

Teleuse@BOP3 findings in brief

Making the decision to adopt: A gender perspective

Mobile phone ownership is lower among females than males in the South Asian countries studied; in the Southeast Asian countries studied, there are no major differences (Figure 1). Further statistical analysis showed that gender has a significant impact on mobile phone adoption at the BOP in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (but not Sri Lanka); that is, in these three countries, being a woman significantly decreases the probability of owning a mobile phone.

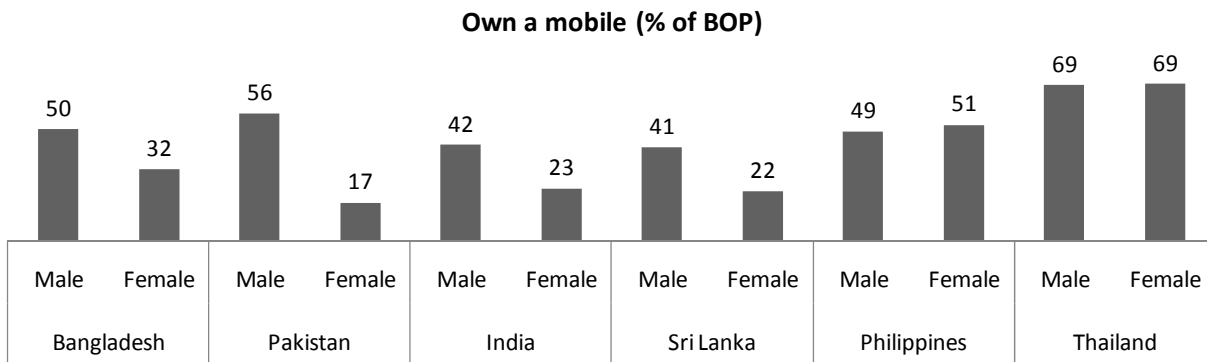


Figure 1: Mobile phone ownership at the BOP: Male vs. female respondents

Source: Teleuse@BOP3 survey, LIRNEasia, 2008

Among South Asian female mobile phone owners, where the respondent herself did not make the decision to get connected, it was most often a male member of her family who made that decision for her (Figure 2); in the Philippines and Thailand, the decision was more often made by herself. In contrast to the South Asian countries, in Thailand where the decision was not made by herself, it was often made by another female member of her family (in fact, women were even seen to be playing a part in the decision for males to get connected in Thailand too).

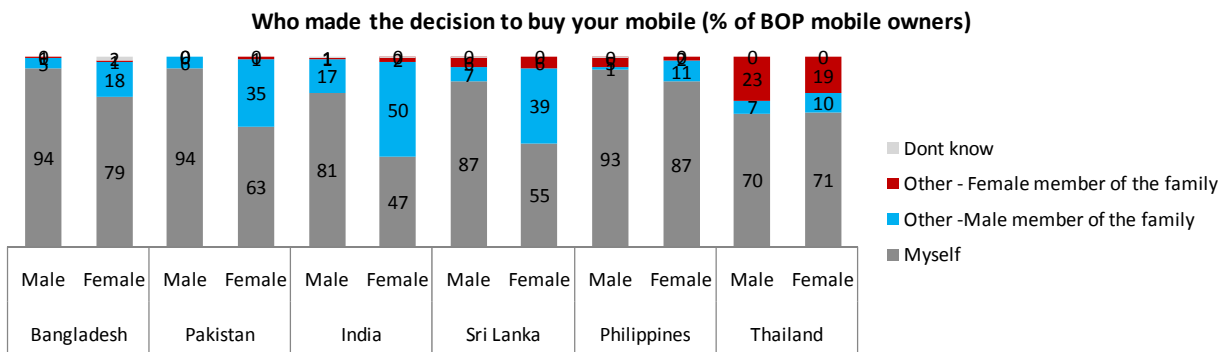


Figure 2: Who made the decision to purchase the respondent's mobile: Male vs. female respondents

Source: Teleuse@BOP3 survey, LIRNEasia, 2008

Southeast Asian women are more independent mobile owners and users. They have better phone, upgrade more often, and are often the primary phone owners in the house. They do not face any restrictions on use either, and are often capable of reloading their mobile credit from their own income.

In contrast, in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh female respondents, especially housewives, seem to have a difficulty in perceiving the phone as theirs although they may have received it from their husbands or brothers almost up to two years back. The women see these phones variably as a phone for the house or their husbands' first phone; not as their own. This is largely because of the way in which the phones have come to them.

Vaishali from Mumbai finds it difficult for her to consider her current mobile as her own since it was her husband's and he initially used to leave it at home. Even now when her husband has another mobile and she is free to consider this handset as her own, she feels it is a house phone more than her own phone. Acquiring a phone whether through purchase or handing down, is not easy for the female respondents in South Asia. Their mobile phones are acquired after repeated mentions, hints and requests ranging from the casual to the forceful.

Often women are late users and owners, largely because they are receiving their first handsets from male family members, at least after two years of the first purchase of the device.

Most South Asian housewives have had very little say in the choice in purchase or transitioning of the phone as opposed to their Southeast Asian counterparts. Generally, younger wives have been taken to mobile shops to see various models while older wives have simply been given a phone that their husbands chose to purchase keeping in mind their understandings of what their wives will be able to manage, the male member's tentative budget and their own perceptions around ease of use and durability.

The younger wives, on the other hand, being more comfortable with technology, willing to explore and overall more aware of the options available in the market, have been taken to shops for preliminary surveys. Samira Alam from Dhaka mentions that she had selected the model which she wanted during such a visit but her husband bought her a lower end model without taking her consent on another day because he felt he cannot afford her choice. Consequently, while she is satisfied about having a mobile, she believes that one day she will purchase a phone of her choice.

In South Asia, in most households in general, younger males are instrumental in mobile adoption. It is observed that sons and brothers guided their parents, siblings, relatives and others, toward the purchase of a specific SIM depending on their judgment of various networks, cost efficiency and the number of other known people on the same network. In many cases, these young men even went to the extent of purchasing the SIMs themselves for people who sought their inputs and taught them how to use it as well. These male initiators, however, purchase the SIMs taking money from the user who needs the SIM.

Male respondents above 25 years of age, who are unmarried, married or have older parents, suggest that they need to have a phone to be able to connect with their girlfriends, wives and parents at any point of time to ensure their safety as well as to remain contactable from their side as well. Such a need arises with growing urban crimes in households as well as the fact that wives, daughters and sisters are often ill-treated in India by in-laws. Husbands worry about the security of their wives in their households while brothers worry about their mother's health and sister's safety in her in-laws place. As a result, in India for sure and to some extent in Bangladesh and Pakistan as well, it is seen that male members of

the households like fathers, elder brothers or husbands not only buy phones for themselves but also buy phones for their girlfriends, wives, daughters and mothers as soon as they are able to afford a second phone. Many even kept their own phones at home, considering that there may be more emergencies rising from home than with them in their work places. Men in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, are more likely to buy phones to bring their mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters into connectivity whereas daughters are given phones less immediately by fathers and require the insistence on their security by another female member of the household, especially the mother. In Sri Lanka, men are seen to be more likely to give their own first handsets to their sisters while purchase new ones for their girlfriends.

In the Southeast Asian countries, however, no such needs to protect or be aware of their women's status are felt by men. Women are more independent and are buying phones out of their free will and on their own. The need to connect with people back in the native village and conversely the need to connect with people who have moved out for work is also seen as one of the factors leading to the adoption of mobile phones. Not just mobile adoption but even the phone usage of BOP respondents in Thailand and Philippines, is substantially driven by the fact of their close contacts living in a different place.

LIRNEasia is a regional information and communication technology (ICT) policy and regulation think tank based in Colombo and active across the Asia Pacific.

“Teleuse at the bottom of the pyramid” (Teleuse@BOP) is a series of multi-country studies of how the lowest socioeconomic groups, or bottom of the pyramid (BOP) make use of telecom and other ICTs in their lives. Teleuse@BOP3, the third of these studies was conducted between 2008 and 2009. The quantitative phase involved 11,000 sample surveys of the BOP in six countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka) in late 2008. The qualitative phase involved focused group discussions, in depth interviews and mini ethnographies conducted in the same countries in early 2009. “Teleusers” are defined as those who have used a phone (their own or someone else's) to make or receive a call in the last three months. More at www.lirneasia.net