

## Research Article

# Agency Within Contextual Constraints: Mobile Phone Use Among Female Live-Out Domestic Workers in Delhi

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores how access to the mobile phone affects the lives of female live-out (as opposed to live-in) domestic workers in Delhi, India. Through interviews with 102 workers, we find that the mobile phone enhances their agency in determining their daily schedule, the amount of work they take on, and the public spaces they can safely occupy. It also engenders certain communication obligations at home and work, reinforcing the inequalities they face due to their marginalized position at the intersection of gender and social class. We draw upon contextually sensitive conceptualizations of agency to explain this phenomenon. In doing so, we argue that the device enhances the women's capacity to act within the context of the social, cultural, and economic forces within which they are embedded. Further, we discuss the relationship between different types of access to technology and such conceptualizations of agency, highlighting its dynamic and complex nature. Thus, we move beyond dichotomies such as empowerment/disempowerment and access/no access to make a nuanced contribution to the literature on gender, mobile communication, and development.*

*Keywords: domestic work, mobile phones, India, M4D, digital divide, restricted agency*

### **Introduction**

In India, within the last decade, the mobile phone has moved from being an elite device to something “possessed by people in marginally compensated trades such as carpentry, peddlers, pedicab drivers, and domestic servants” (Rao & Desai, 2008, p. 389). In this study, we focus on how the device has become integrated into the lives of individuals engaged in one of these trades, namely female live-out domestic workers employed in the country's capital, Delhi.

Research on mobile phone use among domestic workers highlights how international migrant live-in workers employed in developed nations use the device for transnational mothering (Chib, Malik, Aricat, & Kadir, 2013; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007), for dealing with the isolation of staying within an employer's home (Thomas & Lim, 2010), or for engaging in covert acts of resistance against an employer (Sun, 2006). We examine mobile phone use among women who are typically internal migrants from rural India, live independently, and engage in domestic work in multiple homes every day. These marginalized women have not received much scholarly attention. Thus, it is important to provide some context and outline the issues they typically face before examining how access to the mobile phone impacts their lives.

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### ***Study Context: Live-Out Domestic Workers in Delhi***

Most domestic workers in India are women, illustrating how patriarchal beliefs regarding the division of household labor remain entrenched (Kaur, 2006; Neetha, 2004; Rustagi, 2016). There has been a growing demand in urban India for women who engage in live-out domestic work due to a lack of space in middle-class homes for live-in workers. Live-out workers take up jobs in various homes and perform tasks such as sweeping and mopping, washing dishes, doing laundry, dusting, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly. The wages they earn can differ according to the task as well as the locality in which they work, with the average pay in Delhi amounting to 1,500 rupees (approximately US\$23) per month from each employer (Rustagi, 2016). Typically, live-out workers plying their trade in Delhi migrate from rural areas because of diminished earnings from agrarian jobs (Kaur, 2006; Neetha, 2004). These women are often uneducated and take up domestic work because of its low barrier to entry and lack of requirements of formal skills, making it “the commonest and also normally the first occupation of poor and marginalised women” (Neetha & Mazumdar, 2010, p. 66).

These women are forced to contend with several issues. They face physical health concerns due to poor sanitary conditions in the slums where they reside (Kaur, 2006). They combat mental health issues as they must juggle work commitments with the personal domestic responsibilities they are expected to fulfill due to the prevailing gender norms (Bhattacharya et al., 2016). Further, a lack of legal protection and formal work contracts contributes to the inordinate power their employers hold over them (Rustagi, 2016). This power differential is also a function of the class disparity that characterizes the employer–employee relationship (Dickey, 2000; Qayum & Ray, 2003).

### ***Study Objectives: Agency, Access, and Context***

By focusing on mobile phone use among these workers, we add to the literature on gender, mobile communication, and development in the Global South. Studies on this subject are often situated in the M4D research area, and many of them highlight how access to the mobile phone facilitates development by empowering women. Yet, this “give-access–get-empowerment” perspective is facile (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2014, p. 8). First, the idea of access must be problematized. A binary notion of physical access/no access is insufficient to examine the relationship between technology and development (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk, 2017). Beyond physical access, it is also important to consider people’s skills in using a certain technology as well as the frequency and diversity of that use. Van Dijk refers to this as *skills access* and *usage access*, respectively. Second, rather than facilitating empowerment and development, access to the mobile phone can reinforce existing inequalities (e.g., Wallis, 2011). Third, as Bailur, Masiero, and Tacchi (2018) note in the introduction to a special section of *ITID* on gender, mobile communication, and development, there needs to be more clarity on how empowerment is conceptualized in such studies. Fourth, a technologically deterministic view dominates the M4D literature, permitting scholars to underplay the importance of contextual factors as well as individual agency (Svensson & Wamala Larsson, 2015a).

We address these issues and make a nuanced contribution to the M4D literature by examining how access to the mobile phone impacts live-out domestic workers’ negotiation of agency in both the familial and professional spheres. While agency is considered a vital aspect of women’s empowerment (Sen, 1999), we recognize that it is not exercised in a vacuum. Thus, we draw on conceptualizations of women’s agency that highlight its situated nature and view it as women’s capacity to act within the constraints they face due to broader structures and contextual factors (Korteweg, 2008; Mahmood, 2001; Peter, 2003). In doing so, we challenge two dichotomous perspectives. First, as is highlighted in the literature review, access to the mobile phone is often viewed as empowering or disempowering for women. We move beyond this binary and demonstrate how it may enable women to negotiate agency within the limitations they face. Second, we problematize the access/no access binary and detail how different types of access may enhance or hinder women’s agency within contextual constraints. We also outline how this relationship between agency and access is complex and dynamic.

### Literature Review

#### ***Mobile Phones, Empowerment, and Development***

A prominent area of research on gender, mobile communication, and development focuses on initiatives wherein women in the Global South are given access to mobile phones by organizations with specific developmental objectives. As Nguyen, Chib, and Mahalingam (2017) observe, such studies highlight how the device can empower women by helping them gain tangible economic benefits as well as intangible benefits such as enhanced agency and decision-making power. For instance, Balasubramanian, Thamizoli, Umar, and Kanwar (2010) describe how such a developmental initiative in rural India facilitated informal knowledge transfer and, consequently, engendered collective agency among female agricultural workers. Meanwhile, in rural Indonesia, midwives given access to mobile phones devised strategies to address the social and organizational barriers that limit women's access to these devices, allowing them to "develop the capacity for agency and autonomy" (Chib & Chen, 2011, p. 486). In Bangladesh, Grameen "telephone ladies" felt they were economically empowered and had a greater say in domestic decision-making because of the income they generated by selling air-time (Richardson, Ramirez, & Haq, 2000).

Women may also gain such benefits in the absence of targeted initiatives. Studies detail how access to the mobile phone facilitates economic empowerment among female entrepreneurs in Uganda (Komunte, 2015) and Indonesia (Cai, Chew, & Levy, 2015). Access is also described as engendering social empowerment among entrepreneurs in India (Chew, Ilavarasan, & Levy, 2015) and women in rural Mozambique (Macueve, Mandlate, Ginger, Gaster, & Macome, 2009).

In many of these studies, access and empowerment are conceptualized only superficially. First, scholars do not differentiate between physical access and *skills access*, which refers to possessing the skills to use different features of a technology (van Dijk, 2017). Access is simply described as leading to empowerment and development. Second, empowerment is conceptualized in myriad ways as it is linked with diverse aspects such as economic gains and enhanced decision-making power. Third, instead of empowering women, the mobile phone may conversely engender negative outcomes in their lives. As Tacchi, Kitner, and Crawford (2012) contend, the mobile phone is "not a one-size-fits-all technological solution to the issues of development, inequality, and exclusion, and can in some cases highlight and amplify existing tensions" (p. 534). In the next section, we discuss such cases.

#### ***Mobile Phones, Disempowerment, and Inequality***

Studies that link access to the mobile phone with inequality often concentrate on women's use of the device to carry out domestic responsibilities, as this practice reinforces the stereotypical notion that these duties are meant to be performed by women (Rakow & Navarro, 1993). For instance, information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the mobile phone help women in Africa juggle domestic and professional responsibilities, which "contributes to the maintenance and possibly even strengthening of the traditional gendered division of labour and thus to the general gender imbalance" (Buskens & Webb, 2013, p. 6). Similarly, Filipino migrant workers' use of the mobile phone to carry out transnational mothering ties them back to domesticity despite their status as primary earners in the family (Parreñas, 2005; Uy-Tioco, 2007). The device also facilitates the performance of gendered domestic responsibilities among housewives and home-based workers in the Philippines (Portus, 2008).

The mobile phone may also contribute to the reinforcement of existing gender inequalities by exposing women to harassment and surveillance. For instance, Svensson and Wamala Larsson (2015b) find that some market women in Kampala, Uganda must constantly field calls from their husbands inquiring about their whereabouts. Meanwhile, Wallis (2011) observes that acquiring the mobile phone makes young female employees in China susceptible to surveillance and harassment from their employers. In Pakistan, women with access to the mobile phone often face sexual harassment through calls and text messages (Hassan, Unwin, & Gardezi, 2018).

Conversely, unequal power relations are also illuminated when women's access to the mobile phone is restricted. This frequently occurs when women's husbands or boyfriends suspect that they are using the device

to engage in extramarital affairs, resulting in women being unable to take calls at home (Masika & Bailur, 2015) or only having access to a shared mobile phone (Burrell, 2010). Such studies differentiate between physical access and usage access (van Dijk, 2017). Women may have physical access to the mobile phone and yet face inequities as their use of the device is highly restricted due to existing power structures. Similarly, Faith (2018) finds that although low-income women in the United Kingdom have physical access to mobile phones, their usage is curtailed due to structural inequalities that limit their ability to address maintenance requirements such as battery charging, recharging credit, and repairs.

In this literature review, we have so far emphasized how the mobile phone may facilitate empowerment or reinforce existing inequalities. However, access to the mobile phone cannot single-handedly affect women's social position and is embedded within broader social, cultural, and economic processes (Tacchi et al., 2012; Tenhunen, 2008). Thus, in analyzing how access impacts live-out domestic workers, we draw on concepts that enable us to view their use of the device within the context of their social, economic, and cultural realities. These concepts and studies on gender, mobile communication, and development that use similar conceptual approaches are discussed in the next section.

## Conceptual Approach

As noted above, women's empowerment is conceptualized in various ways in the literature on gender, mobile communication, and development. However, many scholars stress that empowerment should be viewed in terms of women's agency. For instance, in her conceptualization of empowerment, development scholar Naila Kabeer underscores the importance of women's "ability to make strategic life choices" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). Similarly, according to Sen's (1999) capability approach, which has often been adopted by scholars to gauge women's empowerment, development and empowerment are a function of the freedom individuals possess to live a life they value.

However, in our analysis, we move beyond the traditional view of agency as complete freedom of choice. Instead, we draw on conceptualizations of agency that are more nuanced and contextually sensitive. For instance, the concept of *situated* (or *restricted*) *agency* refers to women's ability to act within the context of the constraints they face due to individual circumstances and broader social, cultural, and economic factors (Peter, 2003). In conceptualizing situated agency, Peter emphasizes women's capacity to make choices that seem submissive, but actually represent subtle opposition to dominant power structures.

Meanwhile, in her study on Muslim women in Canada, Korteweg (2008) contends that one should not exclusively view women's agency as their ability to oppose dominant power structures. Korteweg (2008) introduces the concept of *embedded agency* and states that there is a difference "between seeing agency solely as resistance, which captures actions that explicitly aim to undermine hegemony, and embedded agency, which captures practices that do not have this explicit aim, yet still reflect active engagement in shaping one's life" (p. 437). According to this concept, women's agency may be conceptualized as being embedded within intersecting forces associated with aspects such as their gender, religion, social class, race, and ethnicity. In conceptualizing embedded agency, Korteweg is guided by the work of Mahmood (2001), who similarly argues that women's agency should be seen "as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" and "as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed" (p. 210).

While we have outlined the differences between situated (or restricted) agency and embedded agency, it is vital to acknowledge that both concepts underscore the importance of context and highlight how women may exercise agency, even within the limitations they face. Thus, viewing agency from this perspective can help to "avoid binaries of freedom or constraint, subject or object, actor or victim" (Vera-Gray, 2016, p. 52). Further, in drawing on such concepts, we also adopt an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989). *Intersectionality* is "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015, p. 1). By employing an intersectional approach, we recognize that the contextual forces that shape women's capacity to act are not only a consequence of their gender, but are related to their position at the intersection of multiple aspects of their social identity, including social class and education level.

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Table 1. Live-Out Domestic Workers' Age Distribution.

Age Range	Number of Workers
18–20	7
21–30	29
31–40	42
41–50	13
51–60	8
61–70	3

A handful of studies that focus on gender, mobile communication, and development are guided by similar conceptual approaches. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2017) observe that the mobile phone helps Vietnamese foreign brides in Singapore strategically negotiate restricted agency within the constraints imposed by intersecting forces associated with their gender, social class, and ethnicity. In Uganda and India, Masika and Bailur (2015) discover that women negotiate agency through their use of ICTs such as the mobile

phone. This agency is viewed as being shaped by the women's individual circumstances and prevailing social norms. Similarly, Svensson and Wamala Larsson (2015b) observe that the mobile phone engenders a situated form of empowerment among market women in Kampala. Finally, the articles in the aforementioned *ITD* special section on gender, mobile communication, and development adopt a similarly nuanced and intersectional approach, demonstrating that age (Zelezny-Green, 2018), poverty (Faith, 2018), and rurality (Wyche & Olson, 2018) can intersect with gender to shape how the mobile phone impacts women's lives.

Because adopting such a conceptual approach involves underscoring the role of contextual factors, we build on the work of these scholars and focus on a context and group that have not received much scholarly attention. Our analysis is guided by the following broad research question:

RQ1: How does access to the mobile phone affect live-out domestic workers' negotiation of agency in both the familial and professional spheres?

In answering this question, we also distinguish between different types of access and analyze how these distinctions influence this negotiation.

## Method

### Sample

In June and July of 2017, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 102 female live-out domestic workers in Delhi. We view live-out domestic workers as those engaged in performing domestic chores. Thus, workers providing services like massages or manicures were excluded from the sample. The participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. The first author's personal contacts provided access to the women employed in their homes. These women were interviewed and then asked to refer other women employed in the same locality. As wages depend on the income level of the employers in the locality the women work in, different localities were covered to ensure a diverse sample. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 70 years old (see Table 1). In many cases, they could not pinpoint their exact age due to a lack of official documentation and could only provide a rough estimate.

### Data Collection

A consent form written in Hindi was prepared, but since many of the women were illiterate, verbal consent was sought before most interviews. The women were assured of anonymity and pseudonyms are used here. The interviews were audio-recorded and conducted in Hindi, lasting anywhere between 3 and 15 minutes. The total duration of all the interviews was 6 hours, 20 minutes. This does not include the time spent in gaining consent and explaining the study's goals. We recognize that the data collection process was affected by the first author being male and belonging to a different social class than the participants. As Sultana (2007) notes, "[T]he knowledge produced in research occurs within the context of the research process, embedded within broader social relations and development processes" (p. 382). Further, the women's need to adhere to a hectic work schedule resulted in short interviews. It was also a conscious decision to conduct interviews in natural settings as this approach enabled the first author to observe the women's daily routines and practices.

Researchers conducting naturalistic research aim to make “the research experience as much a part of the subjects’ everyday environment as possible” (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 5). Thus, workers were often interviewed as they went from one employer’s home to another. In certain residential areas, interviews were also conducted in common outdoor spaces where workers congregated during the day to rest. While most interviews were one-on-one, in some cases, two workers were interviewed together. In the few cases where interviews were conducted inside employers’ homes, the employers were asked to remain out of earshot so the workers could speak freely.

We also conducted short interviews with 41 employers of live-out domestic workers in Delhi through phone calls and instant messaging. Although our analysis primarily focuses on the workers’ accounts, these interviews enable us to present the employers’ perspective regarding the mobile phone’s impact on live-out domestic work.

### ***Coding and Data Analysis***

The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). At the open coding stage, different categories were identified through manual coding. These were primarily based on the purposes for which the workers used the mobile phone (e.g. mothering, communicating with employers). During this process, notations were entered alongside the data on a digital spreadsheet. These categories were repeatedly analyzed and compared with each other. Eventually, overarching themes emerged.

## **Findings**

### ***Family Ties: Mothering and Safety***

Most of the women we interviewed owned inexpensive basic or feature phones with prepaid SIM cards. They primarily used them to make and receive voice calls. This was due to the rudimentary functionalities afforded by these devices as well as the women’s low levels of literacy and technical knowhow. Further, the most common motivating factor behind the women’s acquisition of these mobile phones was their need to call their children from work to check on them. In other words, they mainly used the phones for what Rakow and Navarro (1993) labelled remote mothering. As the women did not own a landline telephone, many of them contacted their children on a second mobile phone kept at their home, which acted as a quasi-landline. They stated that this communication eliminated the need for them to leave work to be physically near their children when they returned from school, freeing up time in the women’s schedule and giving them the opportunity to accept work in more homes. For instance, Jaya, who worked as a cleaner in four homes, stated that the mobile phone had made a huge difference to her life as it had cut down on trips home in the middle of the workday:

The difference is that before I would not know where my children are. When they were small, I would have to leave my work and go back home to check on them. I had to keep traveling between home and work. Since I have got the phone, I do not have to go back home.

The women’s concern for their children’s safety was often the justification given for their use of the mobile phone for remote mothering. Many of them admitted that they felt anxious about leaving their children at home. Damini, who worked as a cleaner in one home, revealed the reason behind these worries:

Since I rely on others to take care of my children, I need the phone. How can you trust someone else? What if they leave my children on the railing and they fall down? That is why I feel that the phone is good for me.

These women could not afford childcare and depended on their neighbors to keep an eye on their children. Damini’s comment, however, illustrates that they did not necessarily trust this arrangement. Supervision by the neighbors was intermittent; therefore, the children’s safety was always a cause for concern. Staying in touch via the mobile phone helped relieve this anxiety. The women felt calmer, knowing their children were only a call away. Bhavna, who cleaned and washed dishes in six homes, expressed this sense of relief: “You get to know if your children are fine. That is the biggest benefit. You feel relaxed when you know that your children are safe.”

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The women revealed that concerns for their own safety also contributed to their decision to acquire a mobile phone. This was apparent when they described using the device to communicate with their husbands, and in the case of the few younger unmarried participants, their parents. The women stated that it was important for them to call and assure their husband or parents that they were safe, especially if they were working late. Ekta, who worked as a cleaner in one home, alluded to this while describing why she thought the mobile phone had become a necessity for her, "If I get late at work then my family starts worrying about me. That is why it is necessary to keep a mobile." Similarly, 18-year-old Faizana, who swept, mopped, and washed dishes in four homes, stressed the importance of assuaging her mother's worries, "Sometimes I get late and my mother gets very tense. That is why it is vital for me to keep a phone."

The women did not engage in such communication only for their husband or parents' benefit. Rather, they stated that they themselves felt safer leaving home knowing they could reach out for help through the mobile phone if they faced a threatening situation. Many of them believed that every woman should own a mobile phone for this reason, especially in a city like Delhi, which has a high rate of crimes against women. As Pallavi, who worked as a nanny in two homes, said: "You see what happens with women in Delhi and even elsewhere. They need a phone. If something happens and you face any problem, then at least you can call someone."

The women's comments illustrate that they value the mobile phone because it enables them to stay connected with their family, to be assured of their children's safety, and to assure other family members of their own safety. However, as we outline in the next section, the device's impact is not restricted to the familial sphere. It also affects their work.

### ***Working the Mobile Phone: Expectations and Scheduling***

Several women stated that access to the mobile phone benefited their work. First, it made job-seeking easier because they could ask friends who were also live-out domestic workers about potential job opportunities. This parallels how individuals engaged in providing transportation services use the mobile phone to call and inform each other about where to find potential customers (Ling, Oreglia, Aricat, Panchapakesan, & Lwin, 2015; Townsend, 2000). Second, as with Jagun, Heeks, and Whalley's (2008) study on Nigerian cloth weavers, the mobile phone aided in reducing unproductive travel. The workers reported that communicating with the female members of the households where they were employed reduced the number of instances of arriving at an employer's house, only to discover that no one was there to let them in. Neha, who performed a variety of domestic chores in five homes, reflected on how this situation was common before she acquired a mobile phone:

I would have to keep waiting for my employers. I would not know when they will reach home. Now, they can call and inform me. We know about each other's timings. Now I know what time I need to go to an employer's house.

Such communication with employers helped the women adjust on the fly (Ling & Yttri, 2002), giving them more control over their work schedule and greater flexibility. However, they indicated that certain expectations of their employers also influenced their use of the mobile phone to engage in such communication. For example, they were expected to call and inform employers if there was any change to the agreed-upon schedule, especially if they were going to be absent or late. Sushma, who cleaned and cooked in nine houses, described why fulfilling this expectation was vital, "I can inform my employers if I am getting late. If I am unwell, then I can tell them that I will not come for work. In this way, they are also not hassled." The women stated that they were also expected to be available to receive calls from employers. They stressed that they needed to respect these expectations to ensure that their employers remained satisfied with their work. Thus, in addition to the quality of their work, their ambient availability through mediated channels has become an element in how they are judged. Further, as Damini revealed, the absence of such communication could only engender misunderstandings in the employer–employee relationship:

Earlier, if I did not come in for work, then my employer would think that I took a holiday on purpose. Even if I were unwell, she would think that I took a holiday on purpose. With the mobile, she gets to know that I am actually unwell, and that is the reason I have not come for work.

In fact, some workers believed that the mobile phone had become embedded within the structure of their work to such a degree that not possessing one could prevent them from being hired by a new employer. Gauri, who washed dishes and clothes in three homes, described how employers were reluctant to take on workers who lacked access to a personal mobile phone:

As soon as you walk into a house, the employer asks you for your number. If you do not have a mobile, then you will have to say no to them. They do not hire you quickly if you do not have a phone.

This was also reflected in the comments of the employers we interviewed. They stated that they expected workers to have a personal mobile phone and use it to call and inform them if they were going to be absent or late. As one employer put it:

If the time for coming to cook is 5:30, and she doesn't surface till 7, it puts me off-kilter, and is very annoying. Yes, i [sic] expect them to inform either if they are late or absent. We inform our employers too.

Although many employers indicated that they held a positive view of workers who had a mobile phone as it facilitated such communication, some stated that the device also detracted from the workers' productivity. They stressed that the mobile phone distracted workers while they engaged in work-related tasks. As one of these employers stated while lamenting this phenomenon, "Since they are at work, for a short time, they are expected to concentrate on work." Yet, overall, the employers preferred and expected workers to have a mobile phone as it made coordination and planning more efficient. However, as is detailed in the next section, not every worker we interviewed was able to fulfill this expectation.

#### ***From No Access to Skills Access: Non-ownership and Skill Development***

Of the 102 women interviewed, 12 did not own a personal mobile phone. In agreement with some of the scholarship cited in the literature review, a few women said the reason for this lack of physical access was that their husbands suspected they would use the device to conduct extramarital affairs. Some of these women had previously owned a mobile phone but decided to relinquish it because of the distrust it engendered. Others claimed that they were reluctant to get one because they could foresee the problems it would cause. Aarti, whose work included washing dishes and clothes, described this reluctance:

It would be too much of a problem at home. If I got a call from an unknown number, then my husband would ask questions. There would be fights at home because of the phone. That is why I do not have a mobile.

Other non-owners revealed that financial constraints or a lack of technical skills contributed to them not having physical access to a personal mobile phone.

Heena, who worked as a cleaner in four homes, asserted that this lack of access had a negative impact on her work. She had lost her mobile phone and could not afford to get a new one. She described the problems she had been facing with her employers, "My employers complain to me. They ask me why I do not have a phone. They say that everyone in the world has a phone now." Meanwhile, a few of the older non-owners stated that they did not have to deal with the same issues as Heena. On being asked if not owning a personal mobile phone caused problems with her employers, Kalpana, who washed clothes and cooked in three homes, said, "There is no such problem. I have been working for them for so many years. They trust me completely." She felt the trust she had gained over the years exempted her from having to fulfill her employers' expectations of communication via the mobile phone.

Conversely, a handful of the younger workers revealed that they not only had physical access to a personal mobile phone, they also had a certain level of what van Dijk (2017) termed skills access. Unlike their older counterparts, they owned smartphones and could use them to go online. Some of these workers even hoped that these devices could help them switch to a slightly better-paying profession than domestic work. For instance, Geetanjali, who was 22 years old and worked as a cook in one house, revealed that rather than continuing to engage in domestic work, she wanted to earn a living through sewing and embroidery. She provided an example of how the smartphone helped her supplement what she learned during the classes she attended to develop her skills:

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I use YouTube if there is a design that I cannot understand despite my teacher explaining it to me. I have to go home and practice. If I cannot understand it, I use the voice command function to search for it on YouTube. I can see it and then practice.

### Discussion

The need to fulfill duties and expectations is the theme that repeatedly emerges from the women's comments regarding their mobile phone use. Their primary motivation for acquiring the device is to fulfill the childcare duties they are expected to perform in a culture where traditional gender roles prevail. As Anderson and Shrum (2007) remark:

Western images of gender roles often value equal participation regardless of the underlying division of labor. This is uncommon in the Indian context, where women shoulder the majority of household and child rearing responsibilities without envisioning an alternative. (p. 242)

Issues associated with the women's socioeconomic position intersect with these cultural norms to affect how they use the mobile phone. As they cannot afford to get help with childcare, they feel anxious about their children's safety. In such a situation, staying connected with their children through the mobile phone relieves this anxiety and helps the women feel more comfortable staying away from home longer. This, in turn, provides them the freedom to take on more work. Thus, while primarily using the mobile phone to fulfill domestic duties reflects the women's continued adherence to traditional gender roles, it also contributes to enhancing the agency they possess in determining their day-to-day schedule and the amount of work they take on. In other words, the mobile phone permits them to exercise a greater degree of agency within the context of the social, cultural, and economic forces in which they are embedded.

Similar themes emerge while analyzing the women's comments regarding their use of the mobile phone to communicate with other family members. The need to dutifully call and inform their husband or parents of their whereabouts reflects the underlying influence of gendered power hierarchies in the familial sphere. Beyond this aspect, however, there are other crucial contextual elements to consider. Delhi remains one of the most unsafe cities for women in India due to its high rates of sexual violence (Tiwary, 2020). In this context, the ability to connect with family members when traveling in unfamiliar spaces provides these women with a sense of security and assurance (Cumiskey & Brewster, 2012), which leads to an "extension of their spatial life spheres" (Kinnunen, Suopajarvi, & Ylipulli, 2011, p. 1074). Thus, while the need to fulfill certain communication obligations hints at the women's lack of power at home, it is also linked to enhancing their mobility and, consequently, the agency they possess in determining the public spaces they can safely occupy.

The women's revelation that they must adhere to employers' communication demands, as well as employers' comments regarding their expectations, again demonstrates how mobile phone use is embedded in existing unequal power structures. Although such inequalities, which are informed by the class disparity between workers and employers, characterize various employer–employee relationships, they are exacerbated by the workers' lack of legal protection through formal contracts. Absent such protections, the workers face an enhanced risk of losing their jobs if they fail to fulfill these demands. Further, the employers making these demands are typically women. As Bailur et al. (2018) contend, adopting an intersectional approach can help illuminate instances where mobile phones contribute to women's subjugation by other women. Here, the workers' marginalized position at the intersection of gender and social class shapes their use of the mobile phone and the inequalities they face. Yet, by fulfilling employers' demands, they are also able to adjust their schedule and avoid unproductive travel, freeing up time to take on additional work. Thus, just as it does in the familial sphere, the mobile phone enables them to enact a greater degree of agency within the constraints they face due to existing power structures.

Access to the mobile phone enhances the agency live-out domestic workers possess in determining their day-to-day schedule, the amount of work they take on, and the public spaces they can safely occupy. However, this agency is enacted within the limitations they continue to face due to contextual factors relating to cultural norms as well as social and economic structures. Thus, the mobile phone does not boost the women's ability to oppose dominant structures by formulating "subtle strategies of resistance" (Peter, 2003, p. 27). Rather, it

enhances their capacity to maneuver within the social order in which they are embedded. In other words, it enables them to exercise embedded agency.

It is important to note that most of these women are able to exercise such agency by using a basic mobile phone to communicate with a select group of contacts through voice calls. While this basic physical access enables them to exercise embedded agency, it does not afford them additional opportunities to significantly improve their living conditions. Meanwhile, for the 12 participants who do not have a personal mobile phone, their capacity to act even within existing structures is curtailed. Conversely, some of the younger workers own smartphones and have skills access (van Dijk, 2017). Such access may facilitate a certain degree of upward mobility and help them acquire marginally better-paying jobs. These jobs, however, may only slightly improve their financial position. The opportunities available to these young women remain limited to such jobs because of their marginalized position at the intersection of gender and social class. Thus, we find that different types of access to the mobile phone may enable marginalized women to exercise embedded agency to varying degrees.

This relationship between access and agency is also dynamic. As we conducted this study at a specific point in time, it is important to recognize that the type of access required to exercise embedded agency may change depending on technological advancements, broader market forces, and changes to the structure of live-out domestic work. At the time they were interviewed, possessing the ability to make and receive voice calls was enough for many of our participants to get by. Yet it is not difficult to imagine that this may change as younger workers increasingly adopt smartphones and as app-based services for domestic work become more popular (Chandran, 2016). As Ismail and Kumar (2019) observe in their study of female health workers in Delhi, while younger and more literate workers benefit from the increased adoption of smartphones, older and less literate workers who lack technical knowhow risk being marginalized from their profession. In a future where live-out domestic work is structured around employers connecting with workers through digital platforms such as mobile apps, most of the women we interviewed may not feel as if they have much agency and would face the prospect of being squeezed out. While this may be speculative, our intention is to emphasize that the relationship between access, agency, and marginalized women's social position is not static. In the literature on gender, mobile communication, and development, we do not see the fluid nature of this relationship given much attention. Our study should serve as an encouragement to other researchers to focus on this aspect and ask similar questions in future studies.

## Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. It focuses on a specific group of marginalized Indian women who face unique challenges. Thus, its findings are not necessarily generalizable to other women who may have different experiences based on their social, cultural, and economic circumstances as well as their occupations. Additionally, as mentioned before, we would like to have conducted longer in-depth interviews. Yet it is important to note that the breadth of our interviews enabled us to touch on multiple themes based on each participant's experiences.

## Conclusion

In this study, we adopt a contextually sensitive and intersectional approach while examining the relationship between access to the mobile phone and marginalized women's negotiation of agency in both the familial and professional spheres. We demonstrate how such an approach helps illuminate instances where women enact agency within the limitations they face due to their marginalized position at the intersection of gender and social class. We hope that rather than mapping Western-centric conceptualizations of agency onto the lived experiences of women in the Global South, future research on gender, mobile communication, and development can adopt a similar approach. This can help researchers move beyond a binary view that access causes empowerment/disempowerment and, instead, focus on the complex and ever-changing relationship between access and agency.

To explicate this relationship, it is vital to problematize the concept of access. We find that for live-out

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domestic workers, physical access to a personal mobile phone is taken for granted (Ling, 2012), with those unable to obtain a device risking further marginalization. As noted above, this is a dynamic situation and the type of access required to engage in live-out domestic work may look different in the future. Perhaps longitudinal studies can lend more weight to this argument. Future studies might also focus on people engaged in other itinerant service jobs similar to live-out domestic work. These jobs are often the only ones available to people who find themselves near the bottom of the pyramid. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine how the mobile phone is becoming embedded within the structure of such work.

In conducting such research, scholars would be remiss to exclusively focus on how workers use the mobile phone for instrumental work-related purposes. In fact, our findings support Donner's (2009) argument that the distinction between such use and use of the device to maintain social ties is not clear-cut. For most of our participants, the ability to connect with family members contributes greatly to enhancing productivity and earning potential. This is further evidence that the mobile phone blurs lives and livelihoods (Donner, 2009).

Meanwhile, specifically focusing on the Indian context, our findings counter some of the more optimistic perspectives regarding the impact of increased access to the mobile phone on class disparity. Jeffrey and Doron (2011) contend that before the advent of cheap mobile phones, the ability to travel and share information was mainly possessed by India's upper classes. This enabled them to exert control over lower-status individuals' movement and communications. The authors speculate that ubiquitous access to cheap mobile phones could help alleviate this situation and have an equalizing effect on Indian society by enhancing the possibilities open to those lower down the pecking order. As our findings demonstrate, expecting such sweeping changes may be far-fetched as mobile phone use remains embedded within established power structures at the intersection of gender and social class.

However, in recognizing that the mobile phone does not necessarily transform such structures, we do not wish to underplay the fact that live-out domestic workers are now heavily dependent on the device to conduct their familial and professional lives. As Usha, who worked as a cook in eight homes, put it, "It has become a necessity. Just like food is necessary, the phone is also necessary." ■

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