

## **Concept Note**

### **Two Day**

### **International Seminar**

### **On**

### **Politics of Gender, Health and Digital Initiatives in India**

Organised by

**Centre for Women Studies, MANUU**

**In collaboration with**

**Department of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad,**

**In association with**

RC 30- Digital Sociology, Indian Sociological Society, New Delhi.

**At**

**Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India**

## **Background and Rationale**

The intersection of gender, health, and digital initiatives represents a multifaceted, intricate, and expanding landscape. The Indian government has made significant strides in implementing policies and programmes aimed at promoting women's empowerment, establishing pertinent questions and

concerns, and addressing the substantial digital divide. However, numerous challenges remain in ensuring equitable access and benefits for all women. These challenges encompass cultural norms, limited access to technology, the necessity for gender-sensitive digital health policies, and the need to explore the evolving nuances of gender politics within the Indian socio-cultural context. It is essential to recognise that, in recent times, the intersection of gender, health, and digital technology has emerged as a crucial area of concern and intervention within India's development discourse. Although various health and digital initiatives have been introduced to enhance access, efficiency, and inclusivity, such as the National Digital Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and several gender-focused e-governance platforms, their design and implementation frequently reveal inherent gender biases and exclusions. Furthermore, issues related to caste, gender, and WASH as a policy initiative are of utmost importance in understanding the intersections of gender, caste, and class, and in scrutinising how the politics of gender and health shape policy initiatives and governance implementations.

In contemporary India, the convergence of gender, health, digital governance, and public infrastructure like WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) underscores the deeply embedded politics of access, representation, and citizenship. While health and sanitation are fundamental rights, they also constitute sites of structural inequality and gendered exclusions. Digital initiatives, though often

presented as democratic tools, frequently reproduce existing socio-economic hierarchies. This concept note examines how gender shapes—and is shaped by—state-led digital health and WASH programmes in India, viewed through the lenses of sociology and intersectionality. Gender is a performative and institutionalised structure (Butler, 1990; Risman, 2004) that organises bodies, roles, and responsibilities in both public and private spheres. Health and sanitation are not merely technical or biomedical domains but social institutions (Cockerham, 2013) governed by norms, access, and symbolic control. The digital turn in welfare governance (e.g., e-health, biometric authentication, mobile apps) introduces new mechanisms of visibility and invisibility, profoundly affecting women's health outcomes. The WASH sector—Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene—is a crucial yet underexplored aspect of gender and health discourse in India. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) and its offshoots aimed to address open defecation and sanitation access. However, these policies often neglect the lived realities of women and girls, who face challenges such as the absence or lack of proper toilets in schools and homes, increased risk of sexual violence during open defecation, entrenched menstrual hygiene taboos, insufficient infrastructure, and inadequate waste disposal facilities, particularly in urban poor localities and remote areas.

The gendered burden of care and sanitation labour, with women and Dalit sanitation workers primarily responsible

for domestic hygiene and manual scavenging, further illustrates the unequal distribution of responsibility and risk (Ray & Dhawan, 2021). The interface between gender, digital health governance, and WASH reflects technological advancement and the politics of recognition, redistribution, and representation (Fraser, 1997). A purely technocratic and gender-neutral approach will continue to obscure structural inequalities. Moreover, digital WASH initiatives such as mobile-based grievance redressal systems, geo-tagging toilets, or app-based monitoring of sanitation workers often overlook intersectional digital divides. For instance, many women cannot access app-based services due to a lack of smartphones or digital literacy, effectively excluding them from feedback mechanisms or service planning (Jha & Mishra, 2021).

India's digital public health infrastructure—manifest in schemes such as the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM), eSanjeevani, Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) Portal, and Poshan Tracker—claims to enhance efficiency and reach. However, gender disparities in mobile phone ownership, digital literacy, and socio-cultural norms hinder genuine access for significant segments of women, particularly in rural and marginalised communities (GSMA, 2022).

Additionally, women, transgender individuals, and other gender minorities often encounter structural barriers when trying to access digital tools and healthcare services due to socio-cultural norms, digital illiteracy, insufficient infrastructure,

and financial dependency. At the same time, the growing dependence on technology in public health prompts urgent concerns regarding data privacy, surveillance, and the digital divide—issues that disproportionately impact marginalised gender groups. Therefore, the politics of gender is crucial for comprehending both the potential and limitations of these initiatives. There is a pressing need to critically analyse how gender functions within these policy frameworks and influences the lived experiences of individuals navigating them.

Given this background, a sociologically informed, intersectional, and feminist lens is necessary to understand how digital initiatives can entrench or dismantle gendered hierarchies in India's health and sanitation sectors.

### Objectives of the Seminar

- ✚ To explore the gendered dimensions of health policies and digital initiatives in India.
- ✚ To examine how digital governance in health influences access, equity, and autonomy across gender identities.
- ✚ To interrogate the socio-political structures perpetuating gender inequalities in implementing these initiatives.
- ✚ To foster a dialogue among scholars, activists, policymakers, and health practitioners regarding inclusive and feminist approaches to digital health governance and related issues.

### Sub-themes

- ✚ Gender and access to digital health infrastructure
- ✚ Feminist critiques of digital health technologies
- ✚ Transgender and queer experiences in health and e-governance
- ✚ Surveillance, data justice, and reproductive rights
- ✚ Digital literacy, rural-urban divide, and gender
- ✚ Community health workers and gendered labour in digital health systems
- ✚ The influence of caste, class, and intersectionality on digital and health policy impacts
- ✚ WASH and Sexual Reproductive Health
- ✚ AI and algorithmic bias in health technology through a gender lens

### Expected Outcomes

- ❖ A nuanced understanding of the political economy of gender in health-tech governance.
- ❖ Policy recommendations for gender-sensitive and inclusive digital health programmes.
- ❖ A collaborative academic network for future research on gender, health, and technology.
- ❖ A publication of selected papers in an edited volume or journal special issue.

### Target Participants

Academics, researchers, public health professionals, technologists, policymakers,

gender rights activists, and students from sociology, gender studies, public health, development studies, political science, and information technology.

#### **Organising Department/Institution**

The Centre for Women Studies, in collaboration with the Department of Sociology, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, in association with RC30- Digital Sociology, Indian Sociological Society, New Delhi, as an all-India Subject Platform.

#### **Date and Venue**

**August 5-6, 2025**, In Person (offline)  
International Seminar **at Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, Telangana (India)**

#### **Patron**

Prof. Syed Ainul Hasan  
Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, MANUU

#### **In Guidance**

Prof. Ishtiaque Ahmed, Registrar, MANUU

#### **Seminar Director**

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#### **Organizing Committee**

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15<sup>th</sup> July, 2025

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