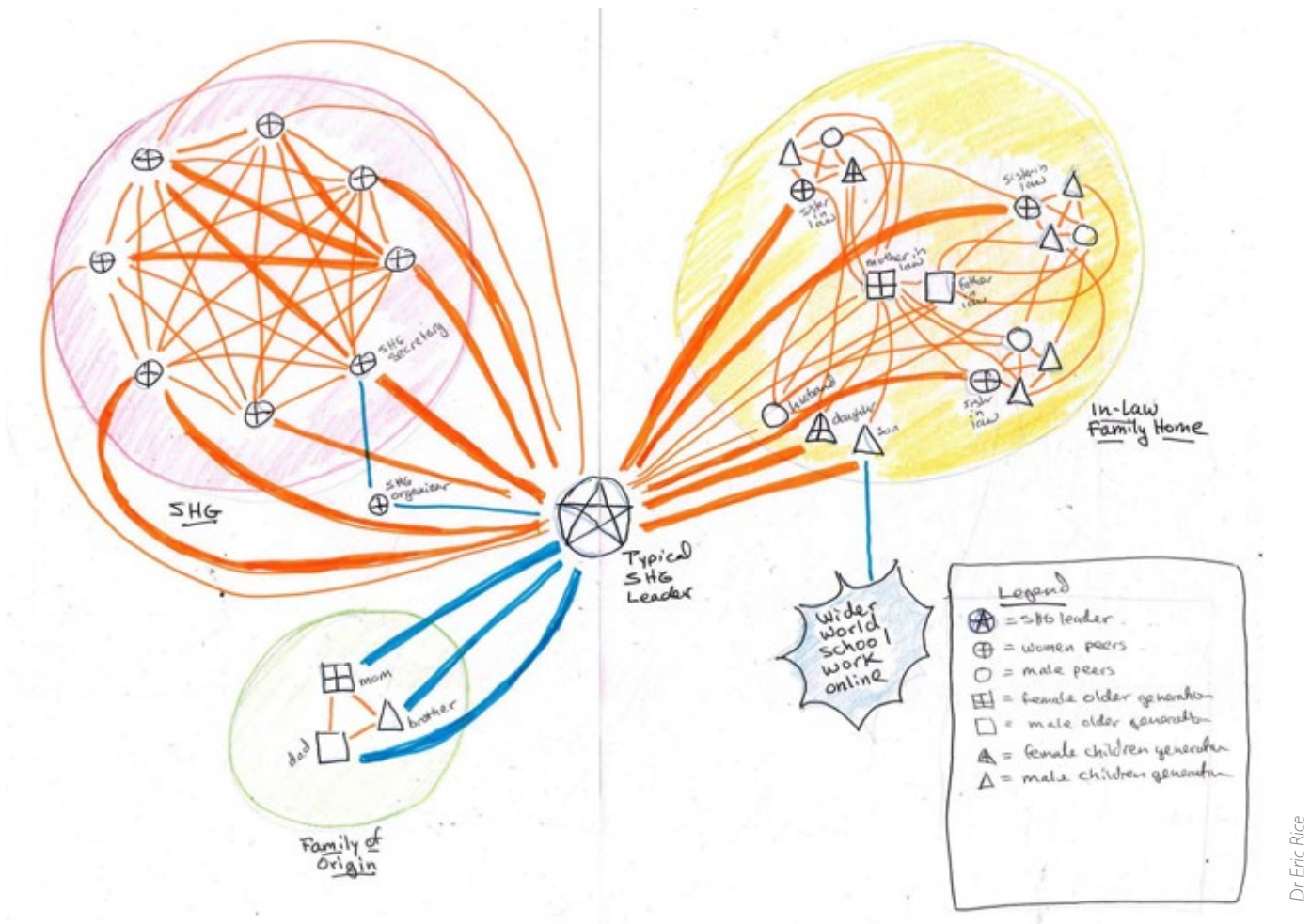
Dr Eric Rice

Lata, Shraddha and Ruchi were not the norm. In the majority of urban groups that BBC Media Action observed (around 75%), less than half the members owned any kind of phone.

Group leaders

Maya was the leader of a women's group in peri-urban Madhya Pradesh. She had set up a corner shop with a loan from her sister's husband, making roughly $1–2 per day. Although she only had a primary school education herself, Maya wanted her daughter to graduate from high school. Her son had had to drop out when he was 11 to help support the family. He bought Maya her first smartphone, purchased with savings from his wages as a labourer on construction sites.

Male relatives purchased phones for many of the group leaders who were interviewed. However, as their economic activity and empowerment increased over time, these women started to pay their own phone bills. It was observed that women who paid their own phone bills seemed to have more meaningful control over their phones and were using them to complete a wider range of tasks.

Maya used her phone to keep her shop stocked, and to communicate with the wider collective through phone calls. She shared her phone with both her children – her daughter, in Class 8, used it to watch TV serials, and her son used it to look for work, listen to music and watch videos. Maya also shared her phone with some of the women in her group, who used it occasionally to make calls.

Maya's digital access and mobile phone use was typical of the group leaders who were interviewed. Almost all owned or had meaningful access to phones. About 50% had access to smartphones. However, many of the group leaders interviewed had basic digital use cases, especially in rural groups. They used their phones for two to three hours per day, primarily to communicate with their husband,

parents and siblings, and to stay in touch with organisers and community resource people in the collective as needed. Like Maya, they often shared their phones with other group members, which highlights the value of one shared phone in a group but also the challenges that shared phones can present for mobile services designed for individuals, particularly those that capture data.

Like Maya, most group leaders who were interviewed were economically active, and involved in some form of micro-enterprise (such as stitching work at home, hand loom work, making jewellery, laundry or catering). However, unlike Maya, most of these group leaders had finished Class 7 or 8, and reported that their groups had elected them in part because of their higher level of education and involvement in economic activity. Group leaders exhibited self-confidence, and were outspoken about their independence. They were also regularly in contact with organisers and leaders in the wider collective structure.

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FIGURE 5
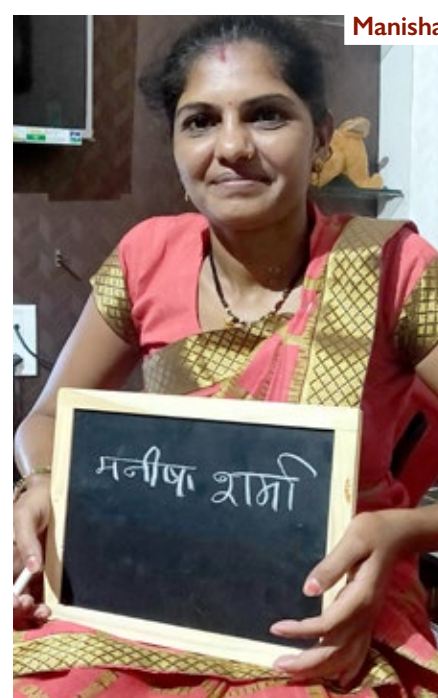### Social networks of cluster level organisers
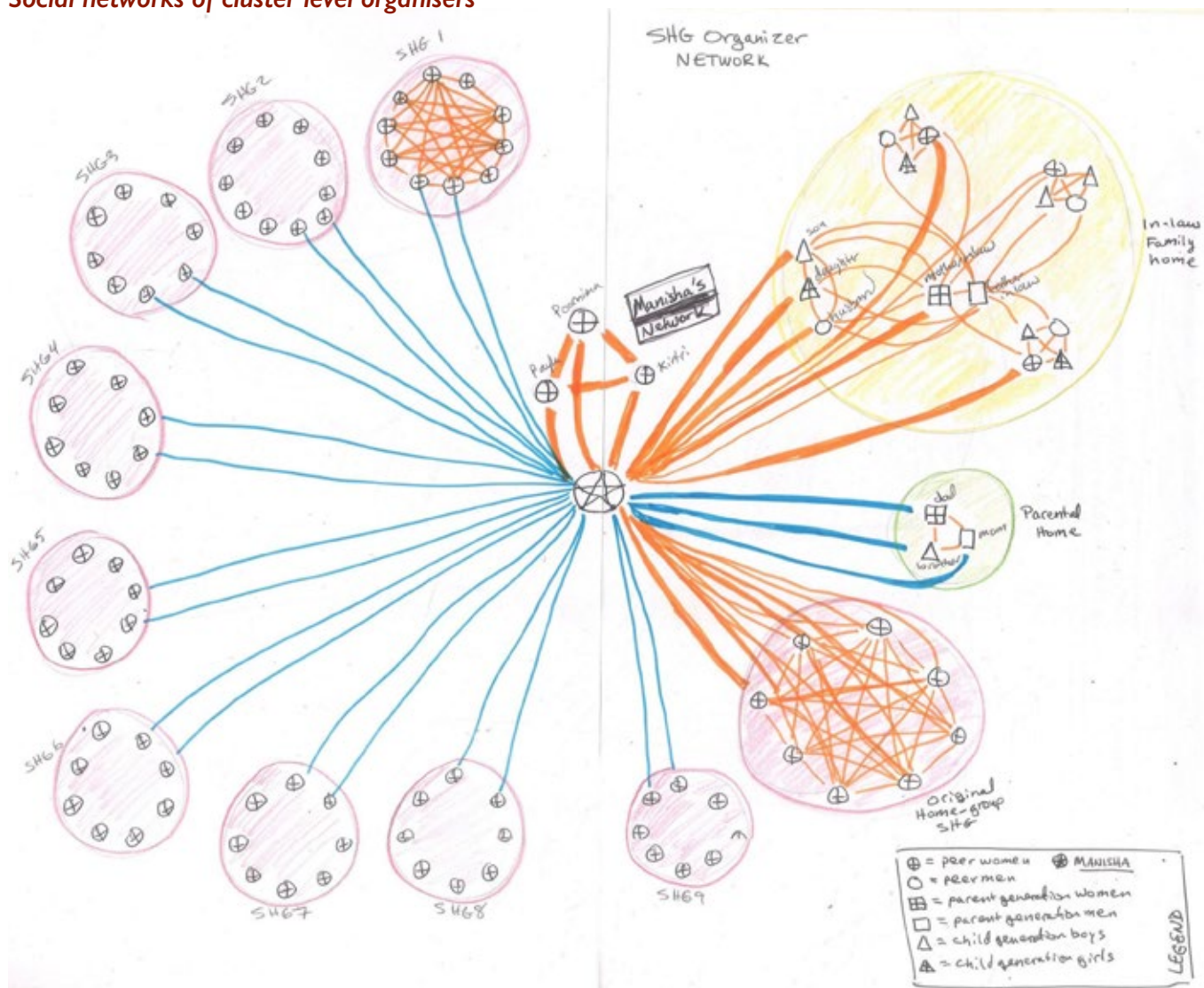
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Cluster-level organisers

BBC Media Action observed higher levels of digital access and use among women at higher levels in the collective hierarchy. Take, for example, Manisha. Manisha was a cluster-level organiser (CLO), who had dropped out of Class 10 when her father arranged her marriage. She had her first child at the age of 15. She joined a women's savings and loans group to support her husband and in-laws financially.

Manisha's bookkeeping talent was recognised by the collective and she was quickly promoted to group leader, and then progressed to CLO. As a CLO, she set up 30 women's groups and then coordinated their activities. Manisha had her own smartphone, which she used every day to manage her groups and to communicate with other women in organising roles in the wider collective – mainly via WhatsApp.
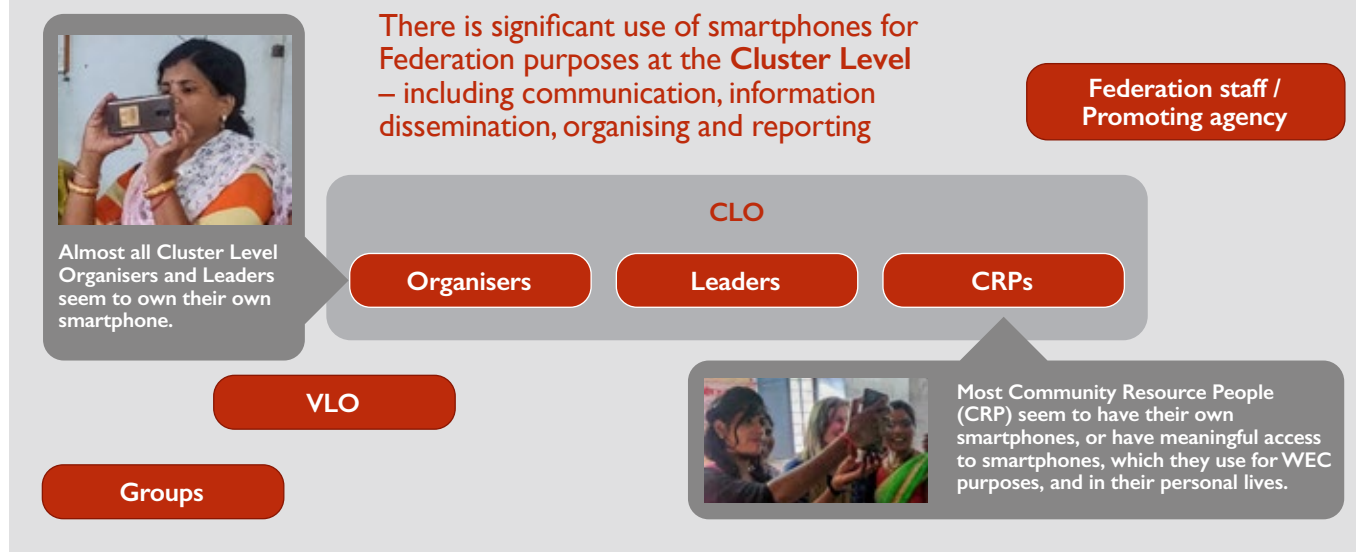
Her best friend and neighbour, Payal, was both the secretary of Manisha's group and a CLO. Before she took on this role, she had worked in a beauty salon. Like Manisha, Payal owned her own smartphone and was a digital champion, helping women in her groups to learn how to use phones. Payal viewed her smartphone as indispensable for her role as a CLO. She said that, as a mother of young children, she would not have been able to do the job without a smartphone, because it allowed her to work mostly from home.

Manisha and Payal were typical of the CLOs who were interviewed. All of them owned their own smartphones, which they then used extensively for their work in the collective, including using WhatsApp groups to coordinate action with colleagues across the wider collective, to document and monitor progress, and to communicate with group leaders and secretaries organising

Manisha

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FIGURE 6

There is significant use of smartphones for Federation purposes at the **Cluster Level** – including communication, information dissemination, organising and reporting

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Almost all Cluster Level Organisers and Leaders seem to own their own smartphone.

CLO

Organisers   Leaders   CRPs

VLO

Groups

Most Community Resource People (CRP) seem to have their own smartphones, or have meaningful access to smartphones, which they use for WEC purposes, and in their personal lives.

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meetings and sharing information. While these use cases were often basic (such as handling logistics), women like Manisha and Payal were on their phones "all day", constantly fielding calls from group leaders, and acting as the conduit for information between group leaders and collective organisers and leadership at higher levels in the wider structure.

Most of the CLOs who were interviewed had at least a Class 10 education (many had completed Class 12), and were coordinating the activities of 15–30 groups. They tended to be outspoken about their independence, including having their own income streams and buying their own phones. Many of them had husbands and in-laws who were supportive of their work in the collective (despite initially having been ambivalent).

Cluster-level leaders and wider collective leadership

BBC Media Action observed that women in senior leadership roles in wider collective structures had the highest levels of digital access and use, and, typically, the highest levels of education. For example, most of the women leaders on the board of a rights-based collective in Tamil Nadu had finished Class 12, and were strategically using smartphones to document evidence of failures in public service delivery (such as education, health, sanitation) to support their negotiations with local government on behalf of the community.

Take, for example, Pattamal. Pattamal was on the board of a collective of

2,000 Dalit women supported by READ in Sathyamangalam, Tamil Nadu, and left school after Class 12. She owned her own smartphone and used it to photograph and video failures in public service delivery. She then used these photos and videos as evidence to support the many printed petitions she submitted to the government, with thousands of signatures from the collective and wider community urging improvements. In one instance, she observed broken sewage pipes in a village, and took photos and videos with her phone, which she took to the *Panchayat* (local government) to persuade it to mount an effective clean-up. In another instance, she photographed poor or broken facilities in schools and backlogs of untreated patients in hospitals and took them to the *Panchayat*. Her community engagement, facilitated by her smartphone and with the support of the collective, has led to action by local government. As Pattamal says, "There is no child labour or child marriage in our village. We help women claim their benefits from the government and make sure our children go to school."

Similarly, Janaki was the secretary of the same collective as Pattamal. She had studied for a Bachelor of Engineering but dropped out. The collective sent her on a social media training course, and she has since helped collective members learn how to use smartphones to benefit the community. Janaki trained Meenakshi, a fellow board member, and Meenakshi became an active smartphone user, also engaging with the local authorities to improve public

service delivery. As she said, "We learned how to interact with local government officials after joining the collective – they respect us and take us seriously."
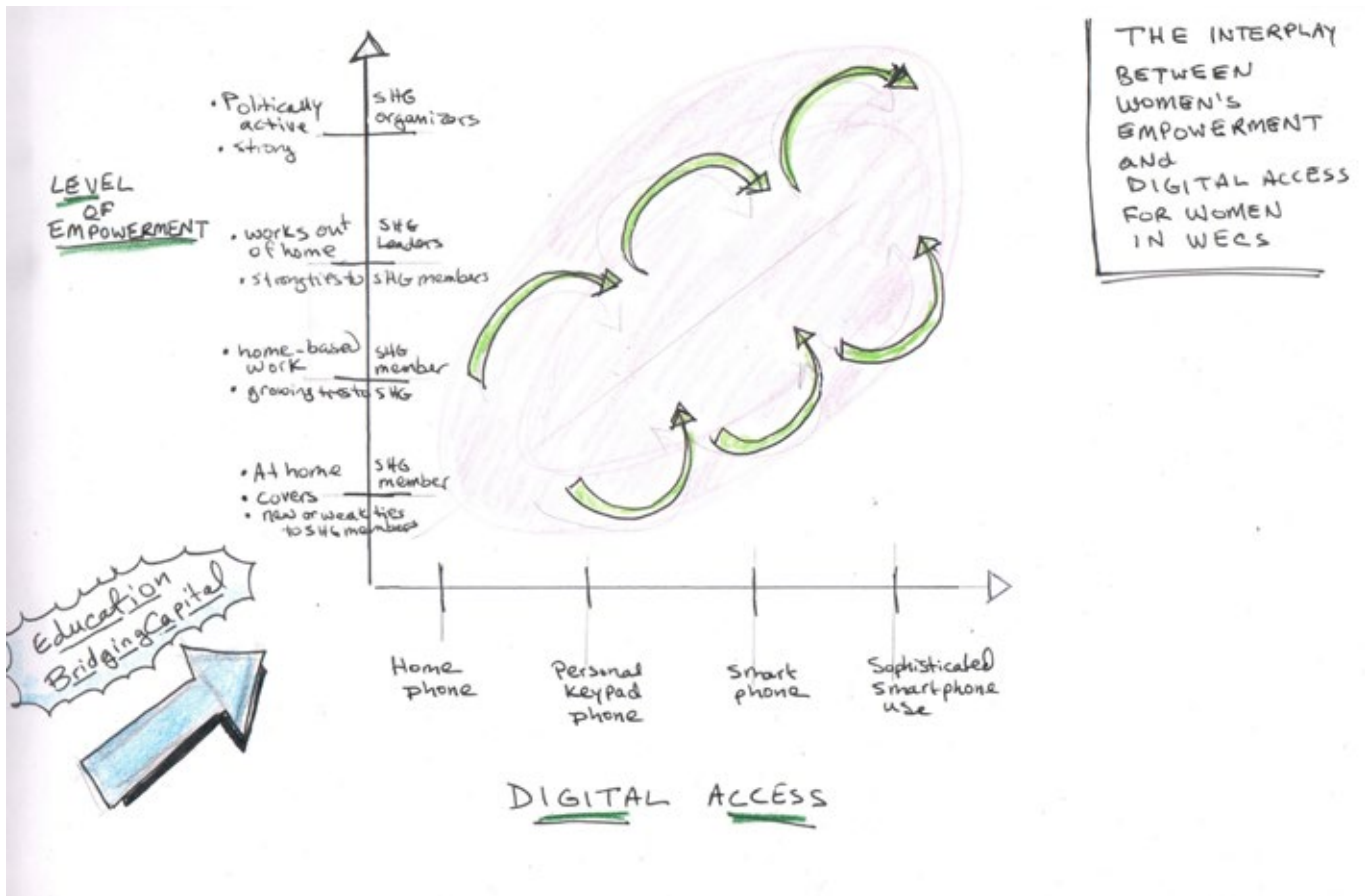
3. Analysis

a) There is an interplay between women's empowerment and digital access and use

In the context of collectives and their wider structures, two crucial continuums were observed, which should be considered when formulating digital strategies for women's social and economic empowerment:

1. A continuum of women's empowerment (social, psychological, economic and political)
2. A continuum of digital access and use

As can be seen in Figure 7, a correlation between these two continuums was observed, both of which seemed to be driven by the expansion of information and resource networks that produce bridging social capital, and often by educational attainment. In most, but not all cases, the respondents who had the most digital access were women who had completed Class 10 or higher, while bridging capital – that is, social capital that connects women to resources, ideas and new opportunities outside their immediate communities – seemed to accompany empowerment. What follows is a description of the typical interplay that was observed between empowerment and digital access and use.

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Payal

b) Greater involvement in WECs means expanded networks and increased digital use

Women at the low end of the continuum (for example, the members of rural groups) typically had small social networks: just their husbands, in-laws and the other women in their groups. For these women, their groups were often their first move out of isolation. However, as some women moved up in the collective hierarchy and became leaders, their social networks expanded (thanks largely to their growing relationships within the wider collective structure).

For example, as women like Manisha and Payal progressed from group secretaries to group leaders to CLOs, their social networks expanded dramatically. As CLOs, Manisha and Payal were supporting the coming together of 20–30 groups of women through a near constant flow of interaction, while still maintaining strong relationships with their original groups, their husbands and their in-laws. These expanded networks point towards increased empowerment, primarily by enhancing their bridging social capital –that is, relationships with women in the wider collective who provide new information and support and model different ways of doing things and different behaviours. Digital technology can greatly accelerate this process by increasing the reach, frequency and richness of communication within the wider collective.

Group leaders like Maya used their phones to maintain their expanded networks, connecting with their CLOs to share information and arrange face-to-face meetings. CLOs like Manisha and Payal used WhatsApp to coordinate with other CLOs in other areas of the city. They also phoned individual group leaders to organise meetings, and they used the internet to find information to facilitate their work. Manisha and Payal (and other CLOs like them) manifested a great deal of bridging social capital, acting as key bridges between the wider empowerment structures of the collective, the group leaders and the

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individual women in both urban and peri-urban groups.

c) Smartphones were a source of "me time"

Women who owned smartphones were very connected to them, not just because they saw their phones as money-making tools (like Madhu and Shraddha), or for coordinating collective activities (like Manisha and Payal), or for holding the political system to account (like Pattamal, Janaki and Meenakshi). Smartphones were also clearly a source of "me time" for these women: for listening to music, watching movies, sharing jokes, watching cartoons with their kids, reading the news, downloading books and searching for educational content.

TABLE 1
The interplay between empowerment and digital access and use

Level	Position	Empowerment	Digital access and use
Low	Group members	Low-level	Limited
Mid	WEC leaders (presidents or secretaries)	Mid-level	Medium
High	Hold positions in the wider structure of WEC federations (cluster organisers)	High-level	High
Highest	Hold leadership positions in more mature WEC federations that are run by NGOs	Highest-level	High

While these digital entertainment use cases might seem innocuous, they could be an important source of digital bridging capital, introducing leaders to new ideas and social norms.

Women's willingness to take time for themselves – for their own enjoyment – could also be an indicator of another small step further along the gender empowerment continuum.

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