



## Mitigating Women's Safety Concerns with Mobile: Vodafone Idea India Sakhi service

### Introduction

Mobile has transformed the lives of billions of people, but not everyone has benefited equally. In low- and middle-income countries, 433 million women still do not own a mobile phone and half of these women live in South Asia. Although the number of women who have access to and use mobile phones has increased significantly in recent years, a wide and persistent gender gap remains in mobile ownership and use across low- and middle-income countries. Even when women do own a mobile

phone, they are far less likely than men to use it beyond basic voice calls, especially for more transformational services like mobile internet.<sup>1</sup>

The gender divide in mobile ownership and use is driven by a complex set of social, economic and cultural barriers. These barriers can be classified by five dimensions of mobile access and use: accessibility, affordability, usability, relevance, and safety and security.

To address women's safety concerns and remove some of the barriers women face to owning and using a mobile phone, Vodafone India launched Sakhi, a mobile-based safety service

for women. The service has three features: emergency alert, emergency balance and private recharge. With Sakhi, Vodafone India has two main aims: to respond to the threat of gender-based violence in India and to develop services that respond to the needs of women. Since its launch in October 2018, the Sakhi service has already reached millions of women, making a significant contribution to their well-being and delivering commercial value to the operator.

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1. GSMA, 2019, [The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019](#)

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This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the early impact of Sakhi and provides some practical recommendations for mobile operators and other stakeholders interested in reaching female customers with a similar service. Conducted in Uttar Pradesh in February 2019, the research aims to assess the impact of the proposition

on women's mobile adoption and use, documenting early evidence of social impact as well as the effect on the Vodafone brand.

This case study is a result of interviews, ethnographic immersions and peer triads conducted with subscribers and non-subscribers of Sakhi from middle and lower

socio-economic classes who own a smartphone, feature phone or basic phone. (see methodology on the following page ).

*Sakhi subscribers, as defined in this report, are adult female customers of Vodafone who have subscribed to the Sakhi service, which launched in October 2018.*

## Key findings from the research

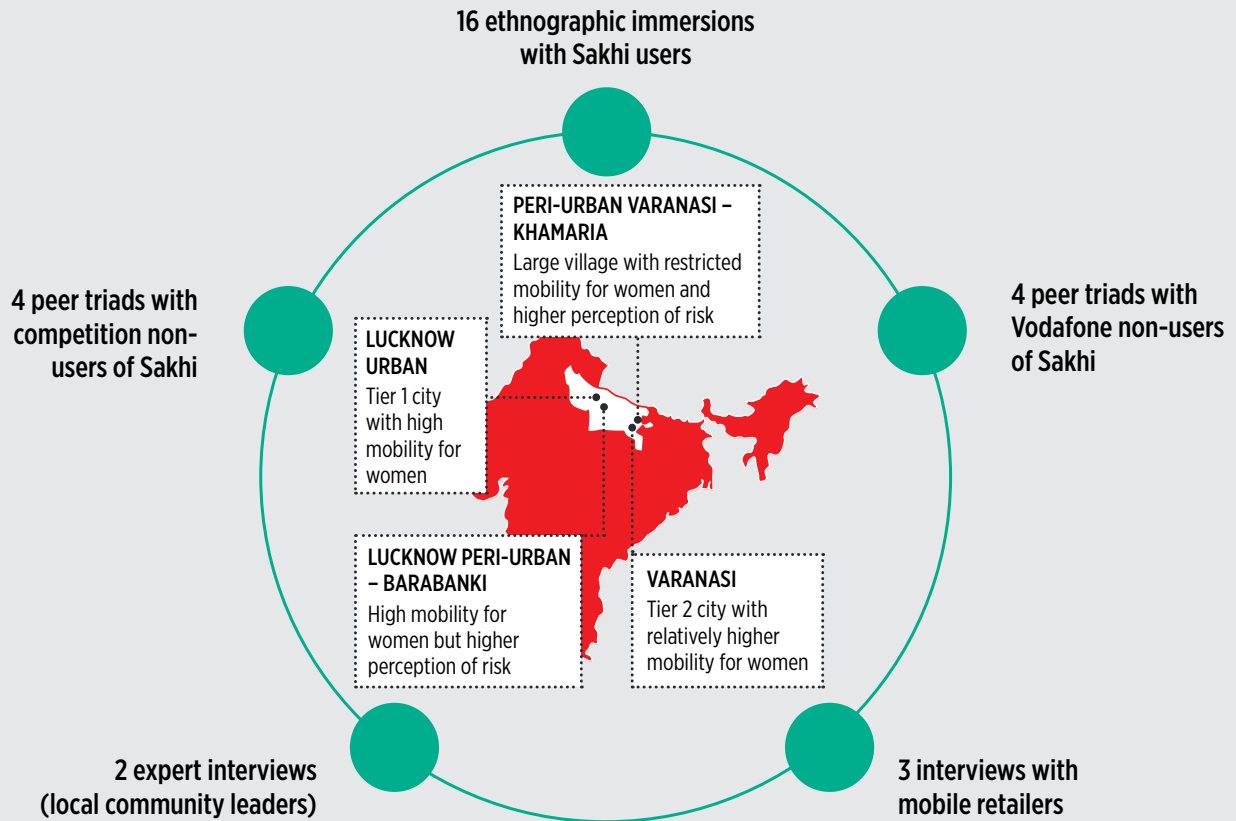
Our research in Uttar Pradesh found that:

- Vodafone India's Sakhi proposition taps into a key motivation for mobile adoption: safety through connectivity.
- Current Sakhi subscribers tend to be aspirational and value personal agency, and often become advocates of Sakhi. Word of mouth between women appears to have been a primary driver of early subscriptions.
- Sakhi increases women's sense of confidence and strengthens their belief that change and new opportunities are possible.
- Sakhi has had a positive impact on the Vodafone brand. Vodafone India's data demonstrates that the Sakhi service has had a positive influence on brand loyalty and increased mobile use.





# Qualitative methodology to measure Sakhi's appeal and early impact



**Socio-economic class:**  
NCCS B, C and D (even split)

**Mobile phone ownership:**  
Smartphone, feature and basic phones

**Age:** 18 to 40

**Life stage and mobility:**  
Students, employed and housewives (even split)

**Sakhi usage:**  
Mix of subscribers that have and have not used the features; non-subscribers but Vodafone users; competition brand users

*Timing of fieldwork: February 2019*



# An unfortunate truth: Safety is a growing issue for women in India

A combination of factors has put India at the bottom of the global Gender Development Index.<sup>2</sup> India also ranks among the worst countries in the world for gender-based violence. A particularly violent rape in Delhi in 2012<sup>3</sup> raised awareness of the safety risks women face in their everyday lives. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Delhi rank as India's most unsafe states for women.<sup>4</sup>

In UP, women are among the most vulnerable, unhealthy and poor. The state also ranks lowest in protection, with violence, abuse and neglect being part of daily life

for many women. In 2017, a widely publicised case exposed retailers in UP for selling the mobile numbers of females to predatory males.<sup>5</sup> However, this research, as well as other studies conducted by Quantum over many years in the region, suggest the prospect for change. While strong gender norms prevail, including limited mobility among other restrictions, some changes in attitudes are nonetheless emerging: young women are challenging norms, refusing to stay at home, standing up for other women and pushing boundaries. For example, there is a focus on investing in education as one woman told us:

“ I could not get a scholarship and could not continue my education despite good grades. I know my parents' circumstances, so I don't blame them either. I have taken up a babysitter's job, which enables me to bear my own expenses. My school friend is now at IIT... I see her life and I know that I want that for myself. I am saving up and also preparing for banking exams. ”

Working woman, 23–30 years old, urban, Varanasi

2. The Gender Development Index measures gender gaps in human development achievements: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GDI>

3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Delhi\\_gang\\_rape](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape)

4. [https://www.planindia.org/sites/all/themes/plan\\_india/images/pdf/gender-vulnerability-index.pdf](https://www.planindia.org/sites/all/themes/plan_india/images/pdf/gender-vulnerability-index.pdf)

5. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/up-phone-recharge-shops-sell-phone-numbers-of-women-reports-4505270/>

## The role of mobile in women's safety in India

The rise of information and communications technology (ICT) has certainly played a role in changing attitudes. Despite concerns about digital safety, there is evidence that women are more empowered when they can access and use ICTs.<sup>6</sup> For example, mobile phones can make women feel safer and reduce their vulnerability (see next page). Accessing and using mobile can also have wider socio-economic benefits, both in terms of helping to accelerate digital and financial inclusion for women and creating a significant commercial opportunity for the mobile industry.



6. ODI, 2015, [Do digital information and communications technologies increase the voice and influence of women and girls?](https://www.odi.org/publications/12042-do-digital-information-and-communications-technologies-increase-the-voice-and-influence-of-women-and-girls?)



# The paradox of mobile safety

There is a paradoxical relationship between mobile technology and women's safety.

On one hand, mobile phones can make women feel safer and more connected, such as providing a way for a woman to get help if she is in trouble or reassurance when going out. A 2015 GSMA Connected Women survey found that 68 per cent to 94 per cent of female respondents in 11 low- and middle-income countries reported feeling safer with a mobile phone or that they would feel safer if they owned one.<sup>i</sup> A recent study by Vodafone Foundation and Girl Effect found that "mobile phones make girls and boys feel safer, allowing them to call when

they need help or communicate an accident or emergency"<sup>ii</sup>

At the same time, research has consistently shown that safety concerns about mobiles are an important barrier to ownership and use, with women perceiving safety as an issue more commonly than men.<sup>iii</sup> Mobiles (and the internet) have become conduits for threats that have always existed (e.g. bullying) as well as new ones (e.g. online identity theft). Mobile-related safety concerns include unsolicited harassing phone calls and text messages, online harassment, mobile theft and feeling unsafe or uncomfortable when purchasing or topping up devices.<sup>iv</sup>

However, safety concerns and a perception that mobile phones and

the internet pose threats, should not be used as an excuse for denying women access.<sup>v</sup> Instead, emphasis should be placed on the ability of mobile technology to empower women and enhance women's personal safety, and how to make women feel safer when using mobile.

- i. GSMA, 2015, [Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries](#).
- ii. Girl Effect and Vodafone Foundation, 2019, [Real girls, real lives, connected](#).
- iii. Truecaller, 8 March 2018, [Truecaller Insights reveals: Women report more unwanted calls than men; Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment](#).
- iv. GSMA, 2018, [A framework to understand women's mobile-related safety concerns in low- and middle-income countries](#).
- v. Broadband Commission Working Group on the Digital Gender Divide, 2017, [Recommendations for action: bridging the gender gap in Internet and broadband access and use](#).



# India has one of the widest gender gaps in mobile ownership among low- and middle-income countries

Access to a mobile is widely seen as a sign of modernity and empowerment. However, India has one of the widest gender gaps in mobile ownership among low- and middle-income countries. Only 59 per cent of women in India have a mobile compared to 80 per cent across low- and middle-income countries overall. Indian women are 26 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 56 per cent less likely than men to use mobile internet (compared to 10 per cent and 23 per cent, respectively across low- and middle-income countries).<sup>7</sup>

Although India is diverse in many ways, the mobile gender gap is

persistent across many segments of the population, suggesting that it cannot simply be explained by socioeconomic characteristics. Our research in Uttar Pradesh identified both economic and normative barriers to mobile phone adoption and use,<sup>8</sup> such as moral, emotional and cultural barriers. Social and gender norms are a particular barrier to mobile adoption for women.

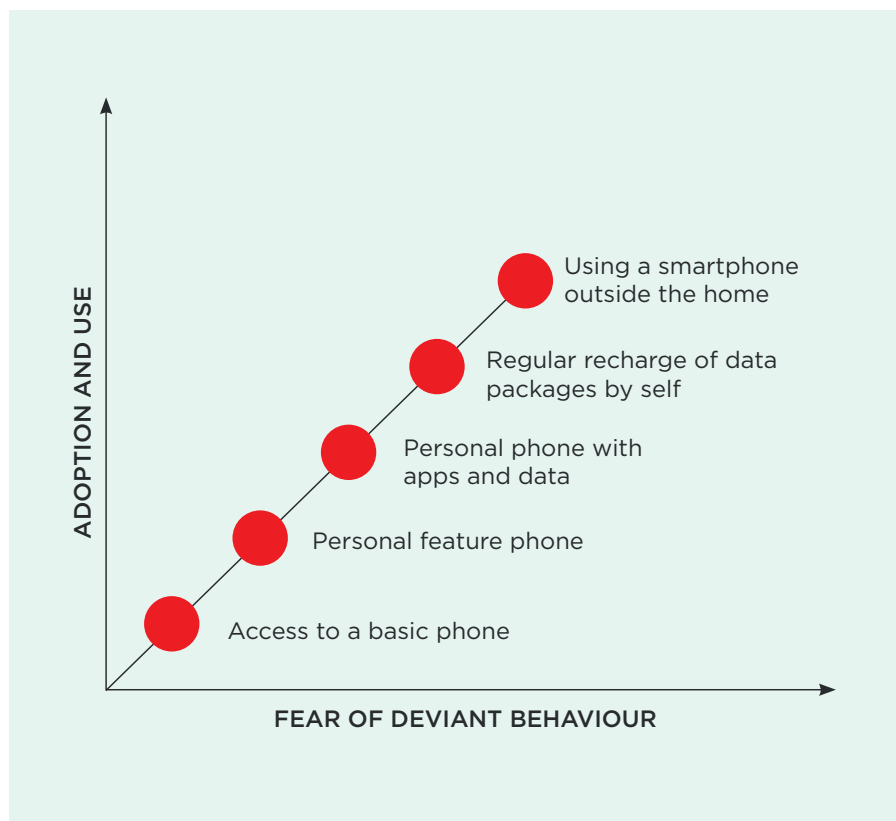
For gatekeepers,<sup>9</sup> a mobile phone is often seen as a device that encourages deviant behaviour. As women progress through the stages of mobile adoption and use, their autonomy increases in tandem with gatekeepers' fears and perceptions

of deviant behaviour (Figure 1). As a result, gatekeepers control the type of handset and tariff plans that women can use. Meanwhile, women understand that their connectivity is conditional and regulate their usage by leaving their device open to the household, limiting expenditure and self-policing the online content they consume.

7. GSMA, 2019, [The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019](#).  
 8. For more information on economic and normative barriers in India see: [Harvard Kennedy School, 2018, A tough call: understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in India](#).  
 9. A gatekeeper in this research is described as a person who has the power to control or influence women's attitudes and behaviours.

Figure 1

Relationship between women's adoption and use of mobile devices and gatekeepers' fear of deviant behaviour







# Vodafone Idea Sakhi: A service aimed at mitigating women’s safety concerns and closing the mobile gender gap

Vodafone launched its Sakhi service nationally in India in October 2018. The service was introduced to address key barriers women face to accessing and using mobile, as well as women’s concerns about personal safety, both the safety issues and threats that may arise from owning a mobile and general safety concerns that women experience that mobile could help address.

**“** With Vodafone Sakhi, we are taking forward our long-term commitment of driving inclusion and addressing real societal problems. This unique, free of cost service will make it convenient for women to step out fearlessly and fulfil their aspirations.<sup>10</sup> **”**

 **Avneesh Khosla, Operations Director - Marketing, Vodafone Idea Limited**

10. [http://microsite.vodafone.in/digitalpressrelease/VF\\_Sakhi/HTML-V2/index.html](http://microsite.vodafone.in/digitalpressrelease/VF_Sakhi/HTML-V2/index.html)

## How Sakhi addresses women’s safety concerns

Tech-driven safety products and services are proliferating in India, including apps such as Truecaller. However, Vodafone’s Sakhi service is different as it was developed

to work on smartphones, feature phones and basic phones. Customers must be registered as a woman to access the free opt-in service. The three features of the service aim to

address women’s concerns about physical safety (anonymous top-up) as well as general safety (emergency alert and balance).

### Sakhi’s three safety features

1.



#### Emergency Alerts

*Highlight of the Sakhi journey*

In case of an emergency, a location alert can be sent to up to 10 pre-registered contacts, even without mobile internet on the phone

2.



#### Emergency Balance

*A sign of Sakhi’s commitment to women’s safety*

Offers 10 minutes of free calling from anywhere in case of an emergency

3.



#### Private Number Recharge

A dummy 10-digit code unique to each subscriber is provided to ensure the privacy of mobile number when topping up at retail outlets





## Lessons from Sakhi's precursor: Piloting and evaluating Sakhi Pack in 2017

Vodafone Idea Ltd has long been exploring ways in which mobile phones can enhance women's

personal safety. In July 2017, it piloted Sakhi Pack in two telecom circles<sup>i</sup> with the aim to empower

rural women. The GSMA Connected Women programme helped research customer opinion about the service.<sup>ii</sup>

### The problem:

Rural women face privacy issues and are reluctant to share their mobile number at recharge outlets.

### Conception and design:

Vodafone Sakhi Pack was a private recharge option with a free emergency airtime calling feature and a bonus health tips feature that was free for the first 90 days.

### Piloting:

Sakhi Pack was piloted in two telecom circles (UP-West and Uttarakhand) in July 2017 and targeted at rural female non-phone owners. The aim was to attract more female customers and ultimately transition them to more profitable data packages.

### Positioning:

Marketed as topping up without revealing a mobile number, private recharge was the selling point. Sakhi Pack was distributed in female-friendly environments, such as temporary kiosks in local female-friendly markets and women's college campuses.

### End user research:

As part of Connected Women's work in 2017, the research found that the most appealing feature across all sampled locations was the free call time. Worries about recharging and number sharing was less prevalent in Lucknow, but was valued in other locations.

### Learning, iteration and scaling up:

Lessons from Vodafone and Connected Women's end user research helped Vodafone iterate their value proposition. During that time, Vodafone also acquired the technology to develop an emergency alert. Sakhi was launched nationally in October 2018.

<sup>i</sup> The Department of Telecommunications has divided India into various telecom circles. Within each circle, the call is treated as a local call, while across zones it becomes a long-distance call. A telecom circle is normally the entire state. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile\\_telephone\\_numbering\\_in\\_India#Telecom\\_circles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_telephone_numbering_in_India#Telecom_circles)

<sup>ii</sup> Findings from consumer research on Sakhi Pack can be found in GSMA (2018), [Triggering mobile internet use among men and women in South Asia and GSMA \(2018\), A framework to understand women's mobile-related safety concerns.](#)

# Sakhi taps into a key motivation for mobile adoption: Safety through connectivity

Our research in Uttar Pradesh identified five main factors triggering mobile adoption and use. The second strongest motivation was safety through connectivity (Figure 2).

Figure 2

The five triggers of mobile adoption, from strong to weak

<p>Strong</p>	<p>Progress and opportunity</p>	<p>A mobile phone is needed to be able to participate in India’s progress story. From status and privilege to convenience, the mobile is now a requirement</p>
	<p>Safety through connectivity</p>	<p>An unsafe outside world and the fear of harassment or violence motivates both women and gatekeepers to adopt mobile, as it makes them feel safer</p>
	<p>Digital identity and social welfare</p>	<p>The mobile number becomes a form of digital identity and a phone is needed to access social welfare schemes</p>
	<p>Creating an expanded world view</p>	<p>It’s a double edged sword. Women aspire to become citizens of the world but for gatekeepers there is a fear of deviant behaviour linked to accessing a phone</p>
	<p>Weak</p>	<p>Social connections</p>

For women and their social circles, a mobile phone helps address safety concerns. A mobile phone increases women’s confidence to go outside the home, where they face the risk of violence and harassment. It also helps make women feel less

vulnerable. For gatekeepers, a mobile provides reassurance that women can be reached when they are out.

Life stages and key milestones affect how women perceive and experience

safety-related issues. Our research found that these life stages can trigger mobile adoption, especially when women enter college, take up a job or get married.

“ This is my first phone – Samsung basic phone. I got it because I have to go for coaching classes in the evening and may come back after 9 pm. It was given to me by my father. I did not have to pester him for it. It was given to me so that their constant worrying for my safety would be addressed. ”

College student, 20 years old, urban, Lucknow



# The Sakhi adoption journey

The journey to Sakhi adoption is primarily driven by women's own initiative (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Simplified representation of the Sakhi user adoption journey among mobile users in our sample





### A compelling marketing campaign raises awareness

To introduce Sakhi, Vodafone Idea Ltd invested in a marketing campaign with the eye-catching strapline, “Ab Rukein Kyun?” (Why Stop Now?) (Figure 4). The campaign leveraged a variety of media: print (on billboards and bus stops), television, promotional SMS and social media. Vodafone also advertised Sakhi in female-friendly environments, such as women’s college campuses or via social workers.

experiences and gave them visibility. The Sakhi proposition of safety and empowerment, highlighted with compelling messages in traditional media like “Why stop now?”, “The future is exciting” and “Free safety service specifically for women”, sparked women’s interest and captured both the anxiety they feel on a daily basis and their aspirations for greater mobility and independence. Supplemented with word of mouth, the marketing campaign successfully raised awareness of the service.

The marketing campaign acknowledged women’s real-life

Figure 4

### Branding from the Vodafone Idea India Sakhi campaign



Link to promotional video:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXEZI\\_wTjI8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXEZI_wTjI8)









“ Safety is a concern in my neighbourhood. I worry if I’m alone and unable to contact anyone. My friend Rubina told me about the service. I called the helpline to understand how the service works and how to register. ”

College student, 20 years old,  
urban, Lucknow

## Women seek more information before subscribing to Sakhi

Sakhi subscribers shared that while they were curious about Sakhi after seeing the ads and promotions, they needed more information before subscribing. For instance, they wanted to understand more about how to register and how features such as the emergency alert would work.

Women often sought additional information about the service via YouTube, Google, asking friends or

calling the Vodafone Sakhi helpline. Some women also visited their local mobile retailer for support. While some channels were more effective than others in answering the queries of potential subscribers, those we interviewed in UP found that retailers often did not have the necessary knowledge to support on-boarding. Further efforts and investment will therefore be required, as retailers are the primary distribution channel for this product.

“ I heard about Sakhi from my sister-in-law [...] I searched about it online [...] My niece helped with the registration, she added people for the emergency alert as well. ”

Housewife, 23–30 years old,  
peri-urban, Varanasi

## Women’s advocacy drives registration, but low literacy and digital skills make registration more difficult

Our research showed that strong user advocacy supported registration of Sakhi. Some of the women interviewed registered because an authoritative or inspirational woman urged them to. Experiencing the perceived or real benefits of Sakhi makes the subscriber an advocate. In a context where faith in institutions is low, women often prefer to place their trust in technology they feel they can control and can mitigate threats through their own initiative.

Lack of literacy and digital skills is the greatest barrier to mobile phone ownership in India<sup>11</sup> and, therefore, a barrier to accessing mobile services. To understand the features of Sakhi well, women reported needing some handholding, repeat watching

of the Sakhi how-to videos or listening to the IVR instructions, which they were less familiar with.

Previous research found that women are more concerned than men about the consequences of making mistakes,<sup>12</sup> and we found similar concerns in this study. For instance, one step in the registration process requires subscribers to save at least one and up to 10 emergency numbers, which many women in the sample felt was a difficult task. It was therefore important for women to receive help and support from someone more familiar with technology (husbands, younger children in the house, colleagues at work, etc.) during the registration process.

11. GSMA, 2019, [The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019](#).

12. GSMA, 2015, [Accelerating digital literacy: empowering women to use mobile internet](#).

## Gatekeepers and retailers are less involved in the customer adoption journey

To promote the Sakhi service to women, Vodafone Idea Ltd launched a competition to incentivise sales teams and their retailers to promote Sakhi, and encouraged every retailer in their network to register at least one female relative for the Sakhi service.

Retailers, most of which sell all India telecom brands, appreciate and welcome the initiative from Vodafone and see it as a great service, despite not always fully understanding it. Some mentioned the challenge of selling many products and not remembering the details of all of them. Others did not see the benefit of supporting customers in the on-boarding process, which is considered more time consuming than other responsibilities.

“ In the time that I tell a consumer about Sakhi, I can service four to five customers. Why must I invest that much time? ”

Retailer, peri-urban, Varanasi

To get buy-in from gatekeepers, Vodafone engaged with community leaders and gatekeepers to emphasise the relevance of a safety service such as Sakhi. Our research found that once gatekeepers were aware of the service they appeared to appreciate it. Their interest in the service is also driven by women's convincing narratives such as this one:

“ After I told my husband about the Sakhi feature, he did react that now he feels more relaxed because now Sakhi is sharing part of the responsibility. He doesn't need to worry as much and keep calling home. ”

Housewife, 18-22 years old, peri-urban, Varanasi

Buy-in from a gatekeeper could be critical for women who do not have a mobile registered in their own name and would like to benefit from Sakhi. Their support could also be useful in helping women, particularly those with low literacy and digital skills, understand the different features of the service.









# Sakhi makes a valuable contribution to women's livelihoods

Sitting on her bed with her phone kept close to her, Shraddha told us that after subscribing to Sakhi she became more confident walking outside. Her husband lives in Haryana and calls her in the morning and evening as he is worried for her safety. Because she goes to the market and shops in town, she wanted to have Sakhi on her phone so she could contact someone in case of trouble. Since subscribing to Sakhi, her mobile has become very important to her and she keeps it with her wherever she goes.



The story of Shraddha is similar to other Sakhi subscribers we met in and around Varanasi and Lucknow. With Sakhi, Vodafone has helped give women more agency, which is critical for improving their own life and the lives of their family and community.<sup>13</sup>

**Greater sense of confidence:** Before subscribing to Sakhi, the women interviewed felt extremely isolated, especially in an emergency situation. However, since the introduction of the service into their lives, they feel a greater sense of confidence and can now overcome some challenging situations; even when faced with a crisis, they feel they will always be connected.

**Expanded boundaries and new opportunities:** As women gain more self-confidence from Sakhi, they also begin to believe that boundaries can expand and opportunities could arise.

“I think girls who have late tuitions or night jobs will feel less anxious for sure [with Sakhi]. If I get a good night job after my graduation, I could consider it; maybe Sakhi will increase the chances of my parents agreeing to such a job for me.”

It also brings them hope that the future for women and the next generation of girls in India looks brighter. Seeing a product designed to make women safer has a positive impact on their self-image and their perceived place in society. To some extent, the service helps women balance their aspirations and family values.

**Change in power relations:** Women reported having a greater sense of negotiating power with household members, particularly for being more active in the community, socialising with family and friends or simply being outside the home. Before Sakhi, some conversations with gatekeepers were not possible, but with Sakhi, negotiating more freedom (such as longer working hours) has become feasible.

Greater agency should in turn bring positive changes to women's aspirations, motivations, psychological capital and impact gender norms. However, for Sakhi to contribute to these more profound changes, other changes need to happen. For example, retailers and gatekeepers should become more sensitised to the Sakhi 'movement' and the benefits it provides (Figure 5).

13. World Bank, 2012, [World Development Report 2012 – Gender equality and development](#).

Figure 5

## Benefits of Sakhi features for women in our sample



### Emergency Alerts

Highly relevant, particularly for women working late hours, travelling long distances or being in unfamiliar places / male dominated areas.



### Emergency Balance

Relevant for all women who often find themselves without mobile phone credit, relying on someone to top up their phone.



### Private Number Recharge

Most relevant for women who top-up themselves, either by choice or under duress (e.g. unfamiliar location). More relevant in male-dominated and conservative areas.



## Arshi, Lucknow



**“Since using the Location Alert feature, I have become more aware and cautious about my safety and surroundings. I feel I am more in control; I keep my phone charged, and handy when stepping out.”**

A mother of three children, Arshi is a 30-year-old housewife from Lucknow. She recounted how she wanted to be a teacher, but early marriage at 18 shelved those plans. She maintains high aspirations but finds day-to-day life restrictive as she is confined to the house and requires a chaperone if she wants to leave. Outside the house, she worries about her safety amid wide media coverage of the increasing threat of sexual harassment.

Arshi believes that women need to be mentally strong and brave to travel outside their community. She believes that while there is increasing violence and crimes against women, imposing

restrictions on women and confining their mobility is not a solution. The solution is empowering them, and Arshi believes that Sakhi is such a solution. She considers Sakhi her secret weapon in times of need and sees it as a significant step forward in empowering both herself and future generations of women.



**“The lady who enrolls Sakhi will feel at peace; with Sakhi I feel I have a chaperone with me. Just like my husband’s protection and care.”**

Pen portraits are a composite of findings from respondents. All names have been changed.

# Sakhi appears to be most appealing to women who already have a sense of empowerment

While the primary target of Sakhi is a more progressive urban audience, we found in our research that it was actually women in peri-urban/rural areas who had an appetite for safety-related products. Women-centred initiatives in these locations are scarce, while urban consumers are surrounded by greater state support.

Regardless of location, psychographic factors like lifestyle and personality characteristics were extremely influential in the decision-making process. Our research found that Sakhi has been effective at reaching women who already have a sense of empowerment. Sakhi subscribers are defined by their aspirational outlook, a desire for agency and finding change less of a struggle. In contrast, non-subscribers tend to not challenge the norm and live with a diminished sense of self. For many, the realities of the status quo at home, isolation and fear make it difficult to relate to Sakhi.



# Considerations to drive wider adoption and use of Sakhi

So far, Sakhi has mainly been adopted by existing mobile phone users who have a SIM card registered in their own name. There are three important barriers to wider adoption that, if removed, have the potential to encourage more women to register a SIM in their own name and increase uptake of Sakhi.

## Sakhi is perceived as too contemporary for women who don't challenge the norm

While safety was a concern for non-subscribers and they recognised that Sakhi was an innovative service that could have some benefits, they felt that the service “isn't for someone like me”. They felt that the marketing campaign did not speak to all women. For example, non-subscribers shared that they felt the TV campaign was relating to the aspirations of young women in urban areas and depicted the lives of young, contemporary, progressive women. This feeling turned rural women, housewives and gatekeepers (who fear women's deviant behaviour) away.

“ It is for someone who is doing a job or any kind of work or if a girl is going far away from home for studies, stays in hostel, goes out for tuitions. Women like us, who don't go out often. Most of our work is at home. It is not for them. ”

Housewife, 31-40 years old, peri-urban, Varanasi



## Lack of understanding about how the service works in practice

While Sakhi subscribers appreciate the benefits of the service, our research found there were concerns and confusion about how certain features worked in practice. Both subscribers and non-subscribers shared that they would like more information on how different features worked, especially ones they were unlikely to use frequently or (thankfully) had yet to use at all. For example, the feature that subscribers considered the most valuable — the emergency alert — was often the least understood. Some customers lacked confidence in using the alert due to concerns over how their emergency contacts would receive the alert and/or whether they would receive confirmation that the message had been received.

“ The confusion is most about the emergency alert. I know 10 people would be notified but don't know how. I am also not sure if the alerts will go or not. ”

Working woman, 23-30 years old, urban, Lucknow



## Keeping the status quo at home, especially if network must be changed

Network coverage, choice and cost were the most important determinants of whether women in our sample adopted Sakhi. Non-Sakhi subscribers said network coverage and their household's preferred network were the main barriers to adoption. Three operational barriers prevent women from changing their network provider:

- Choosing a network tends to be a family decision. Typically, all members of a family are on the same network. Asking to move away from the family network could be perceived as disruptive and selfish.
- Getting a mobile is itself a bonus for many of the women in the sample. These women reported that if they asked to switch network providers, they might lose access to a network altogether.
- A lack of knowledge about Sakhi and no proof of its performance make dialogue with gatekeepers difficult. Testimonials from other women (and gatekeepers) could help convince gatekeepers of the usefulness of the service.

“ If I explain Sakhi to my brother, that I can share my location and get 10 minutes call for free, he will say it is fake, he will need some proof. ”

Student, 18-22 years old, peri-urban, Lucknow



# Beyond social impact for women, Sakhi is delivering benefits to Vodafone Idea Ltd

Since it launched in 2018, millions of women across India have subscribed to Sakhi. Analysis of customer data shows that compared to non-subscribers, Sakhi subscribers have greater loyalty to Vodafone (less churn). Compared to their activity pre-Sakhi, adopters of the service have increased their call activity, both outgoing and incoming.

Sakhi increases the functional usefulness of a mobile. Our research shows a change in perception and behaviour towards mobile among Sakhi subscribers. The mobile phone is now perceived as a necessity rather than a convenience. For subscribers, their mobile is associated with self-defence, making it more relevant for them in their daily lives. Women report feeling

more attached to their phone, taking better care of it and keeping it charged and handy, particularly when stepping out.

Subscribers also feel a sense of ownership and pride towards Sakhi. The Sakhi emergency alert number is saved in their phone to respond to potential threats. With Sakhi, women also feel less threatened by the idea of topping up at unfamiliar retailers.

Greater attachment to a mobile and the need to buy credit each month to ensure continuous access to the Sakhi features are likely to lead to increased mobile use.

Beyond driving revenues, Sakhi has also had a positive impact on the Vodafone brand. Customers

interviewed recognise the far-reaching impact that Sakhi can have by helping reduce crimes against women and making society a potentially safer place for women.

“ It is the first time that a company has thought of such an initiative for women. Vodafone is already a reliable and established brand; for them to think beyond profits is commendable. It shows their commitment towards women. ”

Housewife, 31-40 years old, peri-urban, Varanasi

## How Sakhi has successfully reached millions of women

1. A proposition focusing on safety and empowerment — two topics close to women’s hearts in India.
2. Strong consumer advocacy, i.e. female subscribers encouraging others to subscribe to the service.
3. Sakhi’s positioning as a service that empowers women, rather than reinforcing traditional ideas that women need shielding.
4. Different features responding to different customer needs and segments.
5. Offered as a free service.
6. Usable on any type of mobile phone (smartphone, feature or basic).
7. A strong marketing campaign that many women can relate to.









# Lessons for mobile operators seeking to engage female customers with similar products

In less than six months, the Vodafone Sakhi service has reached millions of women, making a significant contribution to their well-being and delivering commercial value to the operator.

Vodafone Idea Ltd is committed to closing the mobile gender gap and improving women's digital inclusion in India, and the Sakhi service is one way to achieve this.

Sakhi is being continuously developed and adapted in response to lessons from this and other research. The following lessons may be useful for mobile operators interested in launching products and services to attract female customers and narrow the gender gap within their customer base. While aimed primarily at mobile operators, many of these suggestions may also be relevant to other stakeholders involved in efforts to advance digital inclusion for women.

**Piloting in early stages of development helps to shape and refine social innovations.** Vodafone piloted Sakhi in two telecom circles with rural female non-mobile phone owners in mind. The results of the pilot helped Vodafone

iterate both the product and the target group before rolling out nationally.

**In ultra-competitive markets with similar products, it is essential to demonstrate the unique features of a product or service and how they add value.** To other mobile network users, Sakhi did not always stand out as innovative (i.e. different from other products available). A major shortcoming was a lack of awareness that the service works not only on smartphones, but also on feature and basic phones.

**Designing a simple product with clear use cases will help ensure users understand the problem it solves.**

Consider limiting the number of services available in one package. For those less literate, too many services can lead to more confusion and the risk that users do not understand the services available (both how to use them and the benefits).

**Offering a service that responds to a wider societal problem can lead to positive brand perception.** With Sakhi, Vodafone has uniquely positioned itself to address women's issues and is perceived as showing empathy and support to women.

**Leveraging women as agents of change and capitalising on user**

**stories could help drive adoption.**

Subscriber advocacy was an important driver of subscriptions among our sample in Uttar Pradesh. Exploring less traditional channels for raising awareness and using a story-driven approach has the potential to increase adoption.

**It is important to consider different levels of digital skills when setting up registration processes.**

Vodafone has worked hard to simplify registration, but some customers still struggled with the process. As women are often less digitally literate than men, any product or service aimed at women should be mindful of those limitations.

**Providing digital or in-store demonstrations of products and services can help to highlight the benefits and use cases for customers.**

Operators should consider a post-registration demonstration. For new subscribers less familiar with the internet, a first-hand demonstration could help them understand the product and promote learning. If delivered face to face, demonstrations should be conducted in a female-friendly environment, perhaps by retailers and peer-to-peer trainers.





GSMA Connected Women has produced a video showing how Sakhi has improved the lives of its subscribers. Watch the video and learn more at:

<https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/resources/vodafone-sakhi-voices-of-impact-from-india/>







## GSMA Connected Women

The GSMA represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide, uniting more than 750 operators with over 350 companies in the broader mobile ecosystem, including handset and device makers, software companies, equipment providers and internet companies, as well as organisations in adjacent industry sectors. The GSMA also produces the industry-leading MWC events held annually in Barcelona, Los Angeles and Shanghai, as well as the Mobile 360 Series of regional conferences.

For more information, please visit the GSMA corporate website at [www.gsma.com](http://www.gsma.com)

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