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Examining the Empowerment Potential of Mobile Phones to Women in Sri Lanka

The Case of Dependent Housewives

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, at an unprecedented rate, mobile phone has penetrated Sri Lanka, triggering much hype and investment as well as multiple socioeconomic implications. Yet, examining the developmental impact of mobile phones has, however, drawn surprisingly little attention in Sri Lanka with no studies focusing primarily on the impact of mobile phones on the empowerment of women. Therefore, this paper, applying primarily qualitative methodology, attempts an investigation of the empowering effect of mobile phones to dependent housewives in poor households in Sri Lanka. The study found that access to mobile phones was certainly empowering for the women: mobile phones unequivocally strengthened and expanded their social circle and support networks as an instrument of sociability; it led them domesticate technology, thus challenging negative societal attitudes towards women as technophobic luddites; it reduced their information poverty, enabling and facilitating access to information; and, opened them up a “newer”, non-traditional space of fun, something which demonstrated a clear manifestation of choice and power. However, the study unveiled that the women’s use of mobile phones was largely controlled within the household, mainly because they did not have their own income to maintain their phones, but to rely on the spouse, the conventional family provider, thus calling for the need for women’s financial autonomy. Those women who legally owned their mobile phones had control over them relative to those who lacked legal ownership. In conclusion, mobile phones can play a significant role in empowering women and thus, recommends considering it as a tool in the policy agenda for women’s empowerment in Sri Lanka.

From Silence to Voice:

Examining the Empowerment Potential of Mobile Phones to Women in Sri Lanka

The Case of Dependent Housewives

Over the past few decades, at an unprecedented and astonishing rate, mobile phone has penetrated the developing world, taking on an ever-increasing role in both its social and economic realms, and rapidly integrating into its culture as an integral component. Drawing on related work, Blumenstock and Eagle (2010) point out that "... mobile phones are reaching the world's poor at an amazing rate. Already, over two thirds of the world's mobile phones are in developing countries..." Likewise, referring to previous literature, Lee (2009) contends that South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, two of the poorest and remotest regions, are rapidly catching up in mobile phone access, and this has brought about many socioeconomic implications for the developing world. Resultantly, the potential impact of the mobile phone has drawn much attention as a key issue on contemporary research and policy agendas, where there exists ongoing debate and discourse on the developmental impact of mobile phones on developing countries.

Accordingly, as many studies concur, mobile phone has the potential to bring about positive impacts on human development. For instance, Blumenstock and Eagle (2010) note that mobile phone called a "lifeline for the world's poor" (BBC, February 19, 2007), observers are optimistic about the potential role and uses of the mobile phone in the developing community. Mobile phones are a key economic and social asset for the poor (Lee, 2009). It has become the effective and relatively affordable form of telecommunication access in developing countries (Goggin & Clark, 2009), and serves as a decent substitute for computers for the poor (Geser, 2005; cited in Lee, 2009). Studies further note that the ubiquity of mobile phones is highly likely to be benefitting women, especially in poor rural areas, whereas, Shuler, Islam, and Rottach (2010) note that the spread of mobile phones in

poor rural communities has created new avenues for women's empowerment. According to Aminuzzaman, Baldersheim, and Jamil (2003), women's access to mobile phones significantly increases their income generation opportunities, and thus, gives them a sense of economic and social empowerment. Similarly, Lee (2009) notes that mobile phone significantly increases women's autonomy in mobility and economic independence, particularly in communities where women enjoy a lower status. Accordingly, many studies have recognized mobile phone as a "near-perfect device" for developing countries, whereas its multiple effects have been felt by every sphere of life in these communities, mostly for the better.

Anyhow, some studies present rather opposed views questioning how well mobile technology could be incorporated into the traditional lifestyles of poor communities and claim that mobile phone may not necessarily be a boon to human development in those communities. For instance, referring to existing literature on rural Tanzania, Mpagole, Usanga, and Tedre (2008) contend that though many researchers have seen access to mobile phones in developing countries in chiefly positive light, mobile phone alone cannot offer a panacea for all development problems in those countries. Likewise, many studies have stressed the "gender divide" in access to mobile telephony pointing to women's relatively limited access to mobile phones in developing countries, an outcome of both the traditional gender norms that control women's access to mobile phones and the gendered attitude towards technology as a male domain in those countries (e.g., Lee, 2005; Balasubramanian, Thamizoli, Abdurrahman, & Kanwar, 2010). Therefore, as these studies contend, it is likely that the rapid growth rate of mobile phones in developing countries has not necessarily changed the traditional gender disparities entrenched in those societies, thus hampering women's access to the opportunities promised.

Given this contemporary debate and discourse, this paper attempts an investigation of the empowering effect of mobile phones to dependent housewives in poor households in Sri Lanka. Traditional landline communication is both more costly and non-existent particularly in remote areas in the country due to poor infrastructure and the destruction caused by the recently ended civil conflict. As of 2011, mobile phone penetration rate in Sri Lanka recorded as high as 88.6 per cent (see Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka, 2012), yet it is surprising that Sri Lanka has so far given little attention to examining the developmental impact of mobile phones on the country with no studies focusing primarily on the impact of mobile phones on women's empowerment, a key constituent of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Therefore, certainly many basic gaps exist in our understanding of this area of research in Sri Lanka and thus, calls for empirical investigation and substantiation. To our knowledge, this is the first study to primarily focus on the empowering effect of mobile phones to poor women in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

The methodological approach of this study was primarily qualitative. Yet, in order to support and verify the findings and conclusions derived from qualitative methods, simple statistical analyses were also used in this study. Therefore, this paper was benefited from both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data collection was done entirely based on an ethnographic survey conducted in two Grama Niladhari Divisions (GNDs), Walawwatte and Jayeweeragoda, in Hanwella Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD). GNDs are the grass-roots level administrative units in Sri Lanka. According to the latest statistics available at Sri Lanka's Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) (2002), Hanwella is the poorest DSD in Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo.

In early 2012, the authors personally conducted an ethnographic investigation in the two GNDs and surveyed 30 unemployed housewives from poor households - the sample of the study - selected randomly from the GNDs, who had access to mobile phones within their households. The central question of survey was “what changes did mobile phones bring about to the women’s lives?” All these women belonged to the major ethnic group of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese¹, and were surveyed using face-to-face interviews guided by a researcher-administered semi-structured questionnaire. The language in which the survey was conducted was Sinhala, the native language of the Sinhalese. Therefore, the authors translated the women’s citations referred to in this paper from Sinhala into English, as best as possible (refer to the appendix for a summary of the socio-demographic status of the surveyed women).

In defining the concept of empowerment, this study recognizes empowerment as “the expansion of one’s freedom of choice and action” Narayan (2002, 2005), a view of empowerment which is well-recognized world-wide and considered most accurately reflective of the empowering effect of mobile phones to women in this case of investigation. Given that empowerment is a relational concept, data collection basically covered two life stages of the women, before and after their access to mobile phones within the household. However, since data collection was limited to only one stage of life, that is, the period during which the women gained access to mobile phones within their households, recall or memory method of data collection² was used in order to collect data on the life stage during which they did not have access to mobile phones within the household.

Data Analysis and Findings

The data analysis of this study brought to the fore a mix of interesting findings. Most importantly, this study found that access to mobile phones brought about an array of benefits to the women as a group of dependent housewives from poor backgrounds. These benefits enjoyed by the women certainly carried implications for a relative expansion of their choice and action, which this section of the paper is aimed at examining and presenting as follows:

Expansion of Support Networks and Social Circle

Theoretically, the greatest benefit that mobile phone offers its users is the unlimited access to the outside world, be it one's family and friends to perfect strangers. As literature documents, access to mobile phones expands users' circle of communication than before; it strengthens users' social bonds, aids symbolic proximity to the people they call, and expands their psychological neighbourhoods by streamlining communication (e.g., Lee, 2009).

Accordingly, the data analysis of this study revealed that access to mobile phones unequivocally expanded and strengthened the women's social networks than before. The women were quite vocal in reporting this expansion and strengthening of their social networks, which was observed in terms of their improved contact with family and friends as well as the creation of new social contacts with outsiders. Accordingly, all women (100 per cent) reported that access to mobile phones facilitated and improved their contacts with family, particularly with their own or natal family, 60 per cent with friends, while 43 per cent with outsiders, all of which form the basis of their most vital support networks. The following testimonies bear witness to this:

“Having a mobile phone with you is like you're living with your family, you feel so close to each other more other ever before. Actually, I consider my mobile phone as an asset to me (Neela, personal communication, May 21, 2012).”

“My mobile phone is a very useful device to me. One day, my child got very sick in the middle of the night. He kept on crying so hard, and my husband and I did not know what to do. So, I immediately called my parents and asked them to come and help us. If I didn’t have a mobile phone with me, then I don’t know what I would have done at that time. Also, when I have some problem that bothers me, I call my brother and share it with him in privacy and get his advice. It really gives me a sense of relief. Also, over my mobile, I stay in touch with my old friends more frequently than before (Kamanie, personal communication, May 21, 2012).”

“I have been playing “rabana” (tom-tom) for quite a long time in village festivals, especially in Sinhala and Tamil New Year. Now I am 58 years old and still a very good tom-tom beater. Actually, I enjoy playing tom-tom. My mobile phone has been very useful to me in this regard. Now people who want my service can easily contact me on my mobile and invite me to play tom-tom for them. I can also access them very easily on my mobile. I have got to know more people, especially other tom-tom beaters in neighbouring villages in this way. I keep in touch with them on my mobile phone and it’s actually a valuable to me (Soma, personal communication, May 21, 2012).”

Accordingly, for these women, mobile phone served as an instrument that helped them both maintain and create actual and potential support networks more conveniently and efficiently than before. Shuler et al. (2010) note that “[m]obile phones have given women a safe and private way to maintain relationships and contacts, and receive support if needed” (p.848). Given the fact that the surveyed women hailed from poor households with limited access to physical resources, social networks were regarded as one of the few resources available to them at their disposal. Aminuzzaman et al. (2003) point out that rural social life

is characterized by strong family and kinship relationships. These social networks often function as vital safety nets in times of hardship and disaster. Furthermore, as studies contend, the Sri Lanka context is characterized by some serious gender-based barriers to women's ability to develop outside home social networks, such as high domestic workload and family resistance (e.g., Meinzen-Dick & Zwartveen, 1998). Given this local sociocultural context that largely confine women to the boundaries of the household, mobile phones provided the women leeway to develop and maintain external social networks with friends and other acquaintances, an essential factor in social capital generation. Access to outside home social networks also provided them a sense of identity outside of the family.

Likewise, mobile phone functioned as a channel of mental and emotional relief to the women in hard times of life, where they could contact their loved ones without their privacy being violated, or being place-bounded like in the case of landline communication. Thus, mobile phones certainly brought about a liberating effect on the women. In sum, within the context of this study, overcoming spatial, physical and temporal boundaries of the women, mobile phones facilitated an explicit expansion of their social freedom and space, as a group of dependents whose social space is usually largely limited to the domestic sphere and the social space of the spouse.

Accordingly, it's true that the mobile phone has evolved into an "instrument of expression and sociability" (Balasubramanian et al. 2010, p.195) for the women, both reinforcing and expanding their social circle. Yet, the study unveiled that there were certain social norms governing the use of mobile phone as an appropriate mode of communication in their societies. Palen, Salzman and Youngs (2000) point out that "[b]ecause ... [the] existence [of mobile phones] is relatively new, social norms around mobile phone use are still evolving such that judgements about appropriate use vary widely" (p.207). The study found that Sri Lanka being largely an oral culture, under certain instances face-to-face

communication was more valued than virtual communication. Accordingly, 80 per cent of the women perceived mobile phone as a rather inappropriate means to communicate with religious leaders like Buddhist monks, approximately 65 and 50 per cent to make invitations to relatives and friends, respectively, on occasions like weddings, and 60 per cent to communicate with superiors like children's school teachers. In these cases, the women perceived mobile phone as a rather impersonal or too casual means of communication that could make the receiver feel lack of respect vis-à-vis face-to-face communication, which was considered personal and more respectful by them. Therefore, as regards mobile phone communication, to a certain extent, these societies were restricted by "sociocultural barriers" of communication, which were likely to hinder the women's use of mobile phone as a social artifact.

Domestication of Technology

"One obvious problem for anyone using a mobile phone is learning how to use it" (Kurniawan, 2006, p.108). Therefore, apart from accessibility and affordability, it is necessary that the user is able to work with the phone or deal with its technology. However, as studies contend, telephone technology is associated with a gender bias, where it has been said that technical ability is as a masculine characteristic, while women are ignorant of or incapable of dealing with technology. Women feel fear and embarrassment when dealing with technology and it's the social influences that shape their unfriendly attitudes towards technology (e.g., Lee, 2005; Obayelu & Ogunlade, 2006). Likewise, in Sri Lanka gender processes have limited women's access to technology and in general, most poor rural women believe that technology would not be of much use to them (Jayaweera, Sanmugan, & Wanasundara, 2006). According to Zainudeen, Iqbal, and Samarajiva (2010), there exists a gender divide in access to "telephones" in Sri Lanka resulting in women's increased

marginalization from the developmental mainstream of the country and the world at large. Therefore, as literature documents, gender stereotyping has limited women's access to technology in Sri Lanka, which, in part, can also be an outcome of women's relatively low levels of education including technological literacy and poverty.

Given this broader sociocultural context of Sri Lanka together with the fact that the surveyed women hailed from poor rural backgrounds with no access to formal technology education, they gaining "mobile literacy" through their access to mobile phones within the household and thus, pacing up with the developments in the hi-tech world is certainly of greater significance within the context of their individual empowerment.

As Figure 1 illustrates, all women (100 per cent) were capable of individually handling the two very basic functions of a mobile phone, making and receiving calls. The majority of them had SMS literacy, where 70 per cent had the ability to view text messages, while a relatively lesser number, that is, approximately 55 per cent, had the ability to send text messages. In order to operate SMS, users require literacy in a language supported on mobile phones, which is English in Sri Lanka. Therefore, access to mobile phones not only gave majority of the women SMS literacy, but helped them in learning and improving English to a degree that they could use SMS on mobile phones by themselves. The study found that in using SMS, although the women communicated in Sinhala, the messages were actually typed in English letters as English was the only language available on their mobile phones. An example of such a short message is, "*oyata kohomada?*," meaning "*how are you?*".

However, having a foreign language, English in this case, as the language supported on their mobile phones was associated with some downsides, where some women expressed difficulty in gaining SMS literacy, while some others expressed their fear in using SMS as mistakes made by them in sending text messages could put them in an uneasy and

embarrassed position at the receiver's end. On the other hand, most of the women avoided using complex functions on the mobile phones, where the study found that (refer to Table 1) the women who were above 35 years of age and had only primary education scored relatively less on mobile phone literacy, while those who were at or below 35 years of age with secondary education or above scored relatively high on mobile literacy. Moreover, it was interesting to note that those women who lived in extended family households (nearly 60 per cent lived in extended family households) scored relatively high on mobile phone literacy, which can be attributed to their frequent and close contact with a broader circle of family support compared to those who lived in nuclear family households. However, it was surprising that there was no significant relationship between the fact that the women kept the mobile phones in their custody, or, in other words, had control over their phones, and the score of their mobile literacy. The same was observed for their legal ownership of the mobile phones, which was indexed in terms of their purchase of the mobile phones in their name, and their mobile literacy. On average, the women's mobile literacy rate was five point five out of nine.

On the other hand, access to mobile phones led the women learning new terminology, which was clearly indicative of their mobile phone experience. This terminology included "mobile", "phonebook", "SMS", "camera phone", "card connection", "reload", "voice mail", etc., all of which have made the way into the women's lexicon and thus, their local culture. As Palen et al. (2000) note, mobile telephony has its own terminology that users must add into their mental models. Likewise, given the affordability, some women expressed their interest in replacing their mobile phones periodically when new models with improved features are introduced to the market. This was witness to their interest in technology and gaining technological knowhow, and thus, pacing up with technological developments in the world. Lee (2005) contends that "as one controls a technology more freely, one experiences a

kind of empowerment, which in turn gives one an interest in more sophisticated technologies”.

Accordingly, given that the surveyed women were unemployment housewives from poor households with practically no knowledge of technology, their access to mobile phones within the household certainly changed this situation for good. Access to mobile phones triggered a process of discovery for them through which they learnt a technology and new terminology, gained mobile literacy, and used this knowledge for their own benefit, thereby experiencing a sense of technology domestication within the household. Access to mobile phones, thus gave the women a sense of control over technology. All these challenge the negative societal attitudes towards women as passive users of technology, or technophobic luddites. In short, the mobile phone together with its technological evolutions obviously provided the women a lifelong learning opportunity given that they have continued access to the technology.

Reduction of Information Poverty

Women in developing countries in particular face restrictions on freedom of mobility and thus, access to timely and accurate information. Within this context, studies have argued that mobile phone may function as a device through which women can reduce this information poverty by easily and effectively accessing reliable information, ranging from market information to sexual and reproductive health information. For instance, Lee (2009) points out that given the unique feature of portability and thus, the privacy of talking on the mobile phone, women can more easily report domestic violence or consult family planning agencies. Accordingly, the surveyed women interviewed on the above brought to the surface interesting findings chronicled below.

As Table 2 demonstrates, the women's access to mobile phones within the household both improved and facilitated their access to and use of the information needed. Accordingly, more than half of the women conceded that access to mobile phones improved their ability to contact health services, such as village midwife, dispensary and medical centers as well as security services, such as village police station and 119, Sri Lanka's emergency hotline, if needed, and obtain timely and accurate health and security information. Half of the women agreed that mobile phone provided them better and easy contact with administrative and political authorities, such as Grama Niladhari¹, local authorities like Pradeshiya Sabha, Sri Lanka Water Board, and Electricity Board, and obtain their service and information quickly and more effectively. More importantly, almost all the women used mobile phone as a means through which they could quickly and easily access information on situations of probable risk and uncertainty, particularly associated with their family members, such as finding out children's and spouse's whereabouts and delays in returning home, etc. Finally, almost all the women recognized mobile phone as a saver of both their time and money for travelling/transportation as they could more effectively and efficiently access information while at home without having to visit the particular source of information in person.

Resultantly, mobile phones helped the women better access and utilize public services in Sri Lanka, and served as an effective channel through which they could fulfil their information needs, which was simply a dial away. The following personal accounts of the women provide further evidence for this:

“My husband is a machine operator and we live alone in this rented out house. I am expecting my first child. So, having a mobile phone with me is very useful. I get appointments from the village midwife over my mobile. When I feel some change in my physical condition, I immediately contact her and get advice. It only takes a

¹ Sri Lanka's grass-roots level administrative officer.

second. Also, I call my husband, especially when he gets late to return home. With my condition, I cannot go and look for him by myself. When you think about the situation in our country today, if a woman gets lost, she can't ask for help from everyone. But if she carries a mobile phone with her, then she is safe because she can easily call the police or any other source of help. You can't carry a landline with you (Rani, personal communication, May 12, 2012)."

"My mobile phone is useful to me in various ways. I remember, one day a lorry ran over our pipeline and damaged it completely. So, I called the Water Board over my mobile phone and reported the incident. Later that day, they came to our house and fixed it. Actually, having a mobile phone with you saves a lot of time and money because the things that you had to go and get done in person before can now be done simply over the phone (Manel, personal communication, May 12, 2012)."

Therefore, the mobile phone was both an actual and a potential source of information to the women, whose access eased their information poverty, especially given their situation as dependent housewives faced with the gendered barriers to travel long distances frequently coupled with practical reasons, such as heavy domestic workload that largely kept them within the limits of the homestead and left them with little time to travel outside to obtain information. In this sense, access to mobile phones certainly expanded their array of choice and action for good compared to their prior situation during which they did not have access to mobile phones within the household.

Expansion of "Fun Space"

Historically, in Sri Lanka women relied on more feminine means to spend their leisure, such as sewing, knitting, making confectionaries and gardening, all of which kept the

women confined to the precincts of the homestead and reinforced the traditional gender norms deep-rooted in society. However, in the aftermath of Sri Lanka's economic liberalization in 1977, which resulted in a proliferation of electronic media including public television and radio broadcasting, there was an increasing shift in women conventional means of leisure to more modern or rather unconventional means, where women increasingly started to rely on public electronic media to spend their leisure at home. This shift also gave women an unforeseen exposure to the outside world.

Likewise, within the context of this study, the women mostly spent the little leisure available to them watching television and/or listening to radio, which often telecast/broadcast musical programs, dramas, movies, cookery and sewing programs that provide them entertainment while at home. Interestingly, the study unveiled that the women's access to mobile telephony within the household brought about a visible change in the way they perceived and used electronic media as a means to leisure and entertainment for them. In other words, access to mobile phones stepped up the women's use of public electronic media for leisure and entertainment with a different and a "newer" approach. Accordingly, approximately 40 per cent of the women reported using their mobile phones to engage with television and radio entertainment programs while at home. This basically involved them expressing their individual preference by sending text messages, which resembled casting one's vote, for instance, in selecting [eliminating] contestants, called "stars", in local television and radio entertainment programs, and also calling up and expressing their choice in other electronic media forums, such as television game shows.

Access to mobile phones, therefore, provided the women, to a relatively a lesser number though, with a greater opportunity to build up a livelier and more direct contact with public electronic media, express their choice, and be part of a greater circle of

communication, something which they have not experienced before. The testimonies chronicled below are two ideal examples of this particular experience of the women:

“My husband is a fish vendor. As a housewife, I am mostly at home taking care of my family. I don’t have much time or money for myself. So, having a mobile phone is very useful to me in this regard. Because other than calling my family and friends, I kind of take part in TV shows over my mobile phone. That is, I vote for contestants in Sri Lanka’s TV programs like superstar musical and dancing programs on my mobile. For that what I have to do is sending in a text message casting my vote for contestants of my choice. I really enjoy doing this. Then, I feel like that I am actually taking part in those programs. It does not cost me much either. It’s only around 50 cents per message (Mala, personal communication, May 12, 2012).”

“My mobile phone is like an essential to me. Of its many uses and benefits, one is easing my boredom and loneliness at home because my husband is away from me in the Middle East working as a mason. Over my mobile phone, I engage in TV entertainment programs like superstar musical entertainment by expressing my preference for contestants via SMS. It’s fun. I think over the mobile phone you can say things that you cannot say to one’s face (Kumari, personal communication, May 21, 2012).”

Accordingly, the mobile phone has made the women more active users of public entertainment compared to their situation prior to the access during which they portrayed themselves largely as passive users. As poor unemployed housewives, who could not afford or find time for cinema or any other source of entertainment outside of the home and whose social space was largely limited to the household, mobile phone provided the women a cheaper, and more active and “fun” means to leisure and entertainment simply within the

precincts of the household. Drawing on literature, Lee (2009) contends that mobile phones mitigate women's fear, isolation, loneliness and boredom by helping them cope better with confinement at home and physical separation from the ones near and dear to them. In this sense, the women's access to mobile phones within the household both expanded their space of fun as well as opened the doors for a rather non-traditional and "newer" space of fun, allowing them increased accessibility to public entertainment and expressing their preference, which demonstrated a clear manifestation of both their choice and power.

Obstacles to Benefit from Mobile Phones

This study found that regardless of the numerous benefits that the women enjoyed through their access to mobile telephony, they simultaneously faced some obstacles that hindered their ability to fully benefit from this opportunity. Amongst, the women as dependent housewives on the spouse hailing from poor households, their poverty and lack of access to own income were identified to be the most critical of all. None of their men had permanent income sources, but petty sources of income, such as fish vending, carpentry, masonry and driving, thus resulting in their household income to be both largely insufficient and subject to everyday fluctuations. Therefore, given the traditional gender norms, where their men had greater access to and control over household income coupled with other priorities of the household that needed to be met with limited financial resources, such as household basic needs, the women found it difficult to freely bear the cost of using and maintaining the mobile phone and take advantage of it. It was likely that the every purchase of call units pushed them further into poverty and thus, inability, where many women declared that *"if I have 100 rupees, I can think of hundred more important things to do instead of recharging my mobile phone"*. They perceived maintaining a mobile phone as an unnecessary household expenditure in certain ways, especially when one uses it without any

“control”. Accordingly, in terms of the women’s calling behaviour, it was noted that the incoming calls, which are at zero cost in Sri Lanka, outnumbered their outgoing calls in all the cases. This shows that although these women granted others easy accessibility to them, their accessibility of others was rather controlled, mainly because they did not have their own income to maintain their phones, but to rely on the spouse.

Further, as Table 3 illustrates, it was interesting to observe that a greater number of women (43 per cent), who had controlling power over their mobile phones (or, who kept the mobile phones in their custody) were legal owners of mobile phones (or, those who had the mobile phones purchased in their name). Therefore, many women, who legally owned their mobile phones had control over them, implying that those who lacked legal ownership did not have control over their mobile phones, but the spouse who kept the phone in his custody, thus limiting the women’s access and ability to take advantage of the opportunity. Mason (2005) notes that “obviously, control of assets or income normally is power-bearing, so if ... [accessing an asset] means controlling it, then ... [it] is likely to be empowering” (p.92).

Moreover, some women expressed their apprehension as to the possibility that mobile phones can trigger family conflicts and tension, especially between the women and their spouses. The probable causes of such conflicts/tension were largely associated with household allocations on maintaining the mobile phones, where the women faced the risk of being accused by the spouse for “reckless spending” or “wasting” on “unprofitable” phone calls, and issues likely to arise due to unknown callers on the mobile phone. All these acted as obstacles to the women’s use of mobile phones freely, thus reinforcing traditional power structures within the household.

Discussion and Conclusion

Premised upon the preceding findings of this study, it is apparent that the women's access to mobile telephony within the household accompanied a clear relative expansion of their individual space and freedom as dependent housewives, whose social space is usually bound within the household and the social sphere of the spouse, the conventional family provider and head of the household in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. This expansion of the women's space and freedom was manifested in many ways, where the study found that access to mobile phones both strengthened and expanded their social circle and support networks; led them gain mobile literacy, learn new terminology and thus, domesticate technology; reduced their information poverty; and helped them create a rather non-traditional and "newer" space of fun while at home fulfilling their duties and responsibilities as homemakers. Overcoming spatial, physical and temporal boundaries, mobile phones mitigated the women's loneliness, boredom, stress and fear by facilitating and frequenting connectivity to the ones close to them, and gave a sense to variety to their routine lifestyles as housewives. Access to mobile phones in fact gave the women control over a technology for their own ends. Accordingly, mobile phones expanded the women's freedom of choice and action, thus ensuring them a sense of empowerment vis-à-vis their situation before the access.

The women's use of the mobile phone was both socially and functionally-driven, where it served their acts of sociability, security and safety, and the need for information, and leisure and entertainment. Likewise, access to mobile phones made them part of Sri Lanka's popular "mobile phone culture", where mobile phone has become one of Sri Lanka's most popular and cheapest communication and social networking devices with a marked effect on both social and cultural shaping in the present day.

However, as it has been analysed above, the women's ability to further their choice and action via mobile telephony was impeded by some forces, basically their income poverty.

As poor dependent housewives, the women's limited access to household income apparently limited their use of the mobile phone, thus hindering their individual ability to benefit from mobile telephony. Obviously, one's the ability to benefit from mobile opportunities depends on frequent and continuous mobile communication, which requires the ability to bear the cost of communication. Within these households, conforming to traditional gender stereotyping the husband being the family provider and thus, the main decision-maker as regards household finances, the women's use of mobile phones was largely controlled by the spouse through the control of household finances. Therefore, within the context of this study, the mobile phone also functioned as an instrument through which the men heightened and reinforced their control over the women, asserting unequal gender relations within the household. However, apart from this partner control, the women's use of mobile phone was also subject to self-control due to household poverty that made them consider mobile phone maintenance a relatively less priority within the household.

Accordingly, this study recognizes that the mobile phone as an instrument of women's empowerment can more effectively deliver its benefits to women within a context where women are financially autonomous, or have the financial capability; unless women are unlikely to successfully reap the benefits offered by the mobile telephony. Therefore, this study advocates for the need for ensuring gender equality that would ensure equal opportunities and treatment for men and women including equal access to household economic resources. In sum, premised upon the women's mobile experience shared above, where it was evident that the mobile phone brought about change in the women's lives from "silence to voice", this study recognizes the significant role that the mobile phone can play in empowering women and therefore, recommends considering it as a tool in the policy agenda for women's empowerment in Sri Lanka.

Notes

¹ According to Sri Lanka's DCS (2010), of the country's entire population, Sinhalese consist of 82 per cent.

² Recall method of data collection is frequently used in many types of societal research and has a range of practical applications. First, it is a method that can be used for exploratory purposes in research areas where little is known. Second, it can also be used as a complement to data derived from other sources such as survey research, observations and in-depth interviews (Ladkin, 2004).

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Table 1

Mobile Phone Literacy by Main Demographic Characteristics of the Surveyed Women

(n=30)

	YES	[NO]
Age>35 [Age<=35]	3.92*	6.70*
Controlling power	5.22	6.25
Legal ownership	5.71	5.31
Nuclear family [Extended family]	4.36*	6.78*
Secondary education or above [Primary education]	7.63*	3.07*

Source: Own calculations based on survey data, 2012

Note: Mobile phone literacy was measured in terms of the women's individual ability to handle nine basic functions of a basic mobile phone identified in Figure 1. Thus, the literacy rate was calculated out of nine. For instance, if a woman had the ability to handle all nine functions, her mobile phone literacy index was nine out of nine.

*p<.05

Table 2

The Impact of Mobile Phones in Reducing Information Poverty of the Surveyed Women

Benefit	% of Total Respondents
Better and easy access to health and security services	53
Better and easy access to administrative and political authorities	50
Improved ability to uncertainty management (e.g., receiving information on children's and spouse's safety, security, and whereabouts, etc.)	97
Reduced time and cost for travelling/transportation to acquire information	90

Source: Own calculations based on survey data, 2012

Table 3

Controlling Power and Legal Ownership of Mobile Phones as a Percentage of Total Respondents (n=30)

		Controlling Power		
		YES	NO	Total
Legal Ownership	YES	43%*	3%*	46%
	NO	34%*	20%*	54%
		77%	23%	100%

Source: Own calculations based on survey data, 2012

*p<.05

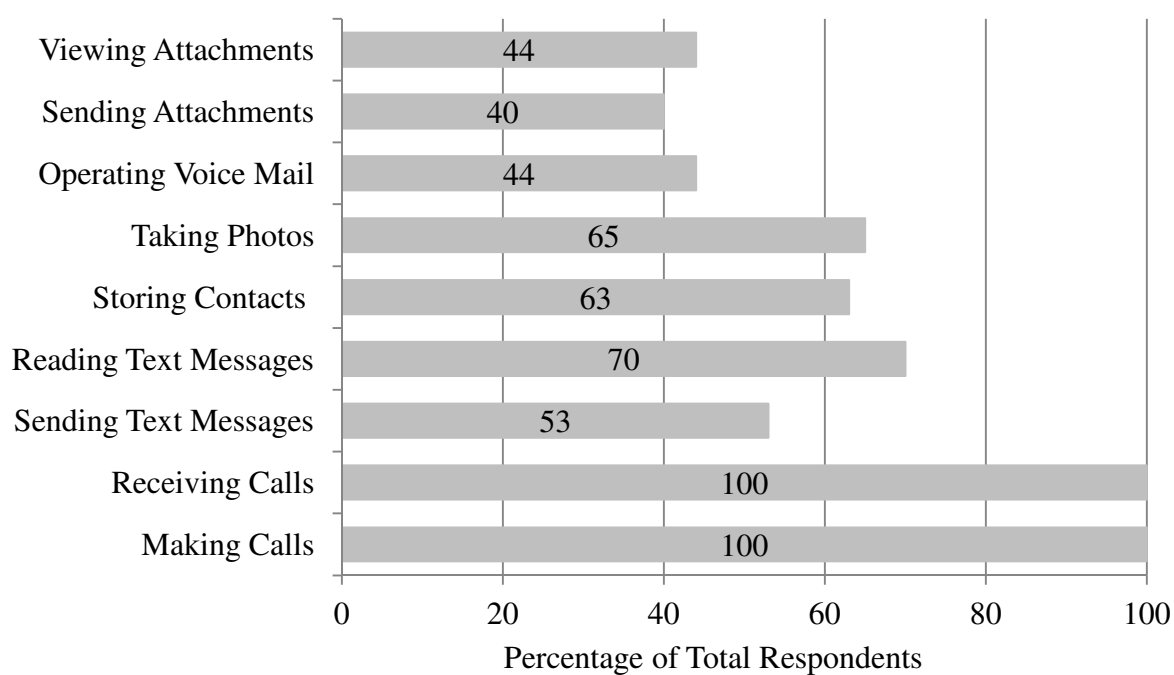


Figure 1. Mobile literacy by functions

Source: Own calculations based on survey data, 2012

 Appendix

Socio-demographic Status of Respondents

Description	% of Total Respondents
Age	
18-25	24
26-35	33
36-45	33
45+	10
Level of education*	
Primary	47
Secondary	50
University	3
No. of children	
0	13
1	47
2	20
3	10
4	7
5	3
Source of household income	
Unskilled/Low-skilled labour	100
Type of family household	
Nuclear	43
Extended	57

Household size

2-3 members	27
4-5 members	60
6 members	13

*In Sri Lanka, primary education is from grade one to five, while secondary education is from grade six to 13.

Source: Own calculations based on survey data, 2012