

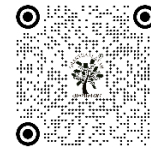
Original Article

DIGITAL MEDIA INCLUSION AND GENDER INEQUALITY AMONG WOMEN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS IN CHENNAI, TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

Women with visual impairments are often viewed as vulnerable rather than empowered individuals. Society frequently perceives women with disabilities as helpless and dependent. Limited access to communication, education, employment opportunities, independent living arrangements, and personal relationships, along with experiences of victimization and abuse, influence how the public perceives them. Among adults aged 18 years and above, women account for a higher proportion of disability, with 19.2% compared to 12% among men, representing nearly one in five women.

Women with disabilities experience systematic marginalization and face attitudinal and environmental barriers that contribute to lower economic and social status. Visual impairment includes all degrees of vision loss, injury, harm, and low vision that limit an individual's ability to perform everyday activities independently.

Digital Media platforms provide opportunities for interaction, access to information, education, healthcare services, and personal expression. These digital platforms help individuals with visual impairments overcome communication barriers and participate more actively in society. Smartphone and networking sites can therefore play a positive role in improving lifestyle, increasing awareness, and fostering empowerment among women with visual impairments. This study focuses on how social media bridges the information gap and contributes to the empowerment of visually impaired women.

Keywords: Visual Impairment, Women with Disabilities, Digital Media, Social Inclusion, social media, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment remains a major global public health and human rights concern. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), at least one billion people worldwide live with a vision impairment that could either have been prevented or has not yet been adequately treated. The burden of visual disability is particularly severe in low- and middle-income countries, where limited access to healthcare, education, and rehabilitation services creates additional challenges for affected individuals.

Persons with disabilities frequently encounter multiple forms of exclusion, including social prejudice, inaccessible environments, and financial hardship. These barriers restrict their opportunities for education, healthcare, employment, and active participation in society. Eliminating such obstacles is not only a matter of social justice but also essential for enabling persons with disabilities to contribute fully to economic and community development.

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Women and girls with disabilities face compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of gender inequality and disability. Across many countries, they remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions. Data from the Asia-Pacific region revealed that, in 2017, the majority of surveyed countries had no women with disabilities serving in their national legislatures. This reflects the persistent exclusion of disabled women from political participation and public life.

Research has consistently shown that women with disabilities are significantly more vulnerable to violence and abuse than women without disabilities. They are more likely to experience physical, emotional, and sexual violence perpetrated by family members, intimate partners, caregivers, or institutional staff. Furthermore, women with disabilities often face higher rates of illiteracy, inadequate access to healthcare, and lower employment opportunities compared with both men with disabilities and women without disabilities.

India has made notable progress in reducing avoidable blindness through improved eye-care services and public health interventions. Early diagnosis and treatment of preventable conditions, particularly cataracts and refractive errors, have contributed substantially to the decline in blindness and visual impairment. Nevertheless, visual disability continues to affect millions of people, highlighting the need for sustained investment in accessible eye-care services and rehabilitation programmes.

Despite legislative and policy advancements, many women and girls with disabilities in India continue to experience discrimination and exclusion. Reports have documented cases of forced institutionalisation, poor living conditions, physical and sexual abuse, and non-consensual medical treatments in some residential and mental health facilities. Human rights organisations have therefore advocated for a transition from institutional care towards community-based support systems that uphold dignity, autonomy, and inclusion.

According to the 2011 Census, India had approximately 26.8 million persons with disabilities, representing 2.21 percent of the total population. This group includes individuals with visual, hearing, speech, locomotor, intellectual, psychosocial, and multiple disabilities. Social stigma and negative attitudes continue to limit their participation in education, employment, and community life.

Digital media has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting the social inclusion of persons with disabilities. Through internet-based platforms, social networking sites, smartphones, and personal computers, individuals can communicate, access information, and participate more actively in society. New media technologies are characterised by digital convergence, interactivity, content sharing, and innovative forms of communication that transcend traditional media boundaries.

One participatory approach that has gained increasing attention is Photo voice. Photo voice is a visual research method that enables participants to use photography to document their experiences, identify community issues, and communicate their perspectives. By placing cameras in the hands of participants, the method encourages self-expression, critical reflection, and community engagement. It also raises public awareness of social issues and promotes advocacy and social change. For persons with disabilities, Photo voice provides an empowering platform through which they can share their lived experiences and contribute to more inclusive policies and practices.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine how women with visual impairments navigate their daily lives and utilize digital media platforms and social networking technologies for empowerment, social inclusion, communication, and personal development.

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the social, cultural, and structural barriers faced by women with visual impairments in their daily lives.
- 2) To analyze how digital media, social media platforms, and online networks facilitate social interaction, access to education, healthcare information, and overall well-being.
- 3) To investigate whether social media serves as a bridge for reducing social isolation and enhancing inclusion, connectivity, and empowerment among women with visual impairments.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies have emphasized the transformative impact of digital technologies on the lives of persons with disabilities. Digital media offers opportunities for communication, education, employment, social participation, and self-expression. For individuals with

visual impairments, assistive technologies integrated into smartphones, computers, and social networking platforms have significantly enhanced access to information and promoted greater independence [World Health Organization \(2022\)](#).

DISABILITY AND GENDER

- 1) The Social Model of Disability argues that disability is not solely the result of an individual's impairment but is largely shaped by societal barriers and environmental constraints. According to this perspective, inaccessible technologies, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary practices are major obstacles to full participation in society. Consequently, digital accessibility plays a critical role in fostering inclusion and ensuring equal opportunities for persons with disabilities [Oliver \(1990\)](#).
- 2) [Goggin and Newell \(2003\)](#) highlighted the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to enhance social inclusion among persons with disabilities. Their research demonstrated that accessible digital technologies can improve communication, increase independence, and facilitate participation in social and economic activities.
- 3) Similarly, [Ellis and Kent \(2011\)](#) examined the relationship between disability and new media technologies and found that social media platforms serve as important spaces for identity formation, self-advocacy, and community building. Through online interactions, persons with disabilities can share experiences, seek support, and challenge societal stereotypes associated with disability.
- 4) [Trevisan \(2017\)](#) observed that digital media has become a significant platform for disability activism and advocacy. Social networking sites enable persons with disabilities to raise awareness about accessibility concerns, advocate for policy reforms, and engage in public discourse. Online communities also provide emotional support and opportunities for collective action.
- 5) Research focusing on women with disabilities suggests that digital technologies can contribute substantially to empowerment. Digital platforms provide access to educational resources, employment opportunities, healthcare information, and social support networks. For women with visual impairments, these technologies can help overcome mobility limitations and social isolation, thereby enhancing self-confidence, autonomy, and independence [United Nations Women \(2018\)](#).
- 6) [Kent \(2015\)](#) argued that social media creates opportunities for marginalized groups to build social capital. Online interactions allow users to maintain existing relationships, establish new social connections, and access information that may not be readily available in offline environments. This is particularly beneficial for women with visual impairments who often encounter barriers to physical mobility and community participation.
- 7) The concept of digital inclusion has gained increasing attention within disability studies. Digital inclusion refers to the ability of individuals to access, use, and benefit from digital technologies regardless of their physical, sensory, or cognitive abilities. Scholars emphasize that accessible technology design is essential for promoting social inclusion and reducing inequalities experienced by persons with disabilities [Dobransky and Hargittai \(2016\)](#).
- 8) Several studies have also explored the psychological benefits of social media use. Online communities can reduce feelings of loneliness, enhance self-esteem, and provide emotional support. Women with visual impairments frequently use social networking platforms to share experiences, seek advice, participate in support groups, and develop meaningful social relationships [Tsatsou \(2021\)](#).
- 9) Despite these advantages, significant challenges remain. Research indicates that inaccessible website designs, the absence of alternative text for images, complex navigation systems, and limited digital literacy continue to restrict the participation of visually impaired users. Furthermore, concerns related to privacy, cyberbullying, misinformation, and online harassment may disproportionately affect women with disabilities [Ellis and Kent \(2011\)](#).
- 10) Overall, the literature suggests that digital media has considerable potential to promote empowerment, social inclusion, and independence among women with visual impairments. However, barriers to accessibility and digital participation persist. Further research is therefore needed to understand how women with visual impairments utilize social media in their everyday lives and how digital platforms can be designed to be more inclusive, accessible, and empowering.
- 11) The intersection of disability and gender creates multiple layers of disadvantage for women and girls with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), women are more likely than men to experience disability due to factors such as longer life expectancy, health disparities, and social determinants of health [WHO \(2023\)](#). Women with disabilities frequently encounter discrimination based on both gender and disability, which limits their access to education, employment, healthcare services, and decision-making processes. Previous studies have demonstrated that women with disabilities are at a greater risk of poverty, violence, abuse, and social exclusion compared to both men with disabilities and women without disabilities [United Nations Women \(2018\)](#).

The United Nations has consistently emphasized the need to address the unique challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities. Their empowerment is considered fundamental to achieving gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development.

Despite policy advancements, barriers such as societal stigma, inaccessible environments, and institutional discrimination continue to restrict their full participation in social, economic, and political life [UN Women \(2018\)](#).

- 12) Visual impairment can significantly affect an individual's ability to access information, communicate effectively, travel independently, and participate in various social and economic activities. Women with visual impairments often experience compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of disability and gender inequality. Research indicates that they face substantial barriers in education, employment, healthcare access, and community participation [Jones et al. \(2019\)](#).
- 13) Studies have further revealed that women with visual impairments frequently encounter social stigma and dependence on family members or caregivers, which may limit their autonomy and self-confidence. However, advancements in assistive technologies and digital communication tools have enhanced opportunities for independence, education, and social engagement among visually impaired women [Luthra and Ghosh \(2015\)](#). These technological developments have contributed to greater accessibility and participation in everyday life.
- 14) Social inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that all individuals, particularly marginalized groups, have equal opportunities to participate in social, economic, cultural, and political activities. For persons with disabilities, social inclusion encompasses active involvement in education, employment, community engagement, and interpersonal relationships.
- 15) [Simplician et al. \(2015\)](#) conceptualized social inclusion as comprising two primary dimensions: interpersonal relationships and community participation. Research suggests that inclusive social environments positively influence psychological well-being, self-esteem, and overall quality of life among persons with disabilities [Goggin \(2017\)](#), [Tsatsou \(2019\)](#). Nevertheless, barriers such as societal prejudice, inaccessible infrastructure, and inadequate support services continue to impede meaningful inclusion and participation.
- 16) Digital media has emerged as a significant tool for enhancing accessibility and participation among persons with disabilities. Technologies such as smartphones, computers, and internet-based platforms facilitate access to information, communication, education, healthcare services, and employment opportunities. Accessibility features including screen readers, voice assistants, text-to-speech software, screen magnification, and speech recognition technologies have substantially improved digital access for individuals with visual impairments [Watanabe et al. \(2008\)](#).

The concept of digital accessibility emphasizes the design and development of technologies that can be effectively used by individuals regardless of their physical, sensory, or cognitive abilities. Scholars argue that accessible digital environments are essential for reducing social inequalities and promoting independent living among persons with disabilities [Dobransky and Hargittai \(2016\)](#). Consequently, digital accessibility has become a critical component of inclusive development and social participation.

- 17) Social media platforms have transformed communication practices by enabling individuals to interact, share information, and build social networks across geographical boundaries. For persons with disabilities, social networking sites provide valuable opportunities for social connection, self-expression, advocacy, and community engagement. Studies have shown that social media can reduce feelings of social isolation and facilitate the maintenance of personal relationships despite physical or environmental barriers [Ellis and Kent \(2011\)](#).
- 18) Women with visual impairments increasingly utilize platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) through assistive technologies. These platforms enable users to access information, participate in discussions, seek emotional support, and engage in educational and professional activities. Online communities also serve as spaces for sharing experiences, fostering peer support, and advocating for disability rights [Trevisan \(2017\)](#).
- 19) Despite these benefits, several challenges remain. Accessibility limitations, the absence of alternative text descriptions for visual content, privacy concerns, cyberbullying, and digital literacy barriers can restrict effective participation among visually impaired users. Therefore, improving the accessibility of social media platforms remains essential for promoting digital inclusion and equitable participation.
- 20) [Subramanian et al. \(2024\)](#) examined patterns of social media use among Indian adults with visual impairments aged 18–35 years. Their study highlights the growing significance of social media platforms in facilitating communication, information access, social interaction, and participation among visually impaired individuals. Although social media has become an integral part of everyday life globally, the authors observed that people with visual impairments continue to encounter barriers related to digital accessibility, including difficulties in interpreting visual content and limited availability of accessible technologies and internet-enabled devices.

The study emphasizes that assistive technologies such as screen readers and voice-based navigation systems have enhanced accessibility and enabled greater participation in digital environments. However, accessibility challenges remain, particularly when social media platforms rely heavily on visual content without providing alternative text descriptions or inclusive design features. The findings suggest that while social media can contribute to social inclusion and empowerment, the benefits are often constrained by technological and infrastructural barriers.

Furthermore, the research demonstrates that social media serves as an important tool for maintaining social relationships, accessing information, and fostering a sense of belonging among individuals with visual impairments. The study underscores the need for developers, policymakers, and platform providers to adopt universal design principles and improve accessibility standards to ensure equitable participation in digital spaces. These findings are particularly relevant to the present study, which seeks to explore how women with visual impairments utilize digital media and social networking platforms for empowerment, social participation, and enhancing their quality of life.

- 21) [Srinivasan et al. \(2025\)](#) investigated the quality of life of visually impaired women residing in the rural districts of Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu. Using the WHOQOL-BREF instrument, the study assessed the physical, psychological, social, and environmental dimensions of quality of life among 333 visually impaired women aged 18–44 years. The findings revealed that quality of life is shaped not only by visual impairment itself but also by broader socio-economic and demographic factors. Variables such as education, occupation, income, housing conditions, religion, caste community, and family structure were found to significantly influence social relationships and environmental well-being.

The study highlighted that women with higher educational attainment and stable employment reported better social participation and environmental satisfaction. The researchers also observed that women from socially disadvantaged communities experienced lower levels of social inclusion and environmental support, suggesting that disability intersects with existing social inequalities to create multiple forms of disadvantage.

A notable contribution of the study is its focus on rural women with visual impairments, a population often underrepresented in disability research. This study provides valuable insights for the present research by emphasizing the importance of addressing both disability-related barriers and broader structural inequalities affecting women with visual impairments in India.

- 22) Access to social media has become increasingly important for social participation, communication, and information sharing. However, unequal access to digital technologies and social networking platforms can contribute to the exclusion of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities. Limited access to social networks often results in social isolation, discrimination, and the widening of digital inequalities. Although social media platforms have expanded rapidly across the globe, not all individuals have equal opportunities to benefit from their potential advantages.

Photo voice has emerged as an influential participatory research methodology for understanding the lived experiences of marginalized populations. Originally developed by [Wang and Burris \(1997\)](#), the method enables participants to capture photographs that represent their experiences, perspectives, and social realities. Through the selection and discussion of photographs, participants are encouraged to reflect on their emotions, challenges, and everyday experiences. This process provides researchers with deeper insights into participants' lives while simultaneously giving participants a voice in the research process.

- 23) Researchers such as Budig and Dican have highlighted the value of Photovoice as a participatory approach that promotes critical reflection and encourages participants to communicate issues that may otherwise remain unheard. The method has been particularly effective in exploring experiences related to health, disability, and social exclusion.
- 24) Studies published by Elsevier and other scholars have recognized Photovoice as a platform for empowerment among women with disabilities. By creating opportunities for participants to document and share their experiences visually, Photovoice enables individuals to exercise agency, express their perspectives, and challenge dominant narratives surrounding disability. The photographs and accompanying narratives generated through the process contribute to knowledge creation and can inform policy development, disability services, healthcare practices, and community interventions.
- 25) [Liebenberg \(2018\)](#) argues that empowerment within Photovoice research is most effective when the process is carefully designed to promote meaningful participation and sustained community engagement. Empowerment is not simply a result of taking photographs; rather, it emerges through opportunities for dialogue, reflection, collective action, and social recognition. Previous studies have documented empowering outcomes among diverse populations, including single mothers [Duffy \(2011\)](#), women living with HIV [Teti et al. \(2013\)](#), and individuals with intellectual disabilities [Wass and Safari \(2020\)](#).

The growing body of Photovoice research demonstrates its potential to enhance self-confidence, social participation, and advocacy among marginalized groups. In the context of women with disabilities, the methodology provides a valuable platform for expressing lived experiences, identifying barriers, and fostering social change. As a participatory and empowering approach, Photovoice offers important opportunities for understanding how women with visual impairments navigate social, cultural, and digital environments while promoting their voices within research and community settings.

RESEARCH GAP

Although a growing body of literature has examined disability, social inclusion, and digital media use, limited research has specifically focused on how women with visual impairments utilize social media for empowerment and social participation. Existing

studies often address disability broadly or concentrate on technological accessibility without adequately exploring the lived experiences of visually impaired women.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research investigating how digital media contributes to reducing social isolation, enhancing access to information, strengthening support networks, and improving the overall quality of life of women with visual impairments, particularly within the Indian context. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of digital media and social networking platforms in fostering empowerment, independence, and social inclusion among women with visual impairments

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the use of social media and digital applications by young women with visual impairments in their everyday lives. The study aimed to understand how these women access and use social media platforms and how digital technologies contribute to their communication, social interaction, information access, and empowerment.

A focus group discussion (FGD) was used as the primary method of data collection. Focus groups are an effective qualitative research technique that enables researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and opinions through group interaction. According to [Tonkiss \(2004\)](#), focus group discussions provide valuable insights into how individuals construct meanings and express their views within a social context.

Purposive sampling was adopted to select participants who met the objectives of the study. The focus group discussion was conducted at the Karna Vidya Foundation, located in Guindy Industrial Estate, Chennai. The foundation offers vocational and computer-based training programmes for persons with visual impairments.

A total of 11 visually impaired young women participated in the study. The participants came from different districts of Tamil Nadu and represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All participants were either pursuing or had completed undergraduate or postgraduate education. At the time of the study, they were receiving training in computer skills, including keyboard orientation, data entry operations, and the use of various digital applications.

Prior to the discussion, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Consent forms were shared electronically through email in an accessible format. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality of information, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

The focus group discussion was conducted in a training room at the foundation and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. The researcher acted as the moderator and facilitated the discussion using a semi-structured interview guide. Questions focused on participants' use of smartphones, social media platforms, digital applications, accessibility features, online communication practices, and the role of digital media in their daily lives.

Each participant was given equal opportunity to share her experiences and viewpoints. With the participants' permission, the discussion was audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation of the data. The recordings were subsequently transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, experiences, and perspectives related to social media use, accessibility, social inclusion, and empowerment among women with visual impairments.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this study are derived from a focus group discussion conducted with eight visually impaired young women aged between 19 and 24 years. Most participants had completed or were pursuing postgraduate education and were undergoing vocational and computer-based training to enhance their employability. At the time of the study, none of the participants were employed, and all were residing with their families.

PERCEIVED BARRIERS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The findings indicate that participants did not perceive physical barriers as a major obstacle to accessing education, healthcare, or daily activities. Most respondents expressed confidence in navigating their environments and managing their personal needs. Similarly, attitudinal barriers and workplace-related barriers were not identified as significant concerns by the majority of participants.

However, technological barriers emerged as a notable challenge. Half of the participants reported experiencing difficulties related to accessibility and the use of digital technologies. Social and economic barriers were also highlighted, with several participants acknowledging that financial limitations and societal perceptions continue to affect opportunities available to women with visual impairments.

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT SUPPORT AND WELFARE SCHEMES

A significant proportion of participants reported that they had not benefited from government-sponsored educational assistance, healthcare concessions, or disability-related welfare schemes. This finding suggests a gap between the availability of support programmes and awareness or accessibility among beneficiaries.

Despite limited utilization of government services, participants expressed positive attitudes toward online education and employment opportunities. Many believed that digital platforms could support educational attainment and improve future employment prospects.

EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

The majority of respondents did not report experiencing strong feelings of social exclusion, inferiority, or identity-related discrimination. Participants generally perceived themselves as socially secure and expressed confidence in interacting with others. However, some participants remained uncertain about the extent of discrimination they encounter, indicating that subtle forms of exclusion may still exist.

Participants also emphasized the importance of preventive healthcare measures, early detection of visual impairment, and increased investment in disability-related research and development. They believed that improved policy initiatives could enhance the quality of life of persons with disabilities.

LEISURE ACTIVITIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Social media and digital applications played an important role in the daily lives of participants. Common leisure activities included listening to music, watching entertainment content, maintaining contact with friends and family, and following selected online content. However, active content creation and personal self-presentation on social media were relatively limited. Only a small proportion of participants regularly posted personal updates, photographs, or quotations on social networking platforms.

Most participants spent less than two hours per day on social media, indicating moderate rather than intensive usage. Their engagement with social media was largely functional, focusing on communication, information access, and practical activities rather than self-promotion.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT

Participants identified education, online shopping, digital transactions, online counselling, and online booking services as major benefits of social media and digital applications. While very few participants used digital platforms for entrepreneurial activities or online business, many relied on technology to support everyday tasks and increase their independence.

The ability to communicate, access information, and perform transactions independently contributed significantly to their sense of empowerment. Notably, all participants agreed that social media and digital applications had strengthened their self-confidence and exposed them to new opportunities. The findings suggest that digital technologies have become important tools for enhancing autonomy, social participation, and personal development among visually impaired women.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that digital media and social networking platforms play a significant role in the lives of young women with visual impairments. Smartphones and digital applications function not only as communication tools but also as sources of information, navigation, education, and social connection. Participants reported that technology enables them to perform daily activities more independently and enhances their confidence and sense of empowerment.

The findings further indicate that while traditional barriers such as physical accessibility and social attitudes remain relevant, technological accessibility and economic constraints continue to influence digital participation. Overall, social media serves as an important medium through which visually impaired women can access opportunities, maintain social relationships, and participate more actively in society.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 11 participants from a single training institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, recruiting participants and obtaining informed consent posed challenges due to accessibility considerations and participant availability. Third, all participants possessed access to smartphones and digital technologies, which may not reflect the experiences of visually impaired women who lack access to digital

devices or internet connectivity. Finally, the study focused primarily on women residing in an urban environment, and therefore the findings may differ from the experiences of visually impaired women living in rural or underserved regions.

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