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### **Situated agency or empowerment? mobile phone use, female heads of households, Trincomalee**

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**Background:** The concept of situated agency, according to the feminists, argues that the women's agency is shaped by the specific social, cultural, historical and political contexts they are embedded in. Thus, situated agency is contextual, relational and shaped by power structures and it challenges the notions such as restricted agency and women's low levels of well-being as such ideas devalue the positive role women's agency can play to uplift their position through social change. Hence, this study discusses subtle strategies used by a group of female heads of households in Trincomalee district in their mobile phone use, ensuring that the mobile phone is effectively used in their income generating activities, family affairs and social relationships.

**Methods:** The data collection of this qualitative study involved 30 in depth interviews with Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim female heads of households living in Trincomalee District. The participants were inquired about how they employ mobile phones in their income earnings and family and social relationships despite the challenges they face due to their social status and patriarchal power structures. Interviews were conducted for nearly six months during the latter part of 2014 in Trincomalee District and they were recorded with the consent of the interview participants and transcripts were prepared. Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative data analysis.

**Results:** It was found that despite popular ideology dictating that women should not use a mobile phone and their experiences of harassment, participants had not given up the device altogether, which can be considered as a form of resistance. They were very much benefitted by the mobile phone in their income-earning activities, and they were able to balance their family responsibilities and income-generating activities. Further, many of them utilized mobile phones to keep up their social relationships and some had to have it to maintain their long-distance relationships with their husbands. Their common mobile phone practices and strategies used to protect themselves and use the phone only for essential tasks can be considered subtle strategies of resistance exerted within the constraints of their situation, even though they are considered submissive behaviors suggesting acceptance of patriarchal norms. Such apparently submissive behaviors, therefore, can be considered as innovative strategies employed to continue owning and using mobile phones – a new technology.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, the participants cannot be perceived as pitiable victims of patriarchy but rather creative individuals because they attempted to achieve their needs and goals as possible as they could, within the constraints of the systems and situations they live under. It can be further argued that their strategic use of mobile phones reflects their resistance against unequal gender relations in society. Thus, it can be argued that instead of achieving empowerment or agency via mobile phones as discussed in previous studies, the participants implement situated agency to maximize the uses of mobile phones in their lives.

**Keywords:** Situated agency, empowerment, female heads of households, mobile phone use.