

JioPhone by Reliance Jio: breaking down the affordability barrier for women in India

By launching an LTE-enabled phone available for under $10, Jio made internet affordable and accessible for the digitally excluded in India — the vast majority of whom are women. In doing so, Jio brought 100 million internet-deprived feature phone users onto its mobile broadband platform, many of whom are getting online for the very first time.

India has one of the widest gender gaps in mobile internet access in the world. Part of the reason for this is that only 14 per cent of Indian women own a smartphone compared to 36 per cent of men.[28] Women who do not use the internet report that affordability is the main barrier they face to mobile internet adoption.

Reliance Jio's entry into the Indian telecom market sparked substantial change, including rapid price reductions and significant growth in data consumption. However, when it launched its 4G-only network in 2016, access to Jio services was limited to those who could afford a smartphone, as the availability of feature phones that could connect to an LTE network was limited. Given the lower rates of smartphone ownership among Indian women, this disproportionately excluded women from accessing Jio's network.

> ***"Jio was founded with a vision to bring digital life to every Indian."***
>
> Mukesh Ambani, Chairman of Reliance Industries

By delivering 4G at a fraction of the cost, Jio has made it accessible for millions more women

Jio set out to provide an affordable 4G-enabled handset for feature phone users unable to afford a smartphone, or those who had never owned a mobile before. To achieve this, Jio partnered with KaiOS Technologies — the US company behind the lightweight KaiOS operating system that powers the emergent "smart feature phone" category of devices. Together they created JioPhone, branded by Jio as "India ka Smartphone" (India's Smartphone), which was launched in August 2017. With its accessible features and affordable price, JioPhone lowers the barriers to first-time internet use for millions in India who have never used the internet, the vast majority of whom are women. It addresses concerns about affordability, usability and relevance of the internet that prevent many Indian women from using it.

JioPhone is a very low cost, 4G-enabled device. At launch, it was available for a deposit of Rs 1,500 (less than $25) but this has been frequently discounted to maximise affordability and uptake of the phone; since

28. GSMA (2020), The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020.

September 2019, the deposit has been just Rs 699 (less than $10). Owners are refunded the deposit if they recharge at least Rs 1,500 per year for three years. Large data plans are offered at Rs 155 (less than $2) per month. Women in India are often more price sensitive than men, and frequently not the decision makers in which handset they acquire. By providing a low-cost 4G-enabled option, the JioPhone helps address a crucial affordability barrier that disproportionately limits women's internet access.

JioPhone strikes a crucial balance between delivering content and features that appeal to first-time internet users while being restrictive enough to not intimidate them. In particular, JioTV offers familiar live TV channels from all the leading Indian broadcasters. While there are around 40 apps that can be installed, including popular ones such as WhatsApp and Facebook, the device has a form factor designed to be as similar to a standard feature phone as possible, making it more familiar for new users that had previously owned a more basic device. In a context where many first-time internet users, and male gatekeepers, are concerned about women's exposure to "inappropriate" content online, the more limited and familiar features of JioPhone can provide some reassurance. Also, the availability of 22 vernacular languages make the phone accessible to those who do not speak English.

> ***"The question for us was: how do you keep it closest to the feature phone experience, but allow wider usage."***
>
> Reliance Jio Device Team

JioPhone has been effective in bringing both men and women online for the first time

Jio launched the phone with a targeted marketing campaign focusing on 800 Tier 2 cities where smartphone penetration was lower. Over the first two years, around 100 million devices were sold. The average monthly data consumption on JioPhone is at par with other smartphone user data consumption in India, and high by international standards. Among JioPhone users, over 70 per cent now use internet-based apps — a remarkably high proportion given that user interviews suggested many users initially only intended to use the phone's basic features, such as calling and SMS.

The combination of a simple interface and sign-up process, low price and features tailored to the needs of first-time internet users in India has made JioPhone a critical enabler of mobile internet access for individuals who would not otherwise be able to access it. It has been particularly beneficial for women, for whom JioPhone was more likely to be their first mobile phone.[29] Although overall figures for the gender of JioPhone owners cannot be confirmed, Jio's existing data indicates that the female share of JioPhone users is higher than in its overall customer base.

> ***"You can watch anything you want on it. You can get any information."***
>
> Rural female JioPhone owner, 18–25, on watching YouTube on JioPhone

Jio has built customer trust through clear, simple offers, and has effectively addressed the appetite for relevant content while remaining affordable. For many women, JioPhone has become an important part of their life (a "good friend"). By effectively addressing women's needs and barriers, Jio has been able to reach female customers who were previously inaccessible, expanding the market opportunity and delivering the benefits of digital inclusion to millions more women.

29. Based on findings from qualitative interviews with male and female JioPhone users.