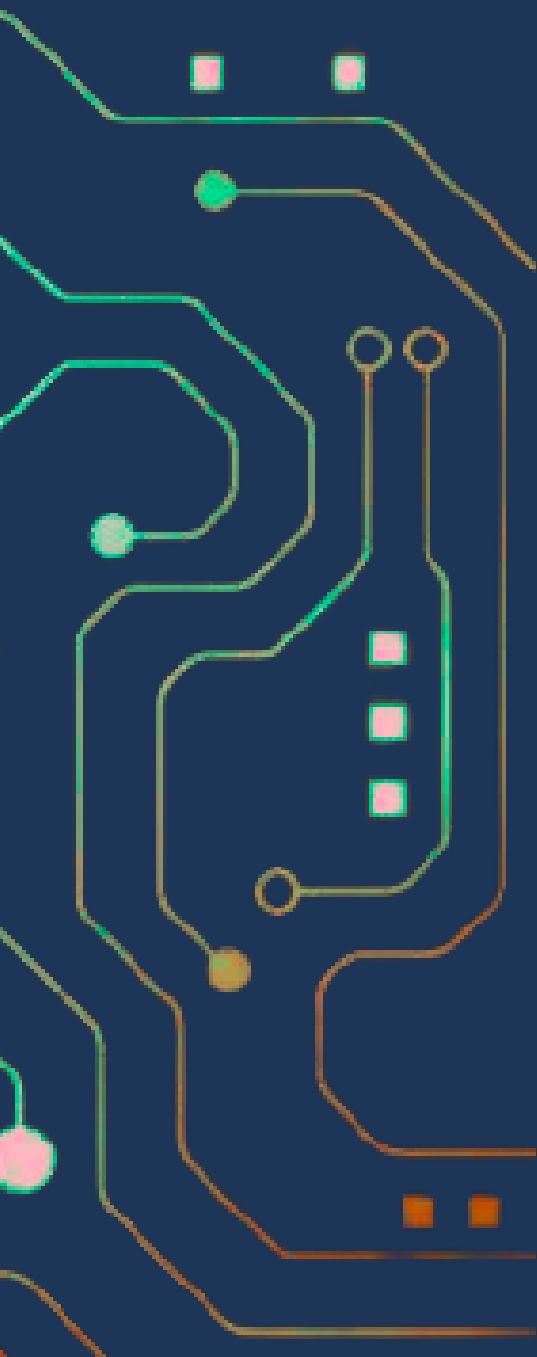


Digital Pathways: Strengthening Women's Political Leadership in South Asia

RESEARCH BRIEF



2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

The Changing Nature of Political Engagement in South Asia

02

Our Research Methodology

03

Who Gets to be Online?

04

The Promise of the Digital Sphere

05

Interventions Strengthening Women's Digital Leadership

06

Discussion

07

Recommendations for Shaping an Inclusive Digital Future

08

Bibliography

The Changing Nature of Political Engagement in South Asia

In the age of algorithms and analytics, politics has become a digital data-driven enterprise: globally digital technologies now shape how leaders campaign, connect with citizens, and govern. Electoral politics is no longer defined solely by charisma and slogans; it increasingly depends on digital footprints, dashboards, and data flows. Around the world, political visibility and legitimacy are mediated through online presence.

In South Asia, democratic life is increasingly shaped by digital technologies.¹ Campaigning, fundraising, party mobilisation, and constituent outreach now take place online, making digital access and literacy essential for political participation. As of 2024, women in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs) are 14% less likely than men to use mobile internet, with the gender gap in South Asia being the widest globally at 32%². Without internet access, women are deprived of significant employment and training opportunities, and cannot benefit from government programs and schemes targeted towards them. Even when women have access to devices, their ability to use non-social media technology—such as e-government platforms, digital training modules, or SMS-based civic information—is limited by lower digital literacy and cost barriers (entry-level smartphones can account for 24% of a woman’s monthly income)³. Despite these challenges, they have significance and remain underexplored in mainstream discourse.

The discourse on “digital politics” in South Asia is dominated by analyses of social media, while non-social media technologies (eg. e-governance portals and apps, digital ID systems etc.) remain underexplored despite their significance for women’s political participation. This brief focuses on these technologies to highlight their potential in enabling more inclusive political engagement across the region.

Our Research Methodology

This brief is based on a scoping review of existing literature, regional reports, and secondary datasets on technology, gender, and political participation in South Asia. The objective was to consolidate evidence on both the opportunities and barriers women face in engaging politically in an increasingly digital sphere.

[1] Democracy-Affirming Technologies: Aligning technology with public interest and social good, (2023), Global Governance.

[2] Sibthorpe, C, (2025, July 9), Opinion: Urgent action is needed to close the mobile gender gap, Devex.

[3] Progress closing the mobile internet gender gap stalls in LMICs: GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2025, (2025, May 14). GSMA.

The approach integrates three elements:

- **Desk Research:** A wide-ranging review of published studies, policy reports, and datasets related to digital access, mobile internet usage, gender gaps, and women's political participation. Sources include global indices, regional surveys, and national-level data to provide a comparative perspective across South Asia.
- **Illustrative Case Examples:** Documentation of initiatives and practices where digital technologies have either expanded or constrained women's political engagement. These include examples of women leaders leveraging digital platforms for constituency-building, governance, and advocacy, as well as programs aimed at enhancing women's digital capacity.
- **Synthesis of Quantitative Evidence:** Use of available statistics on digital access, internet use, and online harassment to highlight regional patterns and disparities. These figures are drawn from secondary sources (such as GSMA, IPU, and Transparency International) and are analyzed to underscore intersections with gender, geography, age, caste, and class.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the current patterns of digital engagement and the prevalence of online harms experienced by women in South Asian politics, and how do these factors shape their participation and influence in politics?
2. What opportunities and challenges do technology-driven interventions present for enhancing women's political leadership and participation in South Asia, considering existing digital divides and gender-based online violence?

This methodology allows the brief to identify common regional trends while also recognizing country-level variation. The focus is on synthesizing available knowledge to generate insights and actionable recommendations, rather than producing new primary data.

Who Gets to be Online?

Understanding women's digital access in South Asia is essential to assessing their political participation, as patterns of connectivity both enable and constrain opportunities for leadership.

Patriarchal Norms:



- Offline inequalities rooted in entrenched patriarchal structures directly shape women's experience with digital technologies in South Asia.⁴ In many households, sons are prioritized over daughters, and women's use of technology may be seen as inappropriate or unnecessary.
- In Bangladesh, for example, LIRNEasia's surveys show that women are far more likely than men to report "not knowing what the internet is" as a reason for not going online, a reflection of both limited exposure and persistent gendered expectations.⁵



Access and Affordability:

- South Asia has the largest mobile internet gender gap in the world, with women 41% less likely than men to use mobile internet, compared to 16% across all low and middle-income countries.⁶
- The divide is especially pronounced in India (41%) and Bangladesh (48%), while in Pakistan it narrowed slightly from 43% to 39% between 2020 and 2021.⁷
- Device ownership underpins these patterns: across the region, women are 26% less likely than men to own a mobile phone. In India, only 22% of women have exclusive access to a device, compared to 57% of men. Where devices are shared, women have less autonomy and time to use them, further limiting benefits.
- Encouragingly, GSMA data shows that when women do own smartphones, their internet use is essentially equal to men's⁹ – underscoring the centrality of device access in narrowing the gap.



Demand-Side Barriers:

- Even where affordability and infrastructure improve, many women remain excluded due to perceptions of irrelevance, low digital confidence, and fears about online safety. These demand-side barriers are shaped by a shortage of female role models in digital spaces, limited locally relevant content, and risks of harassment.¹⁰



Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV):

- The same platforms that enable democratic participation are also weaponized to silence, discredit, and exclude women leaders. Unlike traditional forms of violence against women in politics (often episodic and tied to physical spaces), TFGBV is borderless, persistent, and infinitely replicable. Online abuse, deepfakes, doxxing, and gendered disinformation campaigns linger in digital ecosystems long after their first appearance, resurfacing at strategic political moments to undermine credibility and deter women's participation.¹¹

[4] How closing South Asia's digital gender divide could unleash billions, (2024, September 26), World Economic Forum.

[5] Galpaya, H and Zainudeen, A, (2022, October), Gender and Digital Access Gaps and Barriers in Asia: But What About After Access? UN Women Expert Group - CSW67: Innovation and Technological Change.

[6] Jeffrie, N, (2025, April 14), The mobile gender gap in South Asia is now widening, GSMA.

[7] Jeffrie, N, (2025, April 14), The mobile gender gap in South Asia is now widening.

[8] Fernandez, C, Puri, H, and Prakash, S, (2024, December), Digital Technology as an Instrument to Bridge the Gender Gap in Access to Labour Markets, UNDP.

[9] Jeffrie, N, (2025, April 14), The mobile gender gap in South Asia is now widening.

[10] Galpaya, H and Zainudeen, A, (2022, October), Gender and Digital Access Gaps and Barriers in Asia: But What About After Access?

[11] FAQs: Digital abuse, trolling, stalking, and other forms of technology-facilitated violence against women, (2025, February 10), UN Women.

- The consequences of TFGBV extend beyond individual harm, shaping the broader political landscape by discouraging women from participating in governance. A 2023 study by the Turing Institute found that 77% of women avoid discussing politics online due to fear of harassment.¹²
- This issue is compounded by a lack of influence on platform oversight and less scope for regional variations of protections on such abuse, such as in the Maldives where a survey on Online Violence against Women in Politics found that cyber violence and harassment forced one in four female respondents to shut down their social media accounts.¹³
- In South Asia, where digital campaigning has become indispensable, such self-censorship reduces visibility, restricts outreach, and distorts democratic competition.

Other concurrent challenges like surveillance and privacy risks, institutional resource gaps, and intersectional disadvantages tied to caste, religion, and geography also shape women's digital political participation. While not explored in depth here, these dimensions remain critical to understanding the wider landscape of barriers women face in South Asia's digital democracies.

The Promise of the Digital Sphere

Digital technologies are creating new avenues for women's political participation in South Asia. Three areas stand out:

1. Digital Political Communication: The rise of social media has restructured interactions between political actors and citizens. For women especially, social media has evolved into a platform for self-expression.¹⁴ For instance, during the COVID crisis, KK Shailja (Health Minister of the Indian state of Kerala), and Kantika Sejuwal (MP from Nepal) used social media to combat false narratives about the pandemic and spread awareness.¹⁵ In Pakistan, Maryam Nawaz Sharif has used X to present herself as a defender of human rights, and as a voice against unfair political persecution.¹⁶ This framing has allowed Sharif, who is the daughter of Pakistan's former Prime Minister, to forge her own identity within Pakistani politics.

2. Alternative Platforms for Visibility: Digital media allows women to bypass male-dominated traditional outlets and shape their own narratives. Nepal's Baluwatar Satyagraha is a prime example. In 2012, a Nepali policeman raped a local woman. An article about this incident was published in the Kathmandu Post, yet the government's response to the issue was lax. Enraged activists created a petition for the Prime Minister, which they posted to Facebook. For 107 days, protestors met outside the PM's residence to draw attention to their online petition. The protestors used novel tactics like staging flashmobs, and recording and posting them to Youtube to sustain media attention.¹⁷

[12] Jankowicz, N et al., (2024, September), It's Everyone's Problem: Mainstreaming Responses to Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence. Institute of Global Politics.

[13] Mohamed, S, (2025, March 24), "I completely broke down": the cyber violence pushing women out of Maldivian politics, Maldives Independent.

[14] Adhikari, A, (2022, September 3), Redefining Women's Voices and Rights Through Social Media in South Asia, Geopolitics.

[15] Parmar, S and Neelam, A, (2020, July 16), South Asia's women leaders: Disaster management, gender equality and COVID-19, LSE Blogs.

[16] Salam-Salmaoui, R and Salam, S, (2023, December 20), Twitter and politics: a framing analysis of Maryam Nawaz and Imran Khan's social media discourse, Frontiers in Communication.

[17] Kunreuther, L, Sounds of Democracy: Performance, Protest, and Political Subjectivity, Cultural Anthropology.

3. **Technology-Enabled Networks and Solidarity:** Online spaces facilitate new forms of networking and coalition-building, fostering a sense of solidarity. The 2019 Indian General Election, for instance, was dubbed India's first "Whatsapp election" as the platform was increasingly used by political parties to disseminate information and mobilize voters. The 2019 election was also the first time Indian women showed up to vote in larger numbers than men.¹⁸ Conservative gender norms prevalent in large parts of India discourage women's presence in public spaces, diminishing their participation in politics. Whatsapp and its permeation into Indian society has thus proved to be an enabler for women to participate in politics in increasing numbers.¹⁹

Despite these promising opportunities, realizing the full potential of digital technologies for women's political leadership requires targeted and sustained interventions.

Interventions Strengthening Women's Digital Leadership

Across South Asia, governments, civil society, and international organizations have introduced digital initiatives to strengthen women's leadership.

1. Enhancing Digital Skills

Sri Lanka – Empowering Women Through E-Governance^{20 21}



Between 2015 and 2018, Plan International Sri Lanka implemented a project to empower marginalized women and youth to engage directly with local government via a purpose-built e-governance portal and mobile tele-centres. The program trained a cadre of young women in ICT skills to not only benefit themselves but also to act as trainers for other women in the community. In addition to training participants, the project built the capacity of two women's federations and provided training to local government officials on gender mainstreaming strategies. By the end of the project, 50% of the women and youth members of the two federations had begun to effectively realize their entitlements by using e-governance services.

Maldives – Kiyeveni Portal²²



The Kiyeveni portal, launched on March 14, 2021, is a key initiative to promote women's political empowerment in the Maldives. It provides self-paced online training on political systems, governance structures, women's rights, and digital skills, specifically tailored for underserved regions, low-literacy users, and mobile phone interfaces. The primary objective is to offer skill-building opportunities for female candidates, enhancing their capacity to effectively contest elections and prepare for elected roles. While primarily targeting female candidates for Local Council Elections and Women's Development Committees, it also aims to engage women seeking political careers and even interested male candidates.

[18] Kumar, R, (2024, April 5), What Lies Behind India's Rising Female Voter Turnout, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[19] Merelli, A, (2022, July 21), WhatsApp is driving Indian women to vote like never before, qz.

[20] PLAN International, (2018, April), Digital Empowerment of Girls.

[21] Solutions for Youth Employment, Digital Jobs Case Study.

[22] UNDP Maldives, (2021, March 15), Launch of "Kiyeveni" Learning Portal. Press Release.

2. Amplifying Women's Voices

Nepal – Sajha Sawal²³



Sajha Sawal was a weekly 45-minute debate program produced by BBC Media Action, broadcast on TV, over 20 community radio stations, and online. It brought political leaders and government officials into direct dialogue with citizens – particularly marginalized communities – making political engagement accessible at scale. With a reach of 6 million people (one-third of the Nepali population aged 15–65), the program was among the most widely viewed and discussed political debate formats in Nepal. Over 8,000 citizens posed questions directly, and episodes were recorded in each of the 77 districts of Nepal. A digital platform was also provided for Nepali diaspora and migrant workers to watch the show and submit questions.²⁴

Bhutan – Women Digital Champions²⁵



Through UNDP's Digital Capacity Lab, 30 female HR officers from across Bhutan's civil service were trained in digital leadership, AI literacy, inclusion, cybersecurity, and policymaking. These officers became institutional champions for gender-inclusive digital transformation in traditionally male-dominated departments. The program not only built individual confidence but also strengthened systemic capacity to integrate gender perspectives into policy.

3. Forging Digital Connections for Collective Empowerment

Pakistan – Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)



BISP has evolved into Pakistan's flagship social safety programme, significantly aiding the poorest families since its inception in 2008. It uses the National Socio-Economic Registry (NSER) for identifying eligible families and transfers are made using a biometric verification system.²⁶ The BISP program aims to improve the well-being of Pakistan's poorest households by providing unconditional cash transfers directly to women, ensuring the funds are used effectively for consumption and children's investments.²⁷ By linking cash transfers to Pakistan's national database, BISP ensures direct financial control by women, reducing male gatekeeping.

India – Sarpanch Samvaad



Launched by the Quality Council of India (QCI), Sarpanch Samvaad is a mobile app designed to connect gram panchayat (local government) leaders, enabling peer learning, knowledge sharing, and capacity-building in governance.²⁸ By late 2023, around 1,500 sarpanchs (village heads) had joined, with the goal of scaling to 50,000.²⁹ In India, 50% seats in local government are reserved for women; hence, this app is a key enabler for strengthening grassroots networks.

[23] Sajha Sawal Website.

[24] Sajha Sawal: TV and Radio for inclusive debate in Nepal, BBC.

[25] UNDP Bhutan, (2025, June 27). Bhutan trains women civil servants to lead gender-inclusive digital transformation.

[26] Given, M, Majoka, Z, Najam Jamy, G, (2024), The Evolution of Benazir Income Support Programme's Delivery Systems: Leveraging Digital Technology for Adaptive Social Protection in Pakistan, World Bank Group Open Knowledge Repository.

[27] Ambler, K and Brauw, A, (2017, February), The Impacts of Cash Transfers on Women's Empowerment: Learning from Pakistan's BISP Program, World Bank Group Open Knowledge Repository.

[28] Sarpanch Samvaad Website.

[29] QCI takes on board 1,500 'sarpanchs' for quality development of villages, (2023, October 16), Business Standard.

Discussion

The analysis of digital opportunities and existing interventions reveals a dynamic landscape for women's political leadership in South Asia. While digital technologies offer unprecedented avenues for communication, visibility, and network building, their full potential is realized only through targeted and context-specific interventions.

Key insights

1. **Skill-building and capacity development are crucial:** Programs in Sri Lanka and the Maldives demonstrate that digital literacy and technical skills are foundational for women to engage meaningfully in governance and political processes. Upskilling initiatives empower women to navigate digital platforms, participate in decision-making, and mentor peers, creating a multiplier effect within communities.
2. **Amplifying women's voices addresses demand-side barriers:** Women are more likely to engage with digital platforms when they see themselves represented and their concerns validated. Initiatives that highlight female leaders, role models, community voices can increase confidence, encourage participation, and challenge social norms that restrict digital engagement.
3. **Mitigating Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV):** Amplifying voices and creating safe digital spaces can help women take ownership of online platforms, reducing the deterrent effects of harassment and online abuse. Providing training on digital security, content creation, and moderation further strengthens women's resilience in digital spaces.
4. **Building networks reinforces participation:** Online networks and peer-to-peer platforms allow women to share knowledge, resources, and experiences. As more women engage online, they encourage others to join, creating a virtuous cycle of participation, mentorship, and collective empowerment.

Recommendations for Shaping an Inclusive Digital Future

Governments and Policymakers



- Invest in women-focused digital skills programs that go beyond social media to include civic apps and e-governance platforms.
- Close access gaps by subsidizing entry-level smartphones, reducing data costs, and ensuring digital infrastructure reaches rural and underserved communities.

Civil Society and NGOs



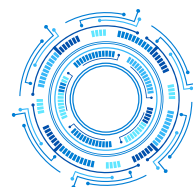
- Support safe digital participation by building community moderation mechanisms, mentorship networks, and awareness campaigns around online safety.
- Build peer networks that allow women leaders to share strategies, strengthen solidarity, and inspire wider participation.

Political Parties



- Highlight women's digital leadership in campaigns and governance to create role models and normalize women's online presence.
- Mentor women candidates in the use of digital tools for campaigning, outreach, and governance.

Tech Companies and Platforms



- Strengthen safeguards against online harassment through better moderation, transparent reporting systems, and context-sensitive protections in South Asia.
- Design inclusive platforms by ensuring interfaces are available in local languages, accessible to low-literacy users, and tailored for mobile-first contexts.

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