



Centre for Peace and
Development Initiatives

**Women's access to technology
in the time of covid-19:
Setting the Baseline for Government's Action
2020**

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Author's Note

This report represents the culmination of months of research and analysis. I want to express my gratitude to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), which generously provided funding for this study and Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI), who commissioned this study.

The study was made possible thanks to the participation of the 400 women who responded to our survey. Their insights and experiences were invaluable in helping us better understand the challenges and opportunities related to women's access to technology during the pandemic.

We would like to express our gratitude to all the individuals and organizations who supported this study, including the civil society groups who helped us disseminate the survey and raise awareness about the importance of this issue.

We hope this report will contribute to ongoing efforts to address the digital gender gap and promote gender equality in all spheres of life. We recognize that there is still much work to be done in this area, and we remain committed to working towards a future where all individuals have equal access to the digital tools and services critical for success in the 21st century.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of individuals and organizations worldwide working to address the digital gender gap and promote digital inclusion. I hope that this report will contribute to these efforts and help to create a more equitable and inclusive digital future.

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1. Abstract

In today's world, the internet is the swiftest and most cost-effective way of getting information from around the world. Its importance and necessity have increased manifold since 2020 as the world is facing the most severe pandemic. In Pakistan, the mobile phone is the primary way most women access the internet. This study was commissioned to gauge women's access to technology during the COVID-19 crisis and is based on an online survey conducted in Feb-March 2021 in Pakistan. The study was carried out with a convenient sample of 391 female respondents across Pakistan who filled an online survey regarding the quality of internet service in their area, the importance of the internet to get intimate information in the time of COVID-19, and the level of their knowledge about COVID-19 related information. The study has pointed toward the gender digital divide in the country.

The study revealed that only 64% of women have an uninterrupted internet connection. Another 29% have internet access, but it is intermittent. 7% of females do not have direct internet access and have to rely on secondary sources to link with the internet. The respondents are divided into five geographic areas. ICT has the best internet access profile, with 81% of women having uninterrupted internet access. Balochistan has the weakest internet access profile, with only 41% of women having uninterrupted internet access. Regarding satisfaction from the quality of internet service, the maximum satisfaction level is achieved in ICT, where 73% of respondents are satisfied with the quality of the internet service. The top dissatisfaction level is achieved in Balochistan, where 33% of respondents are not happy with the quality of internet service.

Most women have less than ten mobile apps installed on their cellular phones. Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are the apps women spend most of their online time and also rely on these apps to get COVID-related information. The study also revealed that the knowledge of women regarding COVID-19 information is not updated. When asked about the three websites for COVID-19-related health information, only about 25% of the respondent could mention the first website correctly. The correction rate for the second and third websites was poorer.

Similarly, the knowledge about COVID-19 testing labs/hospitals in the districts was not updated. 63% of respondents from ICT could name the first lab correctly. From Balochistan, only 38% of respondents could name the first lab correctly. The respondents' knowledge about the second and third labs was limited.

The study recommends the mobile network extension under corporate social responsibility in remote Balochistan and KP districts. Most of the time, women in less developed districts stay at home; good quality and affordable internet can be their best source of getting updated information regarding COVID-19 and other government initiatives. Many countries have adopted simple solutions employing technology and people's favourite social media apps. Pakistan's government can imitate these solutions, but the provision of reliable and good quality internet across all the areas in Pakistan would be the prerequisite.

2. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light technology's crucial role in our daily lives. From remote work and online education to telehealth and e-commerce, the ability to access and use digital technologies has become more important than ever. However, not all individuals and groups have equal access to technology, particularly for women. In order to address this digital gender gap, CPDI has conducted a study to assess women's access to technology during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This report presents the findings of an online survey conducted with 400 women nationwide. The survey was conducted in 2020 and aimed to set a baseline for women's access to technology during the pandemic. The survey covered various aspects of technology access and use, including social media use, satisfaction with internet services, value for money, and women's knowledge about testing labs in their area.

This report aims to provide insights into women's access to technology during the pandemic and highlight the importance of improving this access. By identifying the main barriers preventing women from accessing technology, we hope to inform policy decisions to address these issues and promote gender equality in the digital age.

The report is structured as follows:

1. Part 1 discusses the methodology used in the study, including information on the survey design and sample characteristics.
2. Part 2 presents the study's main findings, focusing on women's access to technology and their experiences using digital tools during the pandemic.
3. Part 3 provides recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders on improving women's access to technology and promoting digital inclusion.

Overall, this report contributes to the growing body of research on digital gender inequality and highlights the urgent need to ensure that all individuals have equal access to the digital tools and services that have become essential for daily life.

Part 1

3. Methodology

The study is based on an online survey to assess women's access to technology during the COVID-19 crisis. The questionnaire has two parts. Part one of the questionnaire consists of questions related to availability and usage of the internet, activity on different social media platforms, the amount spent on purchasing internet packages, and type of content accessed on the internet etc. These questions were assessed on women's age, geography, education and economic status across the four provinces of Pakistan. Part 2 of the questionnaire is related to a pandemic, the source of this information during the pandemic and its linkages with internet technology.

The survey was prepared in two stages: During the first stage, the survey was developed and tested with colleagues at CPDI to get their feedback on the flow and accuracy of the survey. The feedback was incorporated before sharing the final product with the women online.

The survey link was disseminated through multiple collectors, namely email invitations, weblinks and social media posts. A total of 391 responses were collected across the country: 105 through an email invitation, 243 through a web link and 43 through social media. The

responses were collected using a web-based survey application-Survey, Monkey. The application can analyse the survey results and compare the responses to different questions.

Based on the survey findings, recommendations for the telecom sector, government and civil society are drawn.

Limitations of the Study

The sample for this study is not drawn in any systematic manner. It was an online survey disseminated through multiple channels to get the opinion of women. The survey respondents may not be representative of the population as they are women with internet access. It is assumed that if a woman is taking this survey, she already has internet access, whether continuous or intermittent. This automatically excludes the women who do not have access to the internet or do not own a computer or mobile device. This also explains why only 2% of the survey respondents said they had no mobile phone connection.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the extent to which women have been able to access technology during the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To assess the impact of limited technology access on women's right to information during the pandemic.
3. To identify the main barriers that prevent women from accessing technology, such as cost, availability, and digital skills.
4. To highlight the importance of improving women's access to technology in order to promote gender equality and ensure that women are not left behind in the digital age.
5. To provide a baseline for government action to address the digital gender gap and ensure that women have equal access to technology.

PART 2

5. Setting the Baseline: Results of the Study

Respondents' Profile and Survey Results

The survey respondents comprised 391 women from across the four provinces and ICT. The geographic representation of the respondents is given below:

Geographic area	Responses	
Islamabad Capital Territory	10.13%	39
Balochistan	11.95%	46
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	25.71%	99
Punjab	19.48%	75
Sindh	32.73%	126

Answered	385
Skipped	6

Age of the Respondents

As shown in the table below, 88% of the respondents belong to the first three age groups. The maximum representation is from the age group 25-34 years. 21% of respondents are from 18-24, and 27% are from the age group 35-44.

What is your age?

Answer Choices	Responses	
18 to 24	21.24%	72
25 to 34	40.71%	138
35 to 44	27.14%	92
45 to 54	8.85%	30
55 to 64	1.77%	6
65 to 74	0.29%	1
75 or older	0.00%	0
	Answered	339
	Skipped	52

Level of education

Most of the respondents are educated. 78% of them fall into two groups-Bachelor or Masters. 12% have an M. Phil or PhD degree. Another 7% have an intermediate certificate.

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Below High School	0.58%	2
High School	1.73%	6
College (Intermediate)	7.23%	25
Bachelor	30.64%	106
Master	47.69%	165
M.Phil	11.56%	40
Ph.D.	0.58%	2
Madrassa (Religious) Education	0.00%	0
	Answered	346
	Skipped	45

Current Profession

The largest group of respondents is doing private jobs. 43% of respondents fall in this category. The other major group is the 'students.' The strength of this group in the sample is 15%. 13% of respondents are unemployed, and 4% of respondents lost their job due to COVID -19 crisis.

What is your current profession?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Government Job	8.07%	28
Private Job	43.23%	150
Self Employed	10.37%	36
Unemployed-Looking for Job	13.26%	46
Unemployed-Lost Job due to COVID-19	4.32%	15
Student	14.70%	51
House woman (both married or unmarried)	2.88%	10
Other (please specify)	3.17%	11
	Answered	347
	Skipped	44

Owning a personal Cellular Phone

96% of respondents own a cellular phone. 3% of respondents do not have a personal cellular phone, but a phone is available at home which they can use. 2% of respondents neither have a personal cellular phone nor a cellular phone available at home which they can use. 45 respondents skipped this question.

Do you have a personal mobile phone connection?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I have a personal mobile phone connection	96.24%	333
No, I don't have a personal mobile phone connection but there is a mobile phone at home that I can use	3.18%	11
No, I don't have a personal mobile phone connection nor there is a mobile phone at home that I can use	0.58%	2
	Answered	346
	Skipped	45

Access to Internet Connection

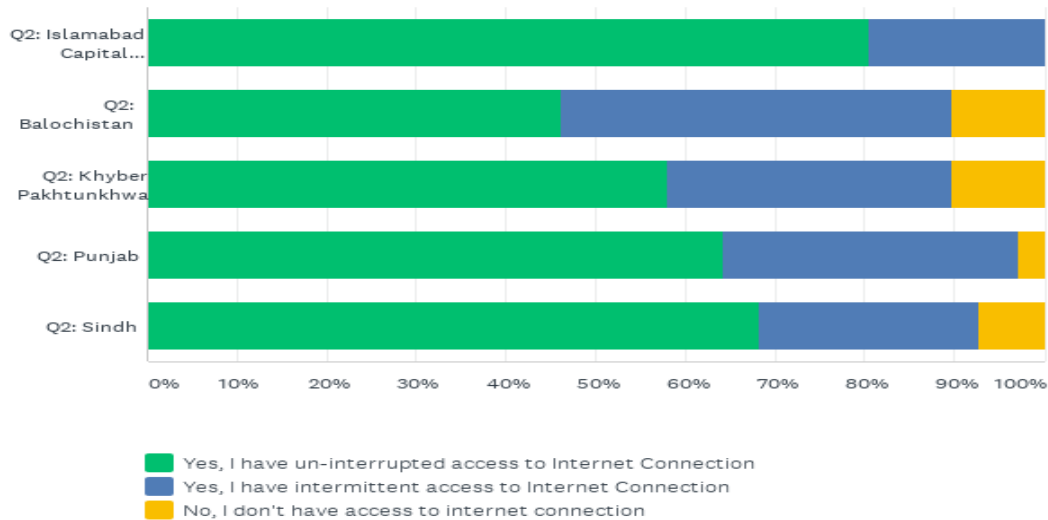
64% of respondents have uninterrupted access to the internet connection. 28% have access to the internet connection, but that access is not round the clock. 7% of respondents said they do not have access to the internet.

Do you have access to an internet connection?

Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes, I have un-interrupted access to Internet Connection	63.98%	222
Yes, I have intermittent access to Internet Connection	29.39%	102
No, I don't have access to internet connection	6.63%	23
	Answered	347
	Skipped	44

ICT has the best internet access, as is shown in the following graph. 81% of respondents from ICT have uninterrupted access to the internet. Another 19% have intermittent access to the internet. The weakest internet access profile is from Balochistan, where only 46% have uninterrupted access to the internet. 10% of respondents from Balochistan do not have internet access. A similar percentage from KP also do not have access to the internet. Only 57% of respondents from KP have uninterrupted access to the internet. Sindh has the second-best internet access profile, where 68% have access to uninterrupted internet, and 25% have intermittent access to the internet.

Q16 Do you have access to an internet connection?



Use of Mobile Apps

Females use mobile phone applications, but their use is not very popular among them. Only 20% of women have more than ten mobile apps installed on their phones. 31% of women have less than five apps installed on their phones. 42% of women are using 5-10 apps on their mobile phones. Given the worldwide trend in using mobile apps for education, information and entertainment, this number is significantly on the lower side. An average smartphone user uses 30 apps per month¹ and only 7% of our respondents have more than 20 apps on their phone.

How many apps have you installed on your mobile phones?

Answer Choices	Responses	
less than 5	31.70%	110
5 to 10 apps	42.07%	146
10 to 20 apps	19.60%	68
More than 20 apps	6.63%	23

Time Spent on Social Media Social Media by Women

Respondents were asked about the average daily time spent per day on nine different mobile apps. Facebook and WhatsApp are the respondents' most preferred social media apps. Only 3% of respondents said they did not use Facebook. More than 99 per cent of respondents use WhatsApp. 30% of respondents use Facebook from 30 to 60 minutes daily. 19% use it from 60-180 minutes, and 30% of respondents use it for more than 180 minutes (3 hours). The use of WhatsApp is even more frequent. 33% of respondents use WhatsApp for more than 180 minutes per day. Another 29% use it for 60-180 minutes, and 22% from 30 to 60minutes. The rest, 16% use it daily for less than 60 minutes.

¹ <https://buildfire.com/app-statistics/> last accessed on 12 May 21.

Which of the social media do you use more frequently?

Daily Time spent

App	Less than 15 minutes	15 minutes to 30 minutes	30 - 60 minutes (1 hr)	1 to 3 hrs	More than 3 hours	I don't use
Facebook	13.31%	23.89%	30.72%	18.77%	9.90%	3.41%
Instagram	27.05%	21.74%	12.08%	7.73%	3.86%	27.54%
Pinterest	18.79%	5.45%	1.21%	0.61%	1.82%	72.12%
Skype	18.89%	8.89%	6.11%	1.67%	0.56%	63.89%
Snapchat	16.48%	6.25%	3.98%	2.84%	2.27%	68.18%
Twitter	20.51%	16.92%	18.46%	5.13%	3.08%	35.90%
Whatapp	3.74%	11.53%	22.12%	29.28%	33.02%	0.31%
Youtube	14.58%	17.50%	25.00%	17.92%	14.58%	10.42%
Zoom	12.31%	12.82%	15.90%	13.85%	4.10%	41.03%

Answered 342
Skipped 49

The data also suggests that the use of Apps like Pinterest, skype, Snapchat and zoom is not very popular among the female respondents. 72% of respondents do not use Pinterest, 64% do not use skype, and 68% do not use Snapchat, which is quite amazing. 41% do not use Zoom. The data in the table can also guide to use of the appropriate social media app to communicate with women and disseminate information.

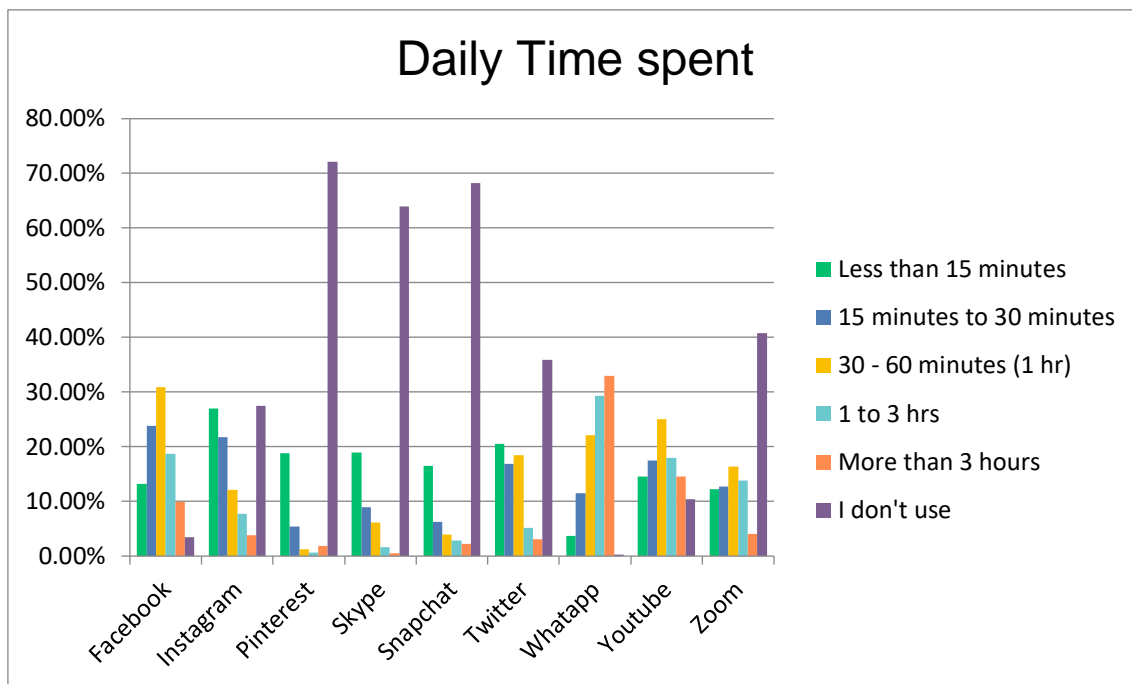
Disaggregating the social media usage data by province provides no further insights. The usage trends of social media apps are almost like that of overall trends.

Primary reason for Using Social Media

	Information (News/ Documentaries)	Entertainment (Movies/ Dramas/ Songs etc)	Infotainment	Education (online classes etc)	Home improvement (kitchen, clothing etc)	Religious purpose	Sports	Connecting with friends	It is related to my economy	I don't use it	Other
Facebook	40%	10%	12%	3%	1%	1%	0%	28%	0%	1%	3%
Instagram	16%	11%	8%	3%	0%	2%	2%	30%	0%	23%	5%
Pinterest	8%	5%	5%	3%	10%	0%	0%	8%	0%	60%	3%
Skype	6%	0%	2%	4%	0%	0%	0%	19%	11%	40%	17%
Snapchat	3%	5%	3%	3%	0%	0%	0%	21%	0%	59%	8%
Twitter	57%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	32%	4%
WhatsApp	20%	0%	1%	4%	1%	0%	0%	61%	7%	0%	5%
YouTube	25%	46%	7%	3%	3%	3%	3%	0%	0%	4%	6%
Zoom	10%	0%	2%	33%	2%	0%	0%	6%	8%	24%	16%

Two social media apps are frequently used by respondents for getting information. For 40% respondents, news and information is the primary reason of using Facebook. 57% respondents told that they used twitter primarily for news and information. WhatsApp and YouTube are also important source of news and information. 20% respondents use whatapp for news and information and 25% use youtube for news and information. Facebook, youtube and whatapp are most favourite social media platforms for the women. Only 1% women said they didn't use Facebook. 4% women don't use youtube. WhatsApp is used by 100% women.

On the other hand, Pinterest, skype and Snapchat are most sparingly used social media apps. 60% of respondents do not use Pinterest, 59% of respondent do not use Snapchat and 40% of respondent do not use skype. 11% of respondent said that skype is related to their economy. 8% said that zoom is related to their economy.



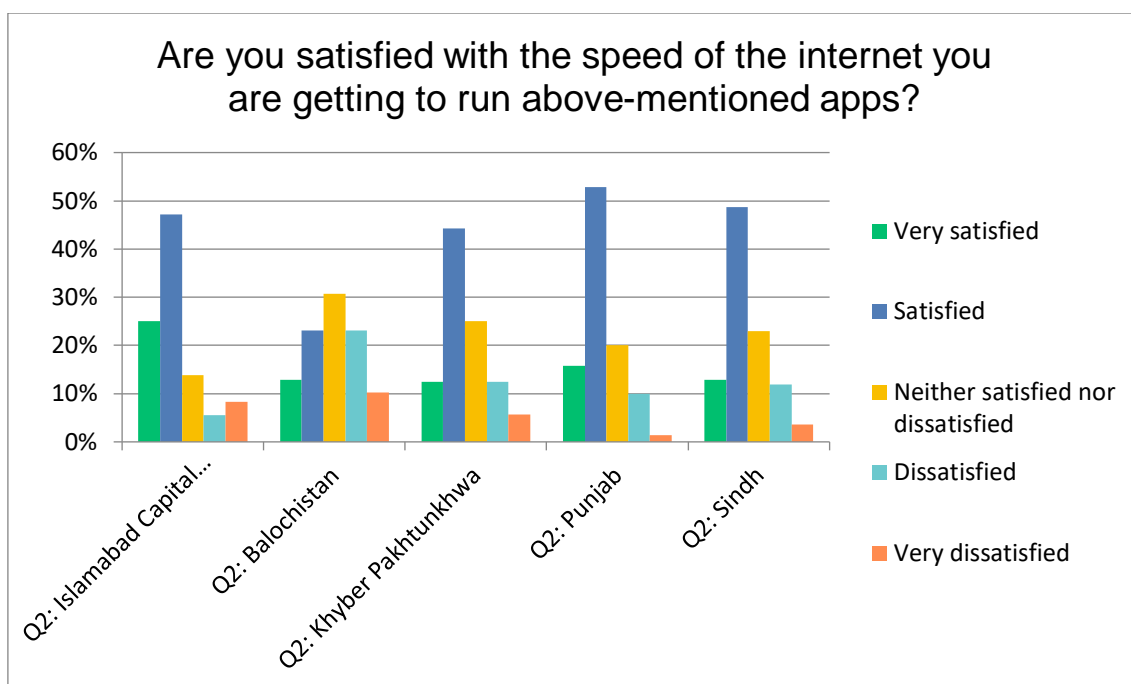
Satisfaction from the Internet Services

Quite a large percentage of respondents are not satisfied with the quality of the internet they are getting. The response to this question is divided into five options: very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied, not dissatisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied

The survey results show that maximum satisfaction level is achieved in ICT. 25% of the ICT respondents are very satisfied with the internet quality; another 47% are satisfied. 14% of the respondents are neutral about the quality of internet services (yellow bars). They are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the quality of the internet. 14% of the respondents are dissatisfied with the internet quality provided in the ICT (last 2 bars). In aggregate, 28% of respondents from Islamabad have shown dissatisfaction with the quality of the internet they are getting (last 3 bars).

The dissatisfaction level is highest in Balochistan, where 33% of respondents are not happy with the service quality (last two columns). Another 31% are neutral about the quality of the service. In Balochistan, only 12 per cent are very satisfied, and 23% are satisfied from the internet service. Together, they make less than 50% (36%) which is alarming and warrants immediate attention of the service providers in the largest province of Pakistan.

69% of respondents in Punjab are happy with the internet they are getting (Col 1 and 2) whereas 12% are not satisfied with the internet quality (Column 4 & 5). Another 20% are neutral. The situation in Sindh is similar where 61% are satisfied with the internet service (column 1&2) and 17% are dissatisfied with the internet quality (column 4&5). 23 % Sind respondents are neutral (Col 3).



Monthly Mobile/Internet Bill

What is your total monthly bill for mobile phone and internet?[Please select one option even if your employer supports the mobile/internet cost]

Geographic Area	less than 300	Rs. 301 to 500	Rs. 501 to 1000	Rs. 1001 to 1500	Rs. 1501 to 2500	Rs. 2501 to 4000	More than 4000
Islamabad Capital Territory	3%	8%	14%	14%	19%	33%	8%
Balochistan	5%	24%	24%	11%	18%	11%	8%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	8%	15%	30%	19%	17%	10%	1%
Punjab	7%	13%	36%	11%	19%	11%	3%
Sindh	6%	18%	27%	28%	15%	5%	1%

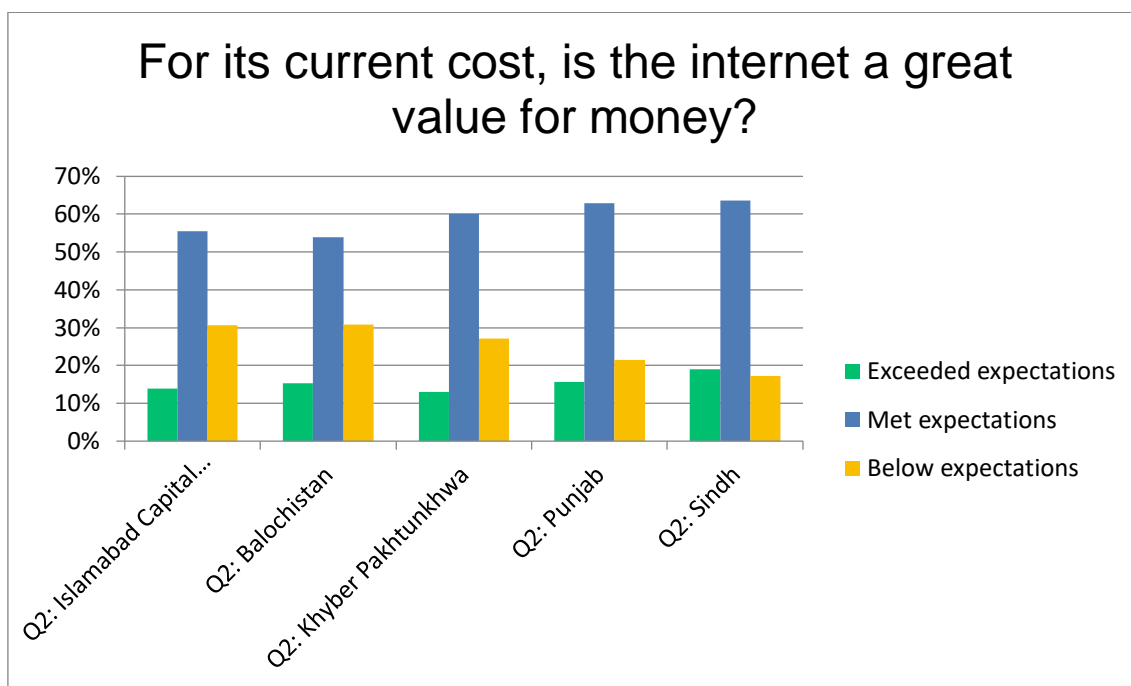
The respondents from ICT are spending more on internet services than other respondents. 33% of ICT respondents are spending PKR 2501-4000 per month on internet services. The percentage of respondents in the provinces spending in this bracket is much less. 4% of Balochistan, 9% of KP, 8% of Punjab and 5% of Sindh respondents are spending PKR 2501-4000 monthly on internet services. 8% ICT respondents are spending more than PKR 4000. Again, maximum percentage of respondents spending in 4000+ category is from ICT. The percentage of respondents from KP, Punjab and Sindh spending more than PKR 4000 on internet monthly is 1,3, and 1 respectively. 8% respondents from Balochistan spends more than PKR 4000 per month.

In provinces, most respondents spend between PKR 501-1000. In Balochistan, 24% are spending between PKR 501 and PKR 10000. The percentage of respondents in this spending bracket (PKR 501-1000) in KP, Punjab and Sindh is 30, 36, and 27 respectively. The next popular spending bracket is PKR 1001-1500. 28% of Sindh respondents fall in this category.

Islamabad has the minimum percentage of respondents spending less than PKR 300. Only 3% of the respondents from ICT spend less than PKR 300 per month.

Value for Money

Only 14% of the ICT respondents feel that the quality of the service ‘exceeded expectations.’ 56% of respondents feel that quality of service ‘met expectations’ whereas 31% think that quality of service is ‘below expectations.’ The trends in provinces can be seen in the graph below. 31% of respondents in Balochistan, 27% in KP, 21% in Punjab and 17% in Sindh feel that mobile service quality is ‘below expectations.’ The highest percentage of the respondents who feel that the quality of service is below expectations is from Islamabad. This may be because people in Islamabad are spending more on their mobile services and expecting the highest standards of service from the service providers.



Knowledge about COVID-19 Cases in Districts

This question was asked to check the current knowledge of respondents about active COVID 19 cases in their districts. When data is desegregated by districts, some very conflicting responses have been achieved. For example, in ICT, the respondents' reply about the active COVID 19 cases range from 100 to 50000. Such an extensive range show that the respondents' knowledge about the COVID 19 cases is not updated. 43% of the ICT respondents either skipped the questions or said they had no idea about the number of cases. Similar wide ranges were obtained for other districts. The table below documents the range of responses about active COVID-19 cases in the districts.

Only districts with more than five responses are mentioned in the table.

Districts	Start Range	End Range	Skipped/Don't Know
Buner	20	8000	33%
Ghotki	1	4000	62%
Hyderabad	5000	10000	75%
Islamabad	100	50000	43%

Districts	Start Range	End Range	Skipped/Don't Know
Jhang	2	20	66%
Karachi	15	20000	66%
Lahore	200	1000	
Peshawar	6000	163000	33%
Quetta	20	18700	0
Rawalpindi	14	4000	66%

Table Showing the responses of the respondents when asked about the number of COVID-19 active cases in their districts.

Websites with Information about COVID 19 Cases

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of websites having the COVID-19 related information of their districts. They were asked to mention three websites from where they can get the COVID-19 related information. The responses to this question have been very poor. It is analyzed in the table below. For example, in Balochistan, only 12 respondents mentioned the first website correctly whereas 34 respondents either skipped the question or replied incorrectly. For second website, the reply of only 3 respondents were correct whereas 43 respondents either replied incorrectly or skipped the question. For the third website, only one response was correct.

Province	Website 1		Website 2		Website 3	
	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer
Balochistan	12 (26%)	34	3	43	1	45
ICT	10 (24%)	31	6	35	0	41
KP	10 (10%)	89	5	94	0	99
Punjab	19 (25%)	56	16	59	4	71
Sindh	29 (22%)	102	7	124	3	128

Except for KP, the percentage of the respondents giving the correct information for the first website is almost the same. 26% of Balochistan respondents gave the first website correctly. This percentage is 24%, 25% and 22% for ICT, Punjab and Sindh, respectively. For KP, only 10% of respondents could mention the website correctly to get COVID-related information.

Knowledge about COVID-19 Testing Labs

The table below shows the respondents' knowledge about the COVID-19 testing facilities in their districts. The question was asked to name three labs/hospitals in the district equipped with COVID-19 testing facilities.

Province	Lab 1		Lab 2		Lab 3	
	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer
Balochistan	17 (38%)	27	4	40	2	42
ICT	26 (63%)	15	19	22	18	23
KP	39 (39%)	60	26	73	18	81
Punjab	38 (50%)	37	35	40	23	52
Sindh	67 (51%)	64	50	81	30	101

The weakest response came from Balochistan, where only 17 respondents out of 44 could mention the first lab correctly. The responses from KP are like Balochistan. In KP, 39 respondents out of 99 could say it correctly. For Punjab and Sindh, 51% of respondents correctly mentioned the first lab/hospital. ICT remained at the top, with 63% of respondents saying the first lab correctly. The second and third lab/hospital response accuracy is even worse.

Knowledge about Government Initiatives for Economic Uplift of Marginalized Groups

Respondents' knowledge about the government's initiatives for economically uplifting the marginalized groups is not updated. 46% of respondents from ICT could mention the first initiative correctly. For the four provinces, the respondents' knowledge of government initiatives is poorer than ICT. Only 27% of respondents from Balochistan and Punjab could name the first initiative correctly. For Sindh and KP, this percentage was 23 and 21, respectively. The percentage of correct answers for Initiatives 2 and 3 is even worse. This is explained in the table below:

Province	Initiative 1		Initiative 2		Initiative 3	
	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer
Balochistan	12 (27%)	32	3	41	0	44
ICT	19 (46%)	22	7	34	2	39

Province	Initiative 1		Initiative 2		Initiative 3	
	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer	Correct answer	Skipped/wrong answer
KP	21 (21%)	78	8	91	4	95
Punjab	20 (27%)	55	11	64	4	71
Sindh	31 (23%)	104	13	122	5	130

Source of Information for COVID related information

If you have filled at least one text box for Q22-26, what is your main source of information?[Rank the options; check NA if you don't use one]

Internet

Province	1 (internet)	2	3	4	N/A
Islamabad Capital Territory	16 (53%)	4(13%)	4(13%)	2(7%)	4(13%)
Balochistan	14(45%)	3 (9%)	4(13%)	1(3%)	9(29%)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	25 (33%)	8(10%)	7(9%)	2(3)	33(44%)
Punjab	26 (44%)	9(15)	3(5%)	3(5%)	18(31%)
Sindh	41(44%)	18(19%)	5(5%)	4(4%)	24(26%)

Answered 326

Skipped 59

The above table shows that the internet is the main source of information for all the geographic areas. 53% of respondents from ICT said that the internet is their most preferred option for getting COVID-related information. Although this percentage is less, the internet is still their preferred source of information for provinces. In Balochistan, 45 per cent of respondents rely on the internet for COVID-related information. In KP, 33% of respondents said the internet was their first choice for COVID-related information.

Similarly, Punjab and Sindh respondents also said that the internet was their preferred choice for COVID-related information. The percentage for Punjab and Sindh was 44 and 41, respectively. Although the table shows that the internet is the most preferred medium for getting information about COVID, the last column gives some alarming figures. For example, 13% of respondents from ICT are not using the internet for COVID-related information. This percentage is even higher for provinces. 29% of respondents from Balochistan, 44% from KP, 31% from Punjab and 26% from Sindh are not using the internet for COVID-related information.

Main Source of Information

For 42% of respondents, the internet is their primary source of information. For another 14%, the internet is their second preferred source of information. Internet is the preference number 1 for most respondents, followed by electronic media, friends and family and lastly, print media. Print media, as a source of information, seems to be losing its penetration.

If you have filled at least one text box for Q22-26, what is your main source of information?[Rank the options; check NA if you don't use one]

Source of Information	1	2	3	4	N/A
Internet	42%	14%	8%	4%	31%
Electronic media (TV and Radio)	22%	30%	15%	5%	28%
Print media	9%	15%	25%	13%	38%
Friends and Family	15%	18%	21%	23%	22%

6. Recommendations

1. Government should have a clear-cut policy of requiring ISPs to extend networks in less developed areas under corporate social responsibility. The UN General Assembly, in 2016, has already passed a non-binding resolution that declared internet access a human right. Countries including Finland, Estonia, Spain, Greece and Costa Rica have made essential Internet access part of their citizens' fundamental rights. People's right to broadband must be respected, and all people must be able to access the Internet to exercise and enjoy their rights to freedom of expression and opinion and to timely information about their health-related matters during the pandemic.
2. The data suggests that Facebook and WhatsApp are women's most preferred mobile applications for getting and sharing information. ISPs should draw a liberal policy towards consumers' use of these apps. Some mobile companies offer packages for unlimited use of some apps during specific times of the day, but a more progressive policy needs to be framed. We have already seen that internet usage is comparatively less in Balochistan and KP than in other areas of the country. The ISPs and mobile companies should formulate a policy to encourage the use of these apps during the COVID-19 crisis.
3. The dissatisfaction rate with internet services is alarmingly high in Balochistan and KP. There can be two reasons for this. Due to the lockdown and work-from-home policy of the government and private enterprises and online classes for students, the internet systems are put under stress. Second, there is a need to invest in network improvement in far-flung areas of Pakistan. Data shows that respondents from districts like Jaffarabad, Sherani, Ziarat, Lorali and Qila Abdullah in Balochistan are not satisfied with the internet services.
4. Similarly, in KP, the respondents from districts like Charsadda, Chitral and Kohat are not satisfied with the quality of internet service. In Punjab, respondents in districts Layyah, Lodhran, Muzaffargarh and Toba Tek Singh have complained about the quality of internet service. In Sidh, respondents from Jaccobabd, Tando Muhammad Khan, Tando Allah Yar and Naushero Firoze suffer from poor internet quality. All these are relatively less developed districts, and mobile companies should invest in such districts to provide better quality internet to the users.
5. The data shows that most women respondents spend from PKR 501 to 1000 per month for internet services. The ISPs should devise their policies keeping this spending bracket in mind. The subscribers from this bracket should be facilitated to access information and infotainment apps so that they can have unabated access to COVID-related information. A heavy percentage of respondents from this spending bracket feel that the quality of service does not meet their expectations. Mobile companies/ISPs should invest in the infrastructure to improve the quality of service so that the barriers to intine access to information should be minimised.
6. A critical cornerstone of all COVID-related relief policies should be gender mainstreaming. With the help of mobile companies, policymakers must ensure that all information, distribution and relief programs are customised to reach women. While doing so, the women belonging to marginalised groups, including women with disability and women from minority groups, should not be lost sight of.
7. While devising any policy regime for COVID 19 recovery and relief, the access of girls and women to internet and mobile technology must be ensured. Pakistan is one South Asian country with the broadest gender digital divide. Although the situation is improving, but numbers are still alarming. "Women in Pakistan are 38 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone, 49 per cent less likely to use mobile internet

and 94 per cent less likely to own a mobile money account”². Escalated efforts must be made by industry and government to narrow this gap. Mere delivery of service is not enough; civil society must come forward to educate families on sharing of resources equitably between genders, especially in less developed areas where resources are scarce.

8. Efforts should be made to ensure women can access affordable mobile devices and internet technology. In the past, federal and provincial governments have launched laptop schemes for students. A scheme on the same lines can be initiated for the benefit of female students, particularly in less-developed districts of Balochistan, Newly Merged Districts (NMD) of KP, interior Sindh and Southern Punjab. If free distribution of mobile devices is not possible, these can be made affordable for the students or provided at subsidised rates.
9. We have seen that Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are the most preferred platforms for women to get COVID-related information. This data provides an opportunity both for mobile companies and health authorities. Mobile companies should collaborate with Health authorities to disseminate health-related messages from these platforms. Health authorities in Pakistan have effectively utilised the ringback tones while making calls on mobile phones. This option should also be explored in collaboration with WhatsApp authorities for WhatsApp calls. This instant messaging service is also moving towards a WhatsApp advertisement regime under new terms of use in 2021. Once this facility is made available, it can be explored to disseminate health-related messages.
10. The responses to the survey questions related to several COVID-19 cases and COVID testing facilities in the districts demonstrate the gender digital divide and women’s inability to access COVID-related information. This warrants a well-chalked-out digital literacy program for women. Public authorities and civil society organisations worldwide have already started innovative programs to provide relief and information to the citizens using technology. For example, the UK government launched the UK.GOV Coronavirus information service last year on WhatsApp. This free-to-use service aims to provide official, trustworthy and timely information and advice about coronavirus (COVID-19) and would reduce the burden on National Health Services (NHS). This will help combat the spread of coronavirus misinformation in the UK and help ensure people stay home, protect the NHS and save lives³. This simplified service relies on WhatsApp group chats. On 13-15 March, Garage48, AccelerateEstonia and the whole startup community in Estonia took action and put together an online hackathon to offer solutions on how to use technology for crisis response and deal with the post-crisis era. Now events run by local communities worldwide are popping up to help solve issues for their communities⁴. Wellness Together Canada is the USD 170 million federal government’s program to provide free mental health and substance use support to youth and adults⁵. The program started anticipating the need for front-line workers during the COVID crisis- most of whom are women.
11. The pandemic has particularly disrupted the education system in the country. The online education classes should not delude well-established private schools in developed districts. The system is not working in less developed areas. There are multiple reasons for this: mobile/internet devices are not ubiquitous, and internet quality is not good

² <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/addressing-the-mobile-gender-gap-in-pakistan/> last accessed on 15 May 21

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-coronavirus-information-service-on-whatsapp> last accessed on 30 April 21

⁴ <https://garage48.org/hackthecrisis> last accessed on 15 May 21

⁵ <https://wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA> last accessed on 30 April 21

enough for live streaming. The total loss of learning activity will be estimated once the pandemic is over, and a study is commissioned to estimate the loss. Still, the fact remains that many girl students are at a disadvantage in remote districts where access to mobile devices and quality of internet service is below par. Even a country as developed as the UK has to invest £ 85 million (including the provision of laptops) to ensure that disadvantaged children should not fall behind in their education. Pakistani governments, hitherto, could not go beyond the distribution of rations and provision of cash schemes, which are undoubtedly essential and commendable steps. Still, the situation warrants more advanced planning to cope with the situation. The provision of cost-effective mobile devices/tablets and affordable data packages will not only give a chance to continue education to the girls, but it will also bring a mobile device inside the home that can be used for getting updated information during the COVID-19 crisis.

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