# A gender digital divide? Women learning English through ICTs in Bangladesh

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**ABSTRACT**

In Bangladesh, the BBC Janala project is using multimedia to give adults opportunities to learn English for economic purposes. English lessons are available on mobile phones, the web, a newspaper and a TV show. Despite the large numbers of people accessing the BBC Janala media products, there is a gendered digital divide, with much fewer women accessing the web and mobile lessons in particular. In this paper, I look at case studies of three adult women learning English through the BBC Janala mobile, web and TV lessons, the barriers faced and the perceived English learnt. Findings indicate that gender inequalities in Bangladesh mean that although the women have high barriers to participation, learning English through ICTs helps to break down some of these gendered barriers.

However, the different ICTs also carry different perceptions of educational value. Despite the web lessons having the highest gendered barriers to participation, they were perceived to carry the most educational value. Learning English through mobile opened up access to the web lessons, giving the women more choices in their learning. This means that although mobile learning may not be seen as a valid form of learning by the respondents, it can however create access to methods of learning that are perceived as more valid.

The research also found that social norms severely restrict the women's choices of the ICT they use and there is a real possibility of a future gendered English and ICT skill imbalance in Bangladesh. As a response to some of the issues identified in this research, the British Council in Bangladesh is piloting an English and ICT project for girls, in partnership with BRAC Bangladesh, to try and address this gender digital divide.

**Author Keywords**

women, ICTs, mobile, gender, digital divide, Bangladesh, development, education, English language learning

## ICTS AND DIGITAL BANGLADESH

A widely accepted definition of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is the one given by UNDP, who define them as 'information handling tools... goods, applications and services that are used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information' (UNDP, 2003, cited in Dighe and Reddi, 2006, p. 20). Commentators often draw a distinction between non-electronic ICTs, such as radio and television, and digital ICTs, such as computers, mobile phones and the Internet (Gurumurthy, 2006; Dighe and Reddi, 2006).

In 2008, the Bangladeshi government launched the Digital Bangladesh initiative. Its aim was to significantly expand ICT usage across the whole of Bangladesh by 2020, working through different partnerships with organisations such as the World Bank and the British Council. This initiative rests on the premise that ICTs can have a positive impact on poverty reduction and gender inequality, through creating access to education for women (BORN, 2009; GoB, 2011). One of its aims was to use these ICTs to build English skills (BORN, 2009). This emphasis on skills and education lays testament to the crucial role in development that education plays. According to the Human Capital Theory, a prevalent standpoint in policy circles, education is an investment that yields economic benefits, creating an educated population, resulting in higher lifetime earnings, economic growth and social returns (Woodhall, 1987). These social returns include reduced fertility and mortality rates, and improved life expectancy (Schurmann, 2009). Clearly, education plays a key role in poverty reduction (UIL, 2009).

Going on this argument, investing in English language skills as a form of education allows people to improve their employment prospects and yield economic and social benefits, both at an individual and macro level. An example of investing in English language skills is the DFID-funded English in Action (EiA) project, involving a consortium of partners working closely with the Government of Bangladesh. EiA uses ICTs to equip millions of Bangladeshis with English language skills that will 'enable [them] to participate more effectively in economic and social activities' (BBCMA, 2011, p.2) by improving access to the world economy. However, levels of English proficiency are low in Bangladesh, though—in 2009, a study concluded that the vast majority of the population had very low spoken English competency due to the lack of opportunity to practice the language (EiA, 2009a).

**BBC Janala**

One strand of the EiA project, BBC Janala, run by BBC Media Action (BBCMA), targets adults learning English through ICTs. Aims include changing people's perceptions of learning English, improving their attitudes towards learning English and increasing their confidence, as well as reducing barriers to English learning, such as lack of access and high cost. The 2009 baseline survey revealed that the media technology eventually used by BBC Janala was already diffused among the adult population. In 2008, over half the adult population had access to a mobile phone (BBCMA, 2009), with high rural rates of access (EiA, 2009b). The number of mobile phone subscriptions has since increased by over 40 per cent, reaching 72 million in March 2011 (BTRC, 2011). The BBC Janala mobile lessons provide voice-only lessons for even simple handsets, allowing users to listen to a lesson by dialling a short code. Users of the mobile service reached 4.8 million in October 2011 (BBCMA, 2011).

Figures for computer and Internet use in Bangladesh are still extremely low—only 2.8 per cent of the adult population used the Internet in 2009 (Nielsen, 2009). However, this is rapidly changing. The number of Internet users increased five-fold from 2000 to 2007 (EiA, 2009b) and doubled again from 2008 to 2009 (BBCMA, 2009), and it is believed that this trend will continue. While personal computer ownership remains low—2.3 per cent in 2008 (World Bank, 2010)—there are many cyber cafés around the country and over 80 Internet service providers (ISPABD, 2011). The BBC Janala web lessons are extremely technologically simple, with light pages designed for low bandwidth, and do not require advanced computer literacy skills.

Television is the most widely used medium across all social classes. In 2008, a quarter of all households owned a television (EiA, 2009b), with 70 per cent of the population watching television regularly (BBCMA, 2009). From October 2010 to April 2011, two English language learning shows – *Bishaash* and *BBC Janala Mojay Mojay Shekha* – went on air on BTV, the state broadcaster, three times a week. *Bishaash* is a drama, mostly in Bangla with some English content. *Mojay Mojay Shekha* – which means 'learning with fun' in Bangla – is a game show that teaches English through quizzes, comedy sketches and competitive team games. In March 2011, the adult viewing figures for the two shows stood at 26 million (BBCMA, 2011), a quarter of the total adult population in Bangladesh.

This particular study focused on the BBC Janala lessons on mobile, web (through a PC) and television. All the lessons contain similar educational content, and the web and television lessons are free. The mobile lessons cost $0.02 for a three-minute lesson - a heavily subsidised rate achieved through partnership with six major mobile operators. All the lessons use Bangla as the medium of instruction, and the materials are developed for a Bangladeshi social context.

BBC Janala's primary target group is adults aged 15 to 45. Usage of BBC Janala products within this population is marked by large gender differences. In the baseline survey, the majority of male respondents cited economic benefits as the primary reason for learning English, while female respondents tended to cite social benefits (BBCMA, 2009). There is also a large gender difference between usage of particular ICTs, particularly for mobile and web users, a pattern that is also reflected in the ICT use of the general population, as table 1 shows (BBCMA, 2011).

| | **Television** | | **Mobile** | | **Web** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | BBC Janala | General population | BBC Janala | General population | BBC Janala | General population |
| **Male** | 55% | 57% | 88% | 67% | 84% | 81% |
| **Female** | 45% | 43% | 12% | 33% | 16% | 19% |

Table 1: The breakdown of ICT usage by gender, for both BBC Janala media products and across the general population.

**THE STUDY**

This particular study formed part of the author's MA dissertation at the Institute of Education, University of London. The study explored the potential reasons for the large gender divide, and what this could potentially mean for the Digital Bangladesh initiative and its aim of using ICTs to improve English skills. The study used two methods of enquiry. One involved an intensive literature review of primary and secondary data across the region, to look for potential reasons for this gendered digital divide. The other method of enquiry involved individual, in-depth interviews with three different women, using purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998).

The BBCMA Research and Learning team has a cohort panel of 120 panelists, tracked since 2009, from the target population and recruited from the baseline survey. The three respondents were selected from the cohort panel for their different BBC Janala media product usage and their gender. Thus, Respondent M is a primarily mobile user, Respondent W a primarily web user, and Respondent T a primarily television user. As there is a lot of cross-usage across media

platforms, respondent selection was based on the ICT they used *most frequently*. For example, Respondent W also occasionally uses the mobile and television services. This cross-usage was unavoidable for mobile and web, due to the low numbers of women accessing these particular services. The low numbers meant that it was not possible to control for other factors such as education level and socioeconomic class in this sample of three women.

**The respondents**

*The web user*
Respondent W is a 22-year old Masters student living in an urban area. She is unmarried and lives with her parents and younger brother. W has been using the Internet for eighteen months and taught herself how to use it. In 2010, her father bought a home computer with Internet access for her brother's studies, which enabled W to teach herself Internet skills.

W aspires to study for a PhD abroad and her learning English, Internet use, and aspirations are intertwined. She wants to learn English to facilitate her studies abroad, but also feels that she needs to learn English to use the Internet to research PhD funding because of the predominance of English websites.

*The mobile user*

M is a 41-year old government employee in a semi-urban area. She is married with two young children. Her husband does not work, and she is the family's financial provider. M wants to learn how to use the Internet and to start her own business, which is linked to her reasons for learning English. For her, learning English will enable her to use the Internet to get business information from English websites. In addition, M wants to earn status and respect from others through English: to M, being an educated mother who can speak English earns her children prestige in a society where higher levels of education equate to higher status (Sperandio, 2011).

M owns her own mobile phone and pays her own bills. She has never used a computer or the Internet, and her office has only one computer, which she has never used. She has been a regular user of the mobile lessons since the service began, and it is her only method of learning English.

*The television user*
T is a 32-year old housewife and is married with three young daughters. She has less than ten years of education and no formal qualifications, having married young. Because her in-laws saw no reason for a married woman to be educated, she left school against her personal wishes.

T rarely leaves the family home and the domestic responsibilities fall on her. She values teaching her children and giving them educational opportunities, and motivation for learning English is linked to this. She feels that if she can learn English, she can help her daughters with their studies.

Because of time constraints and domestic responsibilities, T does not learn English formally. The family has only the state broadcast channel, and T watches *Bishaash* and *Mojay Mojay Shekha* with her children every week. She has a mobile phone, but her husband pays the bills and she does not want to use her phone credit to call the mobile lessons. She has never used a computer or the Internet, and does not feel able to go to a cyber café because of her domestic responsibilities and prevailing social norms, which are explained in more detail later on.

**Methodology**
The interviews took place in Khulna, Magura and Dhaka in the respondents' homes. The interviews were conducted in Bangla, through a female interpreter who had interviewed the respondents in the past for the BBCMA and recorded. Later, a different interpreter transcribed the recordings into English. The study also drew upon primary qualitative data recorded by the BBCMA Research and Learning team since 2009, including questionnaires, structured and semi-structured interviews, and respondents' background data. The main question being asked was: how can learning English through ICTs help the women achieve their life ambitions? The cohort panel interviews revealed the women's reasons for learning English - the mobile user wanted to learn English so that she could use the Internet, the web user wanted to learn English so that she could apply for a PhD abroad, and the television user wanted to learn English to teach her children - but how far did they feel that their use of ICTs had helped them to learn the English for this? Secondly, what barriers did these women face? Why did the mobile user use the mobile service and not the web? Was it a question of choice or was it a lack of choice? What barriers do these women face in using ICTs to learn English?

**Barriers to participation**
From the literature review and from the in-depth interviews with the three women, it emerged that the main barrier to participation for women was access to ICTs. Three main related issues underpinned this issue of access: control, social norms and language.

Firstly, there is an issue of control. Patriarchal norms and constraints over mobility mean that in Bangladesh many women are restricted to the domestic sphere and aren't able to visit a cyber cafe to use the Internet unchaperoned. Public ICT facilities, such as cyber cafés, are often men-only places, where women are either not permitted inside or feel uncomfortable frequenting (DAW, 2002). In addition, due to domestic responsibilities, women often have time constraints and cannot visit public facilities during daylight, while public mobility at night is restricted for many women, often due to male relatives' fears of sexual harassment (Hafkin, 2002), something that is particularly likely in a predominantly Muslim country like Bangladesh.

As well as control over mobility, control over finances and decision-making also tend to belong to male relatives (Raynor, 2008), who often pay phone and Internet bills, and are often the primary users of shared mobile phones and computers (GSMA, 2010). Therefore, women frequently have less autonomy with regards to ICTs and related expenses. In addition, men are often gatekeepers of technology, and control women's use of mobile phones and computers, or television channels.

This is related to the idea of social norms. Bangladesh is traditionally a patriarchal society based around a family unit that maintains 'rigid social understandings about… expected norms for male and female behaviour' (Sperandio, 2011, p.124). Gender discrimination is 'deeply entrenched' (Chisamya et al, 2010, p.4), with a woman's role traditionally being that of wife and mother (Islam and Sultana, 2006) and women often confined to the private sphere (BEPS, 2002). Generally speaking, it is the man, as head of the household, who has control over most areas of a woman's life, including mobility, decision-making and allocation of education and health resources.

A cultural preference for sons (UNESCO, 2003) means that women are often seen as burdens, with many families perceiving female education as a wasted investment, as a woman usually leaves the family home upon marriage (Raynor, 2008, p.8). Therefore, many adult women don't have a high level of education and don't have the confidence to learn. For those women who did finish school, cultural norms may have prevented them studying traditionally 'male' subjects such as maths or technology (Aikman and Rao, 2010), which can have knock-on effects on confidence in using ICTs.

Related to this, the BBCMA baseline survey showed that women tend to use less English in their day-to-day lives than men (EiA, 2009b), and are more likely to have lower levels of English; something compounded by their lower levels of education. However, language is a key cause of marginalisation (Hafkin, 2002; UNESCO, 2010). Most websites are in English and require a minimum level of English proficiency, which is a barrier for many Bangladeshi women. However, currently eighty per cent of the software and content being developed for the Digital Bangladesh initiative is in English (Chowdhury, 2011). How can women use ICTs to develop English skills if the ICTs are in a language that is inaccessible to them?

**KEY FINDINGS**

The findings from the study showed that learning English through these ICTs helped break down some of these barriers. Firstly, it gave the women access, bringing the lessons and the learning into the domestic sphere, allowing them to juggle domestic responsibilities with learning. It also made the women feel that they would be able to access and use the Internet. Learning English through television or mobile opened up access to the Internet by helping the women overcome the language barrier and at the same time increase their confidence in their own English ability and their own ability to use ICTs. As the mobile user put it, if she was able to learn English by herself through mobile, then it followed that she should be able to learn how to use the Internet, by herself. In her mind, she had learnt enough English to be able to do that.

One of the biggest barriers to language learning in Bangladesh is confidence, as the baseline survey showed. For these three women, learning English through these ICTs helped reduce this barrier of confidence: confidence in their ability to learn English and confidence in their ability to use other ICTs to learn English. For example, the television and mobile users felt confident in the English they had already learnt through more accessible forms of ICTs and felt that they would then be confident enough to able to use the less accessible ICT to learn English. This then gave them more options in their learning and allowed them more choice and control over their learning, meaning that to some extent, their learning helped them break down the barrier of control.

When asked about which ICT they felt carried the most educational value, all three women in the study saw learning English through the web lessons (through a PC) as the most valid form of learning, regardless of access, and learning television as the least. However, the rate of access of the web lessons is only a quarter of that of the mobile lessons and significantly less than that of the television lessons, for both sexes (BBCMA, 2011), meaning the lessons with most perceived potential for improving English skills also have the lowest rate of access. This perception was also backed up by other respondents in the midline survey (BBCWST, 2011). This could be accounted for by the fact that in Bangladesh, perceptions of what real learning is means that less conventional methods of learning such as learning through television or learning through fun doesn't fit in with the norm of what education entails, and therefore is perceived as less valid.

What this means is that on the one hand, more accessible ICTs like mobile can help create increased confidence in being able to access the web, but on the other hand the woman who used mobile didn't feel that her learning carried as much weight as it would have had she learned through a computer.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE BRITISH COUNCIL – BRAC PROJECT

What is to be made of this? It seems that there is an imbalance. On the one hand, many people in Bangladesh see learning English as essential, economically speaking, in order to get better jobs and improve livelihoods. It is also becoming more economically essential for women in Bangladesh because social norms are changing and there is more of a diversity in family income. However, on the other hand, there is a gender digital divide which can potentially lead to a greater imbalance of English skills between men and women in the future, leading to potentially increased gender inequality. This is particularly true in a context where Digital Bangladesh aims at gender equality but so much of the content and software developed so far is in English, raising questions about the further marginalisation of women through language.

It is much easier to challenge perceptions of learning and who should be able to learn, and the BBCMA midline survey shows that for a large proportion of women, their perception of English as difficult and their confidence in their English level and their ability to learn English is changing in a positive way (BBCMA, 2011). But there are obvious issues with access and ownership for these women, which will affect the English skills of these women and need to be addressed. The question is now - how can we increase access for women so that learning through ICTs is meaningful for them? Clearly, using low-cost available technologies such as mobile can help create access to less accessible ICTs such as computers – but the danger is that mobile learning is perceived to carry less educational value.

In the Bangladeshi context, it is evident that addressing problem of access requires first and foremost thinking about structural inequalities within society. The first step is for an educational organisation to partner with other organisations in Bangladesh who have already, or have the resources to, set up a community ICT centre for women. These community ICT centres can provide unrestricted access to ICTs in a safe environment, and provide training and guidance for these women.

This is what the British Council in Bangladesh has done. Building on the findings of this study, the British Council has partnered with BRAC, a Bangladeshi NGO, to set up a network of community ICT clubs for adolescent girls, tapping into BRAC's long-established Adolescent Development Programme. The clubs provide an informal space where participants can experience learning English through the British Council's digital English resources, preloaded in an offline format onto small notebook. The clubs are peer-led and meet twice a week, after school. Guided by the peer leaders (who have been initially trained by BRAC and the British Council and have continual mentoring and support), the participants use the notebooks to navigate the resources, which use songs, games and interactive activites, mapped to the Bangla curriculum and supported with Bangla text.

The overarching long-term aim is to help to close the gender digital divide and address issues of skill imbalance, breaking down barriers of access and confidence by providing access to both English and ICTs in an interactive, enjoyable and accessible way in a safe space, allowing the participants to develop ICT skills through learning English (as opposed to developing ICT skills through straight computer training). It is also hoped that it will change perceptions of what educational value learning through less traditional methods, such as through ICTs carry. Although the pilot does not currently use mobile as the main ICT (because of the nature of the piloting materials available), it is hoped that this will be possible in the future, once the proof of concept is established, especially given the prevalence of mobile technology in Bangladesh.

The baseline survey revealed that none of the participants had ever used a PC or the Internet before, including the peer leaders – with some having never even seen a computer. All the participants however wanted to learn English and ICT skills as part of their life ambitions – they had just not had the opoortunity or access. The pilot is currently halfway through, but initial findings indicate that the participants' perceptions of their English level and their ICT skills are increasing rapidly, with some participants asking for more digital resources without the Bangla supporting text – an indication of confidence in their ability. Attitudes towards learning through less traditional methods also appear to be changing.

However, in terms of real empowerment, although it is possible that the ICT clubs alone would have an effect on the agency of the women through ICTs, in reality it can only be effective if conducted in tandem with governmental policies concerned with addressing wider social inequalities that affect Bangladeshi women, which include addressing issues of language marginalisation and ICT access within the Digital Bangladesh initiative.

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