



The gendered periphery: A survey of young women's use and access to mobile phones during the pandemic



Introduction

One of the central themes of our project has been to understand how urban peripheries are being transformed by digitalisation. An important component of this understanding is to examine how digitalisation shapes the lives and experiences of young women living in the peripheries. To gain a broad understanding of this, we conducted a survey with the young women studying in a local vocational college in Bhiwandi. We asked several questions related to socio-economic profile, access to digital infrastructure, network and connectivity, freedom and choice of access to digital space and so on.

This survey was based on a sample size of 300 women, who filled in their responses online. Therefore, the main limitation of these findings is that it represents only those who had access to a mobile phone or laptop.

1. Socio-Economic Profile

The survey suggests that almost all the young women lived in rented accommodation. They had access to basic infrastructure such as electricity, household water-supply and toilets/sanitation. More than 81 percent of the sample size earns less than 100,000 rupees (£1000) annually and only 19 percent earned between 100,000-500,000 Rs (£1000-5000) annually. This shows that the average family income for a large number of them is below poverty line (below 1,059.42 Rupees ~ 62 PPP USD).

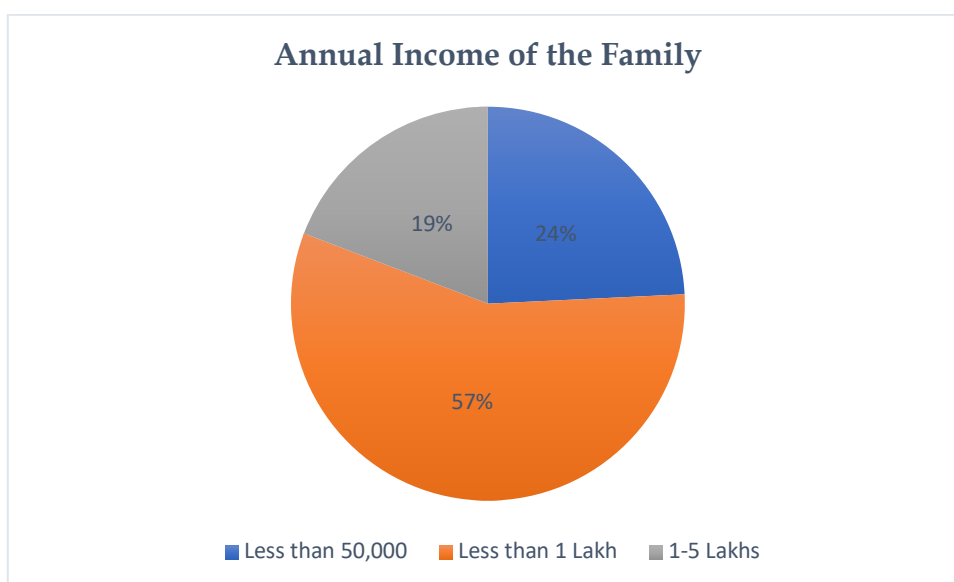


Figure 1: Annual Income of the Family

In terms of access to daily household goods while 72 percent of the households own a gas stove which is a basic necessity. In comparison ownership of washing machine, considered a luxury good, is only

63.2 percent. This is however more than television ownership at 41.4 percent. 55 percent of the families own motorcycle or scooter and in comparison, only 13.6 percent families own a car. This reflects the largely low-income base of the families.

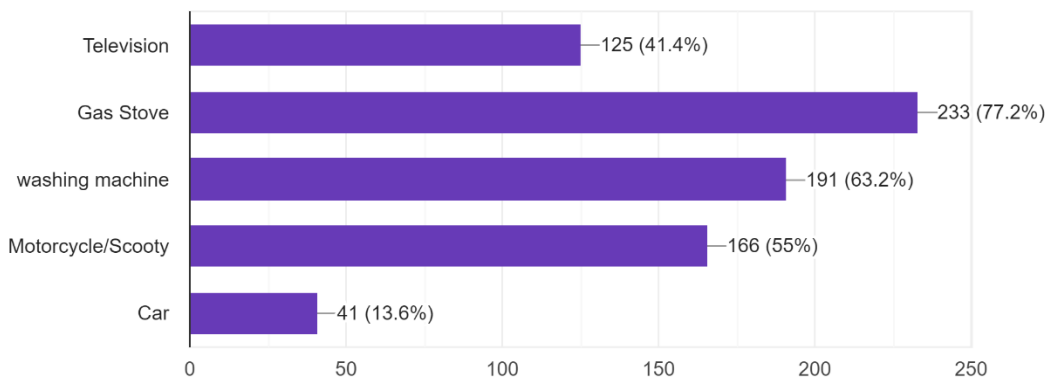


Figure 2: Ownership of Amenities

One can conclude from the socio-economic profile of the women surveyed that a large percentage belongs to lower income group and rest are in the category of middle-income group. It helps in understanding the background from these women are coming from and possible difficulties they would be facing during online classes, particularly during the COVID19 period.

2. Access to digital infrastructure

During the lockdown in India, education system across the country moved completely online. Bhiwandi was no exception. This meant that access to desktop, laptop or a mobile phone was crucial for any student to attend classes. It also meant women need to have uninterrupted network and data availability. This section deals in detail about access and availability issues faced by the young women.

61.6 percent of the women had access to mobile phone but it did not belong to them. They had to share it with their siblings and other family members.

Do you have a mobile Phone
302 responses

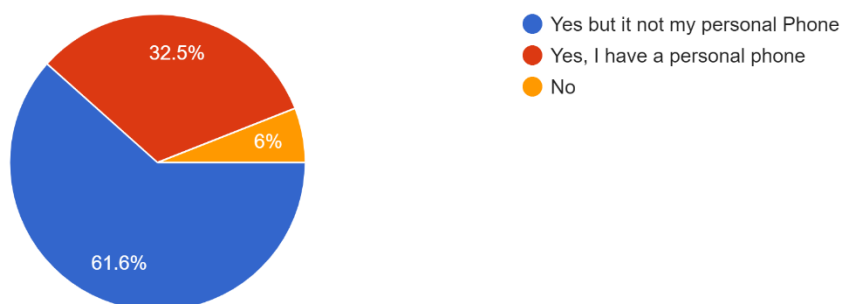


Figure 3: Ownership of Mobile Phone

On the other hand, only **32.5** percent of the women owned a personal mobile phone and **6** percent of the women had no access to phone for attending online classes.

3. Quality of the Mobile Phone

The phone used by 70 percent of the women was 'old', meaning their digital lives had begun with a used phone.

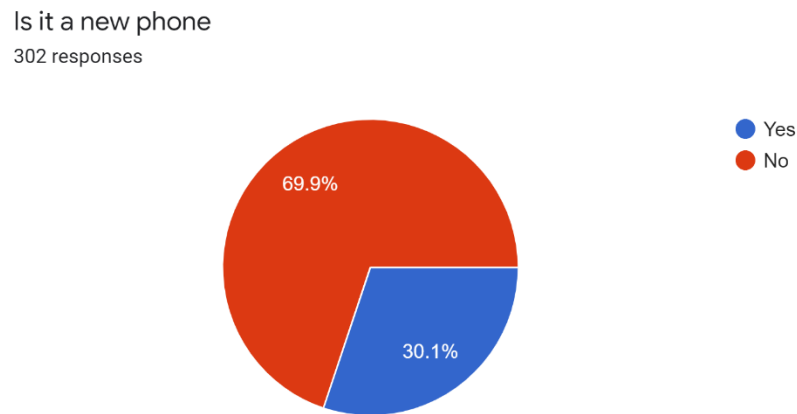


Figure 4: Quality of the Mobile Phone

30 percent of the women were actually given a new phone for attending classes. Meaning it was only this set of women who could regularly join the classes without any difficult.

14 percent of the women reported that though they had a mobile phone, it did not have a functioning camera.

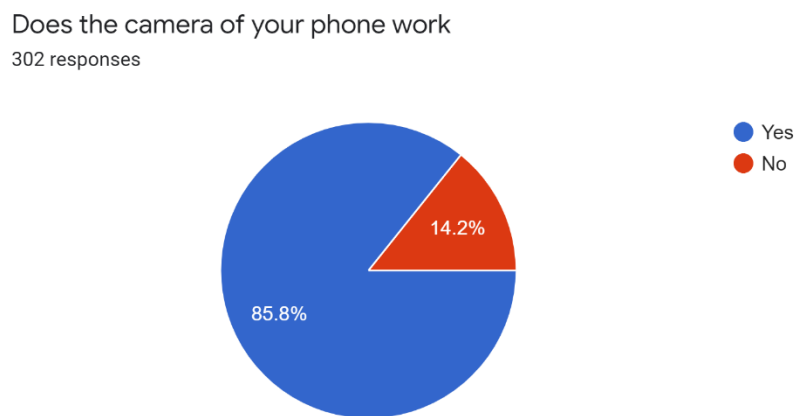


Figure 5: Does the Camera of your Phone work

4. Access and Negotiations

In this section the aim was to understand the access to the mobile phone usage even if they had one at home. Since most women had siblings and working parents it meant the phone was not freely available as per their convenience.

If, yes to above are you able to attend all the classes
302 responses

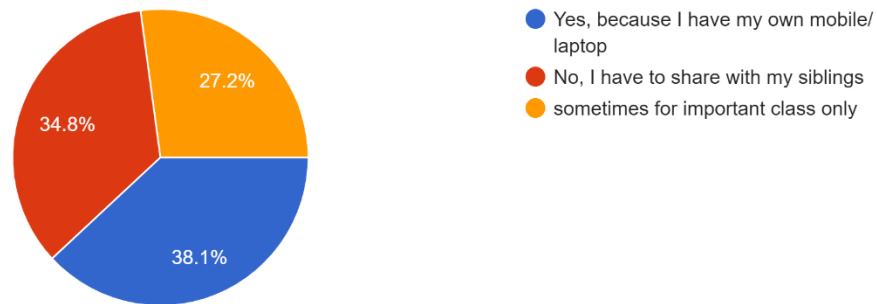


Figure 6: Was the phone available for attending all the classes

Only 38 percent of the women who owned their own device were able to attend all the classes. As seen in Figure. 6, 34.8 percent of the women had to share the mobile with their siblings and 27 percent could only use the phone for attending very important classes.

At what time of the day do you have access to the mobile
302 responses

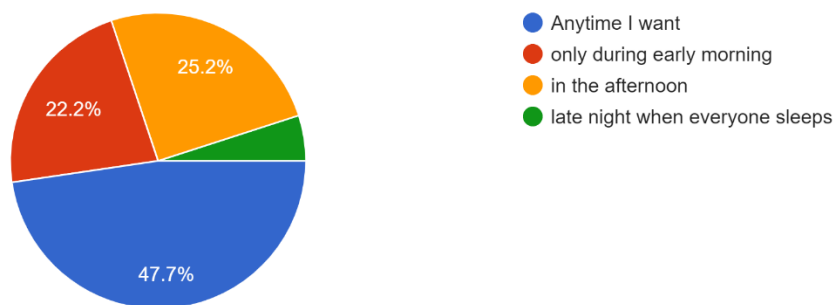


Figure 7: Access Time to the Mobile Phone

Only 47.4 percent said they could access the phone for attending class or listening to the recorded lecture any time of the day. The other 25.2 percent reported access during the afternoon only when the younger siblings did not have class or the parents were home. A close 22.2 percent of the girls said it was only during the early morning hours when they could use it. This showed that the girls had to adjust their study hours as per the availability of the phone and it was impossible for them to follow the college schedule.

How do you manage if you miss the online class
302 responses

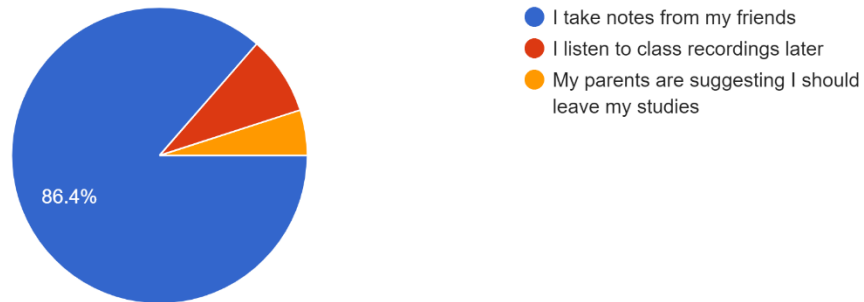


Figure 8: Other Alternatives for attending Class

It is also meant that the girls had to depend on other mechanisms for their learning. The most common practice among 86 percent of the women was to take notes for the classes they missed. Many lecturers also provided class notes regularly to the young women who were not able to attend. Only 8.6 percent of the women managed to listen to the lecture recordings as per their convenience. But it was not very prevalent because data was expensive and therefore data use was a major concern.

Given the grim situation, parents of about 5 percent of the women were of the opinion that they are better off by leaving the course.

5. Surveillance and Freedom

While the pandemic related lockdown confined everyone in their house it also led to continuous monitoring by parents, specially in the case of young women. Since a large number were dependent on their parents' mobile phones for joining classes, it meant they had limited access to the phone, data and time.

Do you regularly get money to recharge your phone
302 responses

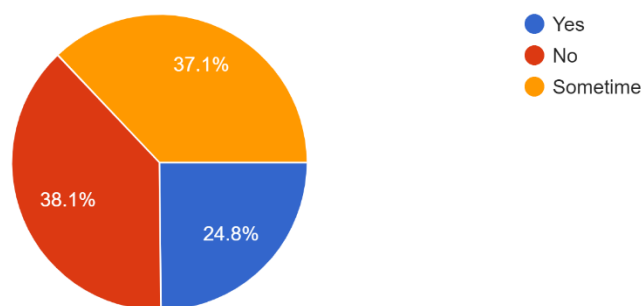


Figure 9: Ownership of Amenities

Even for those who had access to the mobile phone did not necessarily have the freedom to use it as they wished. The biggest hindrance in this was a limited budget for recharging the phone. Only 24.8 percent of the girls said their phones were regularly recharged with data. For a large percentage that is 38.1 percent as seen in Figure. 9, the girls didn't have this choice. In case 37.1 percent of the women, they had to bargain and negotiate with their parents for recharging the phone each time the data was used up.

Many women also complained that though their parents can afford to install a wifi connection this is not done since they do not want the women to have unrestricted and continuous access to digital space. As seen in Figure. 10, 35.4 percent of the number of women do not have the freedom to use internet when they want to. On the other hand, in discussion many girls reported that such was not the case in case of their brothers who had comparatively easier access to the internet.

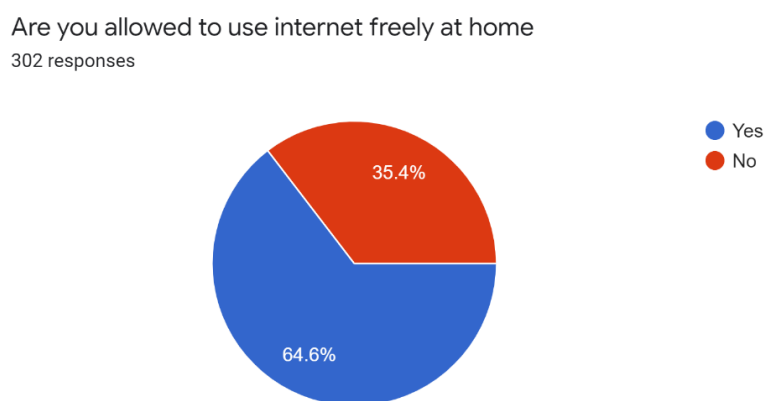


Figure 10: Are you allowed to use internet freely at home

The reason for restricted use for internet use for the girls was because of the added responsibility of household chores. During the lockdown when most families were in their homes, it increased the amount of cooking, cleaning and washing chores for the women of the household. And invariably it was the female members who were expected to share the load. As discussed earlier several girls reported managing household work along with online classes.

6. Network and Connectivity

In city's like Bhiwandi which is on the margins of Mumbai, irregular electricity supply and frequent interruptions in network shapes a fragmented digital experience at the user level.

58.3 percent of the young women reported that the quality of internet connectivity in the house was 'good'.

How is the mobile network in your house
302 responses

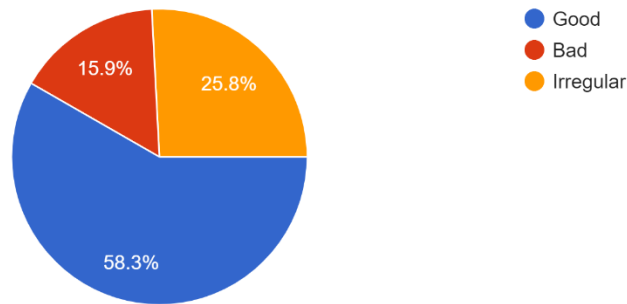


Figure 11: Quality of Internet Connectivity in the House

Over a quarter of them also reported 'irreglar' connection, while 16 percent of the women reported 'bad' connection inside their house noting that they often faced problems during their lecture timings.

As discussed above a large number of women come from economically weaker backgrounds and the average monthly income does not support the expenditures required to maintain stable connectivity. As seen in Figure. 12, a total of 72 percent girls reported that they had no Wifi connection in their house. Only 20 percent of the women said they had Wifi connection in their house. However, in Bhiwandi there is also a practice of sharing Wifi data between neighbours made possible because of high density and families living in close proximity to each other. In several cases, this data sharing is done with mutual consent and some even share the cost between a number of households.

Do you have WiFi connection in your house
302 responses

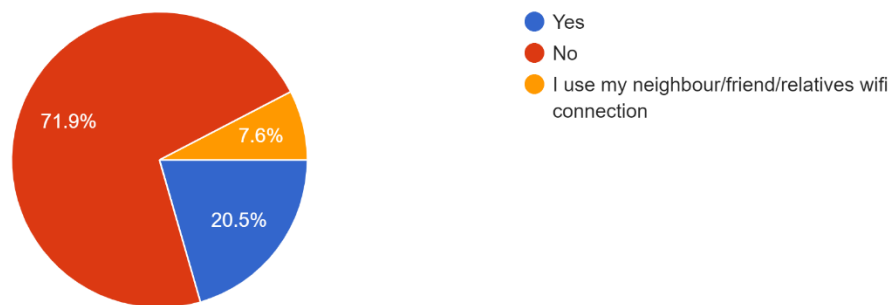


Figure 12: Ownership of Amenities

7. Types of Mobiles used

The use of Mobile phone was most prevalent for attending online classes as well as for other purposes in comparison to a laptop or a desktop. Therefore, it was important to understand the types of Mobile phone used and the average income on data recharge etc.

As seen in Figure. 13 below the most dominating mobile service provider in Bhiwandi among the sample survey was Jio at 47 percent. A close second at 38 percent was Airtel. While in case of Jio, the data packs are relatively cheaper, Airtel’s network connection makes it a common choice too.

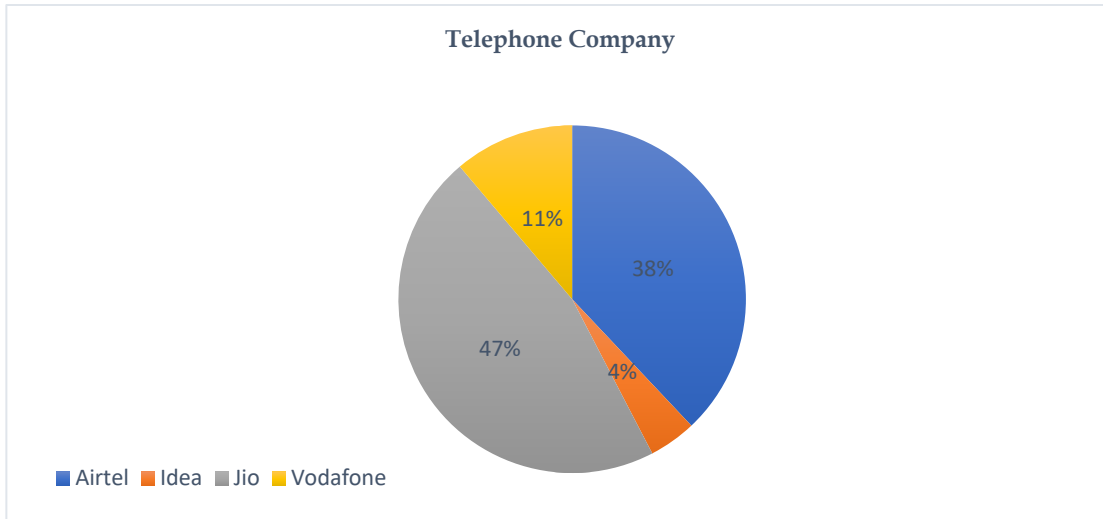


Figure 13: Types of Mobile service provider

The model of the phone used by women is of varied types. The market today is flooded with many options boasting of high-resolution cameras which is of particular attraction for the younger generation. As seen in Figure. 14, the market capture of Redmi and Realme is highest

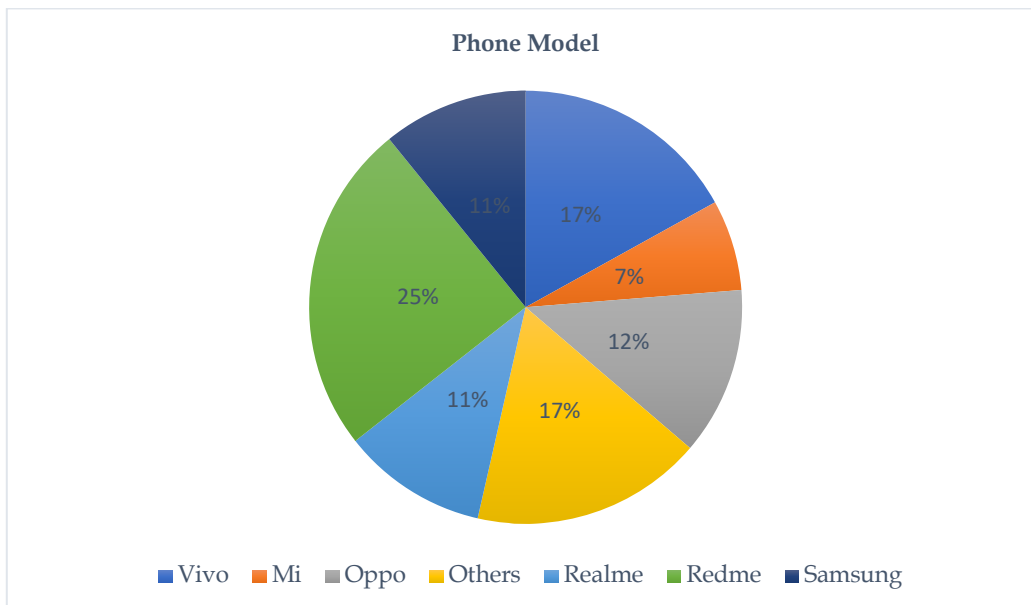


Figure 14: Phone Model

The other prevalent companies are Oppo and Vivo. These are budget price phones which provide adequate camera resolution and is priced under 15,000 Rs (₹150) . The ownership of other phones like Samsung, Nokia or iPhone was less than 17 percent.

Phones are chosen primarily for their storage capacity at a given price. As seen in Figure 15 , 35 percent of phones have a storage capacity of 50-100 GB and an equal percentage of phones have storage facilities of 100 GB and above. However, 16 percent of the women use phones whose storage capacity is less than 10 GB.

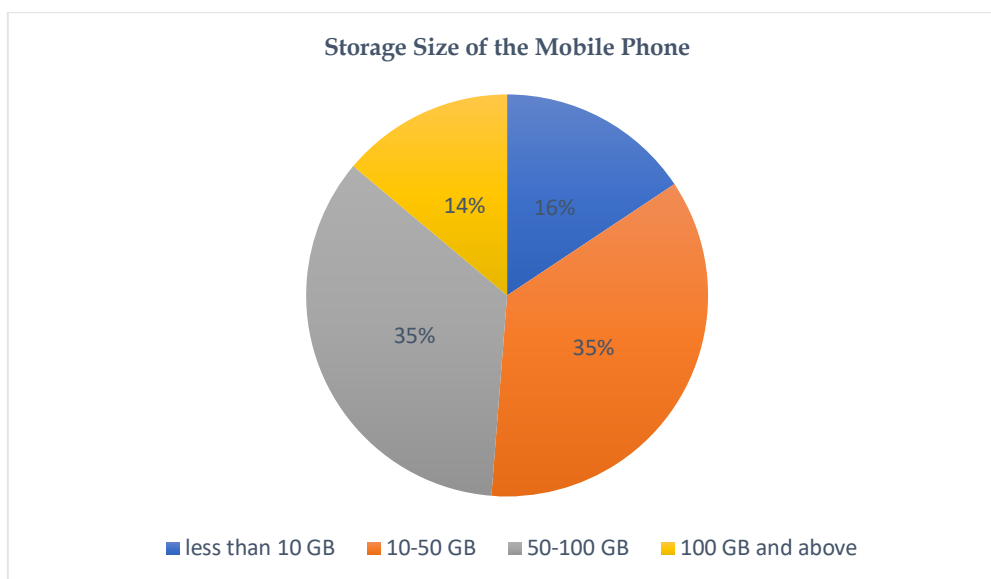


Figure 15: Storage Capacity of the Phone

8. Expenditure and Usage

The monthly expenditure and usage of data had increased for each family during the pandemic. Data consumption during online classes is very high which meant the women could not attend all of them.

As seen in Figure. 16, the average monthly expenditure by the women was anything 200-500 Rs for 52 percent of the girls. A close 34 percent of the women were spending less than 200 Rs for the same. The remaining percent of the girls could afford to spend less than 100 Rs on data recharge.

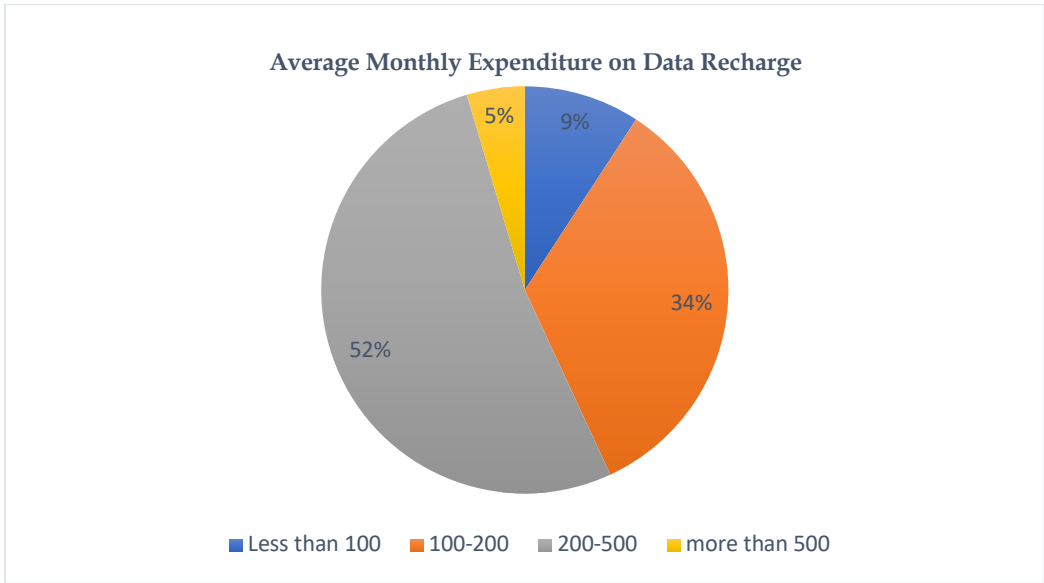


Figure 16: Average Monthly Expenditure on Data Recharge

At an average data package for vendors like Jio or Airtel, costs less than 200 Rs for 28 days for upto 1GB. Similarly, one can get 1.5-2.5 GB of per day data for 28 days for a cost of up-to 500 Rs.

Apart from attending classes, the young girls use mobile phone for leisure. Many girls reported to have taken to baking, cooking or doing other crafts during the lockdown. They learned many of these skills through YouTube and other online videos. Having said that, majority of the women are able to access phone only for online classes.

What do you primarily use mobile phone for
302 responses

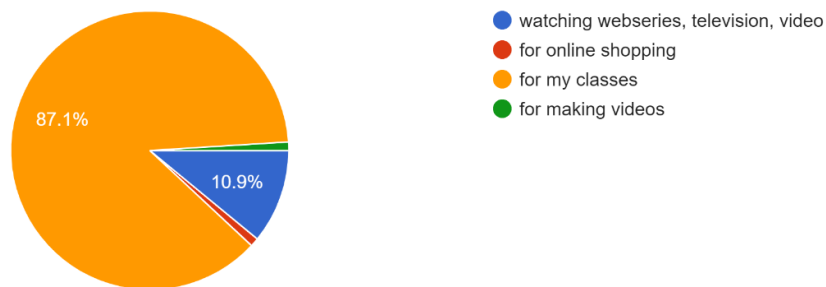


Figure 17: Other Uses of Mobile Phone

9. Digital transactions

The aim of the study was also to capture whether the women use online platforms for paying bills, filling forms and doing any kind digital transactions in their daily lives.

Online booking was most prevalent among 60 percent of women for booking gas supplies. A close second at 54 percent was for completing school and college admission forms. Similarly, less than 20 percent of the girls reported using online platforms for passport application or for starting businesses.

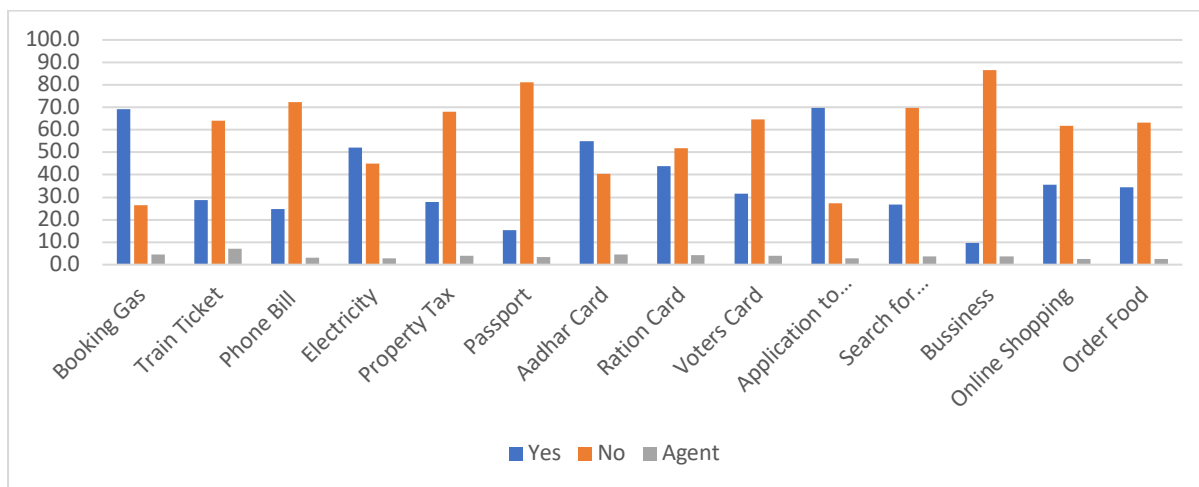


Figure 18: Ownership of Amenities

In the city of Bhiwandi the prevalence of agent for getting documentation work or any online work is quite prevalent. However, in this case we see reporting of less than 20 percent by the women. It is possible that such information is not available with the women and it is the parents who deal with these matters.

10. Conclusions

The evaluation of data from 300 survey forms provide us with an important overview of the role of the digital in everyday life of young women in Bhiwandi. Struggles with online education were acute for those women who were also tied to gender roles of household work in the family alongside course work. The women not only found it difficult to attend all the classes, they also struggled with access to phone, paucity of data and network interruptions. Majority of them managed through a number of micro-negotiations such as sharing wifi, sharing notes as well as continuous guidance and flexibility from lecturers. This survey is therefore a snapshot of the ongoing gendered digital geographies in the periphery – a themes that we will pursue further and more in-depth through our project.

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