

## Chapter 9

# The Gender Divide: Attitudinal Issues Inhibiting Access

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### ABSTRACT

*Technophobia, computer illiteracy, poverty, lack of necessity to counter the downward arch of the learning curve, and fear of sexual predators online are among the more popularly cited reasons for explaining the gender divide. It might be useful to elaborate on the concept of “access” in relation to the Gender Divide. Barriers to access could be physical such as spatial difficulty in gaining physical proximity to a computer, or internet connectivity, mental or related to ability to understand or utilise computer technology or computer usage, or attitudinal. The attitudinal aspect of a woman impeding herself from using the internet is possibly worthy of analysis.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Internet being readily accessible and affordable has in no way bridged the Digital Divide in a studied part of Southern India. Marginalization in the utilization of this resource occurs with women spread over different income levels, age groups and literacy levels: not only by the surrounding society, but, by the women themselves. An Ethnographic Study was conducted in a middle-class

locality in Chennai, South India in the year 2006 to appreciate the attitude of the women towards it. Their apprehensions, fears and prejudices against the Internet abound as they determinedly avoid the one resource which could alter their lives drastically. The commonly propounded belief is that the Internet is not for them. Computer-anxiety is one of the reasons along with a skewing in the way the Internet has been advertised alongside certain societal norms explains why she will not touch it. The woman, the homemaker, the child, the girl, or the lower middle class woman is enamoured by the

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sight of the computer and on hearing all the feats it can perform: connect people across the world, expose data from the stock market, and provide an outflow on information with a singular click of the apparatus entwined in this miracle box.

On dealing with the lower middle class woman and her halting, yet sporadic relationship with the Internet, some of the seminal questions left open are as follows:

- Whether the importance and range of the Internet is understood by her.
- If the might of the Net intimidates her leaving apart what she has been told about cyber porn, hacking, and other cyber crimes.
- Why the Net has not been as well utilized by that class of societies keeping in mind the time and computer literate members who inevitably surround them.
- Whether they feel 'left behind' or insecure on not knowing how to work the miracle machine.
- Other ways how empowering her with the usage of the Internet could be lucrative for her family.

### **ROLE- DEFINITION AS A SOCIOLOGICAL SOLUTION TO THE GENDER DIVIDE**

*'The most critical site of a woman's oppression is the family' - Seecombe (Parvin, 2005)*

Role-definition underlies the reasons why women do not make ample use of technology and restricts their interests in such a way that they do not seek to fulfil their individual needs and their own growth. Women's existence is defined as a source of support for their families and the well-being of the family unit and they rarely attempt self-actualisation. Housewives do not seem to allow themselves to learn anything which will not benefit the family overall. The family roles

of women are constantly defined by culture, the media and society. When the role of a woman is portrayed differently in the mass media and by societal norms greater self esteem could result, leading to a higher motivation among women to use the computer and the Internet for their own development and even pleasure. Generally, women are not encouraged to fulfil their individual needs and pursue growth even in educated families. Subordination need not always be explicit and is often self-imposed. A woman at work outside her home will use the computer outside her home and the Internet at the workplace as part of her job, motivated by the need to perform better, but will rarely use them for herself or in her own interest. In the case of lower class women, the additional disadvantage is not only attitudinal but economic.

The Indian society is described as a gendered society where the education of the women is a low priority (Thakkar, 2003), in this situation the surprise she conveyed through her tone of voice and reply at my irrelevant question reaffirmed it; they commonly perceive their literacy levels do not suffice or imply it is not necessary. Women are regarded as supplementary earners (Parvin, 2005) and not regarded as equivalent to the male member. The division of labor in families is unequal and women are preoccupied with their families. The concept of 'woman' and its illustrations have not only influenced Indian minds, but also enslaved Indian women (Kelkar, 1995). Pure poverty hampers buying a computer system and acquiring the related know-how. Worldwide, little research has been conducted on computer use by homemakers (Maitlin 2004:17). Internet could be utilised by all women for self-development, 'empowering themselves by pulling themselves up by the bootstraps' (Karl 1995:108). Intrigue as to why the Internet revolution had not changed the quality of women's lives in Kalaingar Karunanidhi Nagar (K.K. Nagar), a small area in South India, Chennai drove me to investigate (the results of which are available in a research note published by the Indian Journal of Gender Studies).

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