

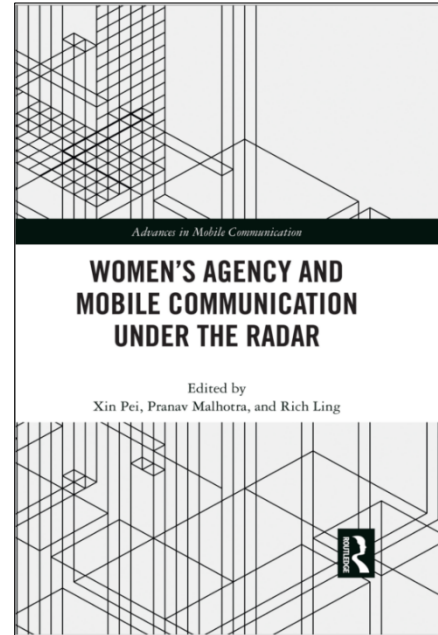
Xin Pei, Pranav Malhotra, and Rich Ling (Eds.), **Women's Agency and Mobile Communication Under the Radar**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2024, 274 pp., \$166.34 (hardcover).

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In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994), Brooks is released from prison after many decades and finds himself lost and disconnected in a world that has moved on without him. With the advent of mobile communication, the general social changes caused by technological advancement have put many, especially marginalized women, in a position akin to Brooks's. The volume **Women's Agency and Mobile Communication Under the Radar**, edited by Xin Pei, Pranav Malhotra, and Rich Ling, offers a nuanced perspective on the intersections of mobile technology, gender, and social change. It explores how mobile communication technologies can be both tools for empowerment and instruments of existing power structures, with a particular focus on their impact on women in less visible communities.



Being the first edited collection of the "Advances in Mobile Communication Routledge Series," this volume, as indicated in its name, specifically sheds light on the "under the radar" use of mobile communication. The three editors clarify in the Introduction that this metaphorically used term—"under the radar," originally a military reference to airplanes flying low to evade detection during World War II—discloses the book's focus on the often invisible mobile communication practices among women at the lower echelons of their societies, as well as those migrating with marginalized statuses within and across national borders (p. 3). This approach brings attention to the long-overlooked voices from the Global South and the "south" within the Global North (p. 200). This unique perspective allows the 34 contributors, who range from established media, anthropology, and ethnology scholars to well-prepared research students, independent researchers, and development practitioners working with governments or institutions, to delve into the subtle implications of the topics.

Exploration of "under the radar" mobile communication practice can be contextualized in various settings. *Women's Agency and Mobile Communication Under the Radar* segments these into four primary dimensions, delineated across four parts following the introductory Part I (Part II to Part V).

The first dimension, "Gendered Mobile (Ex)inclusion Across Sociocultural Milieux" (Part II), features four papers. These papers discuss the experiences of female students at basic- and secondary-educational levels in Ghana (West Africa), middle-aged women from Dwesa in South Africa, elderly women in Hongkong, China, and female farmers in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa. This section highlights how women's access to mobile communication is limited by gendered sociocultural beliefs, existing colonized or

patriarchal power structures, ancestral customs, and age-related digital literacy challenges. The second dimension, "Economic (Dis)empowerment and Mobile Communication" (Part III), includes two reviews and one qualitative fieldwork study on the underground organization of transactional sex via mobile in Tanzania. It explores how women strategically use mobile technology to access social and economic resources and operate within both formal and informal economic sectors. Particularly interesting is what ethnologist Laura Stark has noted in chapter 8—the "market of intimacy" (as she calls it) in Dar es Sallam, urban Tanzania. It represents a hidden parallel reality that extends "the social space with endless opportunities for heterosexual connectedness" (p. 93) enabled by mobile phone practice, thereby enhancing especially women's agency within a culture that values reserve and self-control.

The third dimension, "Migration of Women and Mobile-Mediated Mobility" (Part IV), consists of one review and four studies on both internal and transnational female migrants. This section examines how female migrants navigate their unfamiliar social life with the assistance of the smartphone. Six studies focusing on working or soon-to-be-working women from diverse regions including India, China, Flanders of Belgium, and Italy comprise the fourth and final dimension, "(C)overt Resistance and Self-Expression in Negotiated Mobile Spaces" (Part V). This part addresses how mobile phones influence women and girls' perception of their individual identity and their efforts to construct an internal "agentic self" in response to external challenges.

When all these stories are put together, two clear themes emerge. First, a generally optimistic narrative portrays women from less-developed regions around the globe as rising—whether voluntarily or passively—to meet the challenges and fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by digital technologies. Predominantly, the extent of women's digital literacy, digital freedom, and digital confidence is influenced by factors such as age, the socioeconomic status of their societies, the depth of patriarchal structures defining their societal roles, and the social and familial expectations imposed on them. These studies depict a continuum of attitudes toward women, synchronized with socioeconomic status against the backdrop of technological transformation. On this spectrum, Africa and China represent the southern and northern extremes, respectively, with India and the lower rungs of the Global North positioned in the middle, as evidenced by the 15 field studies in the book—five focusing on Africa, five on China, two on India, and three on the "south" areas of the North.

However, the continuum is dynamic and subject to change. As revealed by Dhavan, Oreglia, and Israni in chapter 16, citing Hicks (2017), "Disruptive events such as a pandemic have the power to upend what seemed to be immutable social arrangements" (p. 197). Two studies subtly hint at this potential for change. Chapter 16 highlights how young Indian women, during the protracted COVID-19 lockdown, leverage mobile technologies to create opportunities for their future careers, notably influencing their parents' attitudes. Another poignant example is presented in chapter 13, which focuses on women resettled from cyclone-struck rural areas in West Bengal, India. The displacement empowers them to engage in paid labor and prosper, thus redefining their "gendered cultural code of conduct" (p. 151).

Fortunate in ways that Brooks was not, many of our protagonists in this volume benefit (or partially benefit) from family ties, a situation that plays a crucial role in their empowerment or disempowerment. Smartphones have proven to be a valuable tool for maintaining and negotiating ties

with left-behind family members, especially when facing loneliness, disconnectedness, and physical constraints at the workplace. This is evident in various contexts: transnational refugees relocated to the Global North (as in rural Norway in chapter 9), study mothers in education migration households (chapter 11), internal migrant women displaced from a cyclone-struck area (Indian domestic helpers in chapter 13) and for economic reasons (Philippine live-in domestic workers in chapter 15). Despite the explicit influences of family ties, there are more subtle impacts as well, for instance, the stereotypical biological assumptions about African women as discussed in chapters 2, 3, 5, and 8 and the gendered religious impacts on Muslim teenage girls in chapter 18. The multiple perspectives offered by each of such factors thereby further complicate the dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment facilitated by mobile communication.

Aimed at a diverse audience of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, this book serves as a critical resource in the fields of mobile communication, gender studies, and international development. It enriches and diversifies the existing literature on gender and technology. In comparison to other books on the same theme (i.e., Dotson, 2017; Fox, Johnson, & Rosser, 2024; Perez, 2019), this volume focuses more specifically on the agentic power of particular groups and populations through scholarly voices, presenting what the editors of the series describe as “the best of contemporary scholarship, theory, and thinking on mobile communication” (p. xx). Its comprehensive case studies and theoretical insights are especially beneficial for academics and students interested in exploring the nuanced roles technology plays in social transformation. Moreover, NGOs, global development agencies, and technology designers will find the empirical data and discussions informative for crafting interventions to narrow the digital gender gap.

The contributions in this volume represent robust studies of the topics and specific women groups within their social and geographical contexts. These works should be viewed not only as fieldwork studies or reviews of the subject but also as a handbook for readers seeking inspiration from any of these perspectives. Each chapter, not just the three reviews in chapters 6, 7, and 12, includes a detailed review of the literature and methodology employed, guiding readers toward various research gaps. I agree with Didem Özkul and Gerard Goggin, editors of the “Advances in Mobile Communication Routledge Series,” that this inaugural volume “provides a precious, resonant set of studies that mark out the navigation points, tools, and paths to reorient future work” (p. xx).

References

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