



Digital Equity for All

Closing the Digital Divide for Dalits in Bangladesh

Digital Transformation and Dalits in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is experiencing rapid digital transformation, with over 186 million mobile connections and increasing internet penetration. Yet, this growth masks deep inequalities in access and participation. Dalits, an estimated 6.5 million people historically marginalized due to caste and relegated to low-status occupations such as sweeping, leatherwork, and menial labor, remain disproportionately excluded from digital spaces. The digital divide reflects not only technical gaps but centuries-old structural discrimination, intersecting with poverty, gender, and rural-urban disparities (IDSN, 2021; DataReportal, 2025).

Dalits' exclusion from digital technologies is rooted in historical patterns of marginalization. Over generations, Dalits have faced systemic barriers to education, occupational mobility, and social integration. Social stigma and caste-based segregation have limited their access to quality schooling, formal employment, and civic participation. Consequently, Dalit communities often have low literacy, low income, and limited social networks. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, Dalits are not recognized in the national census, creating a critical data gap that leaves them invisible in policy and planning interventions, reinforcing cycles of exclusion in education, livelihoods, and civic participation (IDSN et al., 2023).

While Bangladesh's digital transformation promises new opportunities in education, financial inclusion, and governance, these opportunities largely remain inaccessible for Dalits. Without targeted interventions, digital growth risks replicating and entrenching historical inequities, leaving the most marginalized communities further behind.

Historic and Structural Discrimination

The exclusion of Dalits from digital spaces cannot be understood in isolation from the historical patterns of caste-based discrimination in South Asia. In Bangladesh, as in neighboring countries, Dalits have historically been assigned low-status occupations and relegated to segregated settlements. These occupations, including sweeping, leatherwork, and other menial labor, carry deep social stigma that limits interaction with mainstream society, access to education, and participation in public life (IDSN, 2021).

Occupational marginalization has long-term consequences. Limited access to quality schooling and skill development constrains the ability of Dalits to engage in higher-paying or formal-sector jobs. Income disparities resulting from these structural inequities make it difficult for Dalit households to afford technology, internet subscriptions, or digital literacy programs. Thus, the digital divide is a contemporary manifestation of historical social exclusion, translating occupational and caste-based marginalization into technological disadvantage.

Dalit women face compounded challenges due to intersectional discrimination. Gender norms restrict access to education, mobility, and employment, while caste-based barriers amplify these limitations. Women are less likely to own digital devices, participate in online learning, or engage with e-governance platforms, further reducing the community's overall digital participation (IDSN, 2023).

Structural Barriers to Digital Inclusion

Bangladesh has made notable progress in digital infrastructure, with significant mobile network coverage and broadband expansion. However, these structural gains do not equate to equitable access. Dalits face multifaceted barriers. Affordability remains a central challenge; low household income limits access to smartphones, computers, and internet subscriptions. Even where mobile networks are available, poor service quality, high costs, and lack of localized content reduce meaningful engagement.

Digital literacy and skills present another critical barrier. Limited schooling among Dalit communities hinders understanding of online information, safe internet practices, and the effective use of digital platforms for education, employment, or civic engagement. These gaps in literacy are compounded by social discrimination, both offline and online, which restrict participation in digital communities and e-governance initiatives.

This combination of structural and social barriers creates a technological echo of social inequality, where those historically marginalized continue to be excluded from emerging opportunities in education, livelihoods, and governance (Hasan, 2025).

Impacts on Education

Digital exclusion directly affects Dalit children's educational outcomes. Online learning platforms, digital libraries, and remote classrooms require access to devices, connectivity, and digital literacy—resources largely unavailable to Dalit families in rural or segregated settlements. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted these disparities: while wealthier and urban children were able to continue education through digital means, many Dalit students were cut off, exacerbating existing educational gaps (IDSN et al., 2023).

The consequences are long-term and multifaceted. Dalit students experience lower enrollment and retention rates in secondary and higher education, limited exposure to

STEM and vocational learning, and reduced competitiveness in the labor market. Without caste-disaggregated data, policymakers are unable to quantify these educational gaps or design interventions that specifically target the most marginalized students.

Economic and Livelihood Impacts

Digital technologies have transformed labor markets, financial services, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Yet, Dalits' historic occupational marginalization limits their ability to benefit from these changes. Without access to online marketplaces, digital banking, or remote work platforms, Dalit communities remain dependent on low-paying, caste-assigned jobs (DataReportal, 2025).

This digital exclusion perpetuates structural poverty, reducing the community's capacity to leverage e-commerce and microfinance, limiting access to vocational or employment information, and constraining entrepreneurial activity. In essence, digital exclusion reproduces historical economic marginalization and reduces resilience to socio-economic shocks.

Civic Participation and Digital Rights

Digital exclusion also limits Dalits' ability to participate in civic life. Access to e-governance services, online grievance mechanisms, and digital public platforms is essential for claiming rights, accessing social protection, and participating in policy processes. Dalits' limited access reduces their visibility in governance and policy discourse, weakening accountability and inclusion (IDSN et al., 2023).

The absence of robust legal safeguards for digital rights exposes Dalits to online harassment, identity theft, and discrimination. For Dalits who are also religious minorities, these risks extend to targeted hate speech and the potential for digital spaces to be weaponized to incite violence. Digital invisibility and vulnerability are thus a continuation of historical occupational and social marginalization, translating centuries-old inequities into the 21st century.

Policy Blind Spots and Structural Gaps

Bangladesh's digital policies often assume universal access, failing to account for historical, structural, and social barriers. Programs for digital literacy, e-governance, and financial inclusion often target the "average" population, overlooking marginalized communities such as Dalits. Without caste-disaggregated data, targeted interventions, and proactive measures, these policies are unlikely to reach those most in need.

International development frameworks, including the SDGs, emphasize leaving no one behind, yet Dalits remain largely absent from national reporting and monitoring processes. Unless these gaps are addressed, technological progress risks entrenching inequality rather than reducing it (Hasan, 2025).

Recommendations

- Integrate Dalit digital inclusion explicitly into national and international development agendas, ensuring alignment with SDG monitoring frameworks to make the community visible in policy evaluation.
- Institutionalize caste- and religion-disaggregated data collection, including in the national census, household surveys, and educational and labor statistics, to inform targeted interventions.
- Strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks to guarantee Dalits' digital rights, including access, privacy, protection from online harassment, and freedom from hate speech, with particular attention to vulnerabilities as religious minorities.
- Scale community-driven digital literacy programs across Dalit settlements, emphasizing safe online practices, civic engagement, and economic empowerment, with special focus on women and youth.
- Ensure equitable digital infrastructure and platform design, including affordable devices, reliable connectivity, localized content, and inclusive e-governance services accessible to low-literacy users.
- Engage civil society organizations working for Dalit causes in the design, monitoring, and governance of digital policies, ensuring community perspectives shape interventions and resource allocation.
- Mobilize international technical and financial support for initiatives addressing Dalit digital inclusion, ensuring that technology becomes a tool for empowerment rather than the perpetuation of inequality.
- Promote awareness campaigns for the general citizens, policymakers, and service providers on the historic and structural discrimination affecting Dalits, fostering social inclusion alongside digital inclusion initiatives.

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