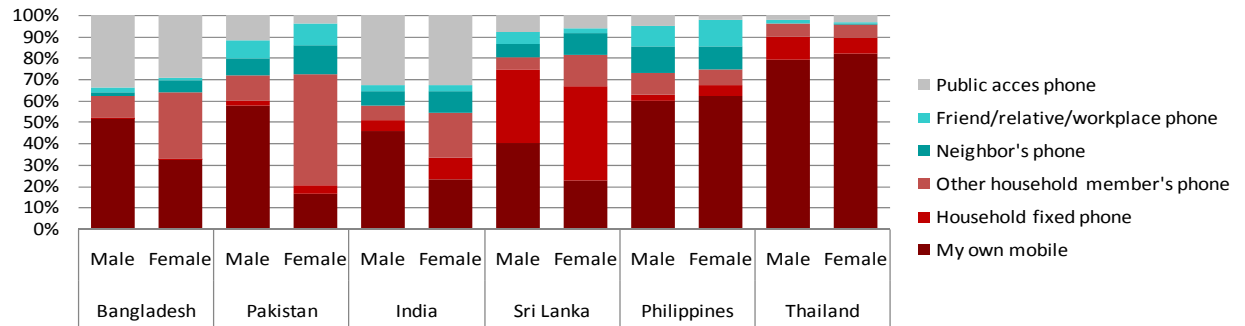


Teleuse@BOP3 findings in brief

Female use of public phones



The quantitative study showed that public phones, including PCOs, were mentioned as the most frequently used method of making calls by Indian women at the bottom of the pyramid (SEC groups D and E). Indian men at the BOP relied more on the mobile, yet their use of public phones was quite intensive.

In the qualitative study, it was found that in Indian female respondent showed a preference for public phones, unlike in any of the other countries in South Asia. Women are using these phones to make calls when they do not have access to mobile or fixed phones, when their phone credit is close to exhausted, and in order to have private conversations with their parents and siblings away from their immediate family. The Indian women used public phones on a regular basis, from once a week to once a month. Female respondents in both west and south India were of one voice in saying that there were public phones near their homes that they were perfectly comfortable in using, and have used for a long time. While mobiles have become affordable in the past two to three years, they have a much longer experience with public booths.

Most of these women had started using the landline booths when they got married and moved away from their parents. At that time, they used to call their parents once a month. The calling frequency had increased to once a week with declining call prices. Women are comfortable using these booths: they are enclosed ensuring safety and privacy in most cases and provide a place to sit while talking. They prefer to talk in privacy with their family members from a booth. With their home phones, the husband and children and others would overhear what was said. The female respondents reported that using public phones was never a hassle as the shops are near their homes; the shopkeepers at times allow them credit if they run out of money; and they also keep messages for women who did not have phones. In these booths, the number to be called can be both dialled by the shop owner or by the caller, which was seen as a plus. None of the Indian female respondents had been disturbed while talking from a public phone booth. They believe that using public phones is better than using other people's home phones since it is a cash transaction and they can make as many calls as they wish.

In contrast, in Pakistan female respondents from urban areas reported that public phones were rather far from their homes, leading to reduced or non use. Family members do not

consider their need to call important enough to allow them to go to these public phones on their own. In true emergencies, they will accompany them. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, female respondents claim to have been subject to verbal abuse and character defamation if they are seen at telephone shops too frequently. In both the countries, women are accused of being “loose characters” and talking to their lovers and are questioned on their need to talk so much. In Bangladesh, for example, a single working woman, who lives in a paid accommodation, would be taunted by older men of the neighbourhood if she went to a reload shop on two consecutive days. She would have to bear their comments as she needed the reload but at the same time, she would feel humiliated. Having experienced this on several occasions, she now prefers to walk a distance to another reload shop far from her hostel simply to avoid such unpleasantness. Female respondents in both these countries rely extensively on their spouses, brothers-in-law, other male members of the family and even children, to reload value on their phones. This is ironic in the case of Bangladesh where Grameen’s women manned booths are considered to be a pioneering effort in equalizing telecom availability to both genders. However, it should be pointed out that female ownership of public phones in urban centers like Dhaka are quite rare but are likely to be more prevalent in the interior.

South East Asian countries do not show any such restrictions on female use of public space for communication purposes. In the Philippines, male and female respondents use public phones only when they are out of credit on their mobile phones and rarely when they have to talk to their family members living in distant places who own a landline connection as it is cheaper to make calls from a landline to another landline. With the introduction of mobile phones, the use of public phones is already on the decline in Thailand. There are no significant differences in women’s motivation to use public phones and no socio-cultural factors influencing their use of public phones except for the fact that mobiles offer more privacy than public phones.

“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