

Role of ICT Initiatives in Sustainable Progress of Rural Women in India

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Abstract

The lower status, lost dignity, and denied rights of women across the rural India comes out with a clarion call to promote sustainable progress in their lives. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has emerged as one of a dynamic tool in their lives. It has been successful in connecting the rural and remote population to the wider world. These tools are initiated for gender equality and women's sustainable progress. Its success largely depends on the availability and accessibility for the rural women. The main objectives of the study was to present the successful elements of ICT initiatives in the significant process of sustainable development, to trace out the barriers and bottlenecks of ICT initiatives in rural India and to identify the areas of further strengthening the effectiveness of ICT initiatives in sustainable progress of rural women. Of the four sample ICT initiatives, two of the initiatives were situated in southern India i.e. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and the other two were in the northern part of India i.e. Gujarat and Rajasthan. The study also identified the requirement for basic education, technical skills, tailored training for women and above all engendering of ICT policies.

Women are one of the wonderful creations and co-creators of the universe. However, the history of human civilization testified to the changing status of women all through the history. In 19th and 20th centuries, reform movements led by great social reformers provided better avenues to women's legal status. Nevertheless, independent India continued to witness upheavals against women oppression despite its Constitution providing equality.

1. Introduction: Global Gender Position of India

According to Gender Inequality Index (GII) of Human Development Report (2013), India was in 132th position among 148 countries. GII depicted that Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) was 450 for every 1000 new born, adolescent fertility rate was 68.1, seats in parliament was 9.2 percent, population with at least secondary education above the age of 25 years and older was 26.6 percent (male 50.4 percent), labour force participation rate was 35.7 percent (male 84.5 percent), contraceptive prevalence rate for 15 – 45 years was 56.3 percent, antenatal coverage of at least one visit is 74 percent and births attended by skilled health personnel was 47 percent. According to Gender Empowerment Index (GEM) of UN Human Development Report (2009), India was in 134th position among 183 countries. This statistical information revealed the low status accorded to women in Indian society.

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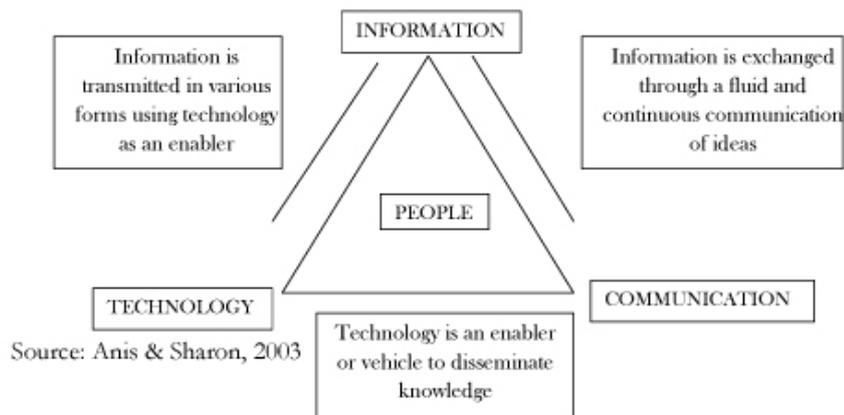
2. Need for Sustainable Progress of Rural Women

Rural villages epitomize the soul of India as 68.84 percent of its people lived in 640,000 villages (Census, 2011). The people in rural areas especially women continued to lag behind in receiving basic facilities of life including education, healthcare facilities, socio-economic development and political participation. These rural women spend long hours in household chores, in farm or in agriculture allied activities. For fetching water, collecting firewood and seeking work, they were forced to walk miles and miles. All through their strenuous work load, they played a significant role in the rural economies. In addition, they carried out vital reproductive functions in caring for children, older persons and the sick (UN, 2008). Over the years, the socio-cultural structures and the various developmental initiatives excluded the women in general, rural women in particular. In view of attaining gender equality and women empowerment, at present addressing the multiple deprivations of these rural women and empowering them has become one of the major challenges for policy makers, development agencies and civil society organizations in India.

As the needs, requirements and concerns of rural women differed considerably in comparison with the women in urban areas, ICT initiatives had to ensure that the benefit of the ICT percolates to lower socio-economic strata and to the grass roots of the rural India. It is true that ICT by itself will not solve the problems of rural India. However, strategic use of ICT can lead to strengthening the capabilities and increasing the opportunities for income generation of rural women. With poor infrastructure in the rural areas, delivery of services of essential nature becomes a formidable task. But how far ICT boom has touched the rural womenfolk, leave alone uplifting them is a moot question being explored in this research study.

3. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

ICT include the 'old' ICTs of radio, television and telephone, and the 'new' ICTs of computers, satellite and wireless technology and the Internet. ICTs are network of technologies that enable people to speed up processes, transactions and improve their access to resources of all kinds. This technology has triggered revolutions in the developing countries. As portrayed in the figure 1.2 to bring out the synergetic outcome, people has to be in the centre of process. In this process, different technology can be an enabler to disseminate knowledge. The relevant information communicated through apt technology can bring about the required changes in the lives of women.

Figure 1.2 Synergistic ICT Relationships

4. Scope of ICT in India

India had been looked up in ICT field for two main reasons. First, because it has, for many years, given a significant priority to ICT's both on the production side (as seen, for instance, in the development of its software industry) and on the consumption side (with significant investments in e-government applications, and attempts to push ICT's out into rural areas) (Heeks, 2005; Bhatnagar and Schware, 2000). Second, because application of ICT's has taken place through a variety of different models; for example, from pure market to pure state, and from gender-blind to gender-focused (Singall and Rogers, 2001). India therefore provides a valuable source of data for other countries seeking to journey towards the 'information society', and concerned about the gender consequences of this journey (Shoba, 2004).

ICT Initiatives

In view of promoting ICT, there had been a lot of initiatives at the grass root level by various governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Duncombe, 2005). However, these initiatives had varied focus. For some of them, welfare had been the main focus, for few others business had been the major focus and few others had mixed focus. Moreover, these initiatives were supported either by Community Based Organization (CBO) / Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), private sector and Government.



Figure 1.3 Focuses of Women's ICT Initiatives (Source: Richard, 2005)

5. ICT from Gender Perspective

ICT has extended its frontiers in the areas of e-governance, e-commerce, e-advocacy, e-education and e-income generation activities. It has a high potential for contributing to gender equality and women empowerment. It can provide women with a quality education, information and entertainment. It also can lead women from social isolation to expanded social network and widen their social perspective. It can enhance their productive and reproductive roles. It can make them aware of the civic responsibilities and Government policies.

5.1 Objectives

The objective of the study were to list out the key strengths of ICT promoting initiatives, to highlight the different modes of communication and types of information, to present the successful elements of ICT initiatives in the significant process of sustainable development, to trace out the barriers and bottlenecks of ICT initiatives in rural India and to identify the areas of further strengthening the effectiveness of ICT initiatives in sustainable development of rural women.

5.2 Universe and Sample

Among UNDP supported 18 ICT4D pilot initiatives since 2004 that were focusing on integrated citizen services, rural livelihoods, governance and women's empowerment, four ICT initiatives focusing exclusively on women's empowerment were selected as samples. Of the four sample ICT initiatives, two of the initiatives were situated in southern India i.e. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and the other two were in the northern part of India i.e. Gujarat and Rajasthan. In Karnataka, a development agency IT for Change was implementing the project named 'Mahiti Manthana' and in Tamil Nadu, Vidiyal was carrying out the project on 'ICT for Women Conciliation Centre'. In Gujarat, SEWA was undertaking the project, 'ICT School for Women's Empowerment' and in Rajasthan, PEDO was executing the project, 'Mobile Information Technology for Rural Advancement' (MITRA).

5.3 Sources of Data

In depth interviews and focus group discussion gave more information about the realities of the initiatives. Besides, the official statistics, technical reports, scholarly

journals, literature review, reference books and annual reports of the development agencies were also used as sources of information. The researcher also visited different universities and libraries to collect relevant information about the research study.

5.4 Salient Findings of the Study

The salient findings of the study can be enlisted as the key strengths of ICT promoting initiatives, different modes of communication and types of information, successful elements of ICT initiatives in the significant process of sustainable development, barriers and bottlenecks of ICT initiatives in rural India and the areas of further strengthening the effectiveness of ICT initiatives in bringing sustainable progress for rural women.

5.5 Key strengths of ICT initiatives

The key strength of ICT initiatives identified is the prolonged and consistent working together of development agencies with the women at the grassroots level. During their involvement, they were able to evolve a bottom-up approach keeping their needs as priority. In the rural community, these women were organized as self-help groups. ICT initiative is one among the integrated approach they had in addressing the needs of the women. During this process, the technical proficiency of these women was enhanced. Women leadership and concern for rural women also positively contributed to the ICT initiatives.

5.6 Different modes of communication and types of information

The development agencies used different modes of ICT to reach out to the rural women. Community radio had been one of the tools which had been reaching out to a large section of women. Through voice mail, ongoing learning process was initiated in a few rural areas. Video screening was used to give education to these women and some of them also had access to e-kiosks. However, the priorities and needs of specific groups of rural women, such as indigenous women, disabled women, widows and women heading households, must be given particular attention (UN, 2008). The types of information widely focused on women sustainable development in different life stages. More care was given to educate women on health and hygiene. The women were also given technical skills in order to enhance their economic activities, especially to improve their livestock care. The rural women were given legal aid and Government schemes through these ICT initiatives.

5.7 Successful elements of ICT initiatives in sustainable development

Rural women, those who wish to empower themselves, initially have to become members of women's groups. In these groups, they are offered on-going training on multiple topics. It also increases their savings and thrift. During this process, their social network gets expanded with other government and banking sectors. They are able to get more information that could help them to undertake economic activities.

5.8 Barriers and bottlenecks in rural ICT initiatives

These ICT initiatives came across barriers and bottlenecks in reaching out to larger section of rural women. The prime concern is illiteracy of rural women in getting the optimum from these ICT initiatives. However, lack of accessibility of infrastructure, poor technical connectivity and electricity are some of other limitations faced by them. Some of them are too rigid to accept the changes. They also have limited participation and ownership. According to them, most of the information are not need based and do not cater to their knowledge level. Though interactive methods were introduced in these ICT tools, still the respondents felt that the communication had been one way and they were not able to express their viewpoints.

6. Towards Sustainable Progress

Taking stock of the situation of rural women, the journey of sustainable development seems to be a long way. In this process, three elements are vital to lead them to sustainable progress i.e. education, employment, and emancipation. ICT as a tool for development can contribute substantially and strengthen the process of sustainable progress.

6.1 ICT for Education of Rural Women

The first step of any ICT initiative needs to focus on providing functional literacy to rural women since female literacy rate is 58.75 percent (Census 2011). It can open the wider world of information and knowledge. In turn, they can choose their learning. It is vital to have ongoing learning in different aspects of women's issues, child care, entrepreneurship, etc. Later, the basic requirement of functional literacy has to be followed by digital literacy. In rural areas, special hands on training and periodical learning programmes have to be organized for them. The requirements of these women vary from place to place. But the comprehensive education on legal rights, health education, civic consciousness, and human dignity has to be imparted to them.

o Inclusive education

The ICT constructive discourses for rural women need to have the component of adult education or lifelong learning so that the 42.2 percent of the illiterate women of the rural areas may reach the stage of functional literacy. The type of education can include skill training and vocational training which can comprise of tailoring, knitting, embroidery work, animal husbandry, agriculture, etc.

o Holistic health

Health component of rural women is another important area of concern. They need to focus on their personal health which also comprises of reproductive health. The women have to be exposed to preventive health measures, early detection of cancer, etc. It is also vital for the rural women to be aware of health and related insurance schemes.

o Value system

The value system of upholding gender equality has to be inculcated. With the persistent patriarchal thinking, it may be difficult for the rural women to unlearn the imbibed value system of accepting all that the male members utter in the family. But they need to

relearn that with the optimistic approach of women it is possible to create a gender just society.

6.2 ICT for Employment of Rural Women

Economic independence can contribute significantly to empowering of women. With limited education and exposure, taking a long leap on entrepreneurial activities may be too tough for the rural women. Instead, it would be more feasible to begin from where they are and what they are more familiar with. If the agrarian women are good in goat rearing and upbringing milch animals, their innate skills have to be fostered. In relation to it, if linkages are created with bank, market and customers with the help of ICT initiatives, it can become a successful milestone in the lives of these women. Similar services can be rendered to the women engaged in fisheries, forest products, handicrafts, etc. In the course of time, it is important to give them training in managerial skills, communication skills, leadership skills, and entrepreneurship skills to become steadier in the economic ventures.

6.3 ICT for Emancipation of Rural Women

The emancipation of rural women has to begin from within. It starts from their thinking process. Especially, the crimes against rural women inside and outside the home need to be addressed confidently and collectively to make the women empowered. While using the different ICT tools, it is essential for rural women to know how to choose the programmes and contents of ICT tools for constructive and productive purposes. In choosing the existing ICT tools, the use of right programmes which could promote better outlook of life than getting addicted to the gender stereo typed TV serials is important. Moreover, they need to grow at a level of creating contents promoted through ICT tools. The contents which are needed for their livelihood promotion and greater well being have to be taken into account.

Conclusion

To sum up, the need for ICT initiatives is essential to establish women's dignity and rights. For this to happen, they require attention on basic education, technical skills, and tailored training for women; employment of women in content creation; offering easier access and optimum use; above all engendering of ICT policies. The present reality is a wakeup call for a policy change in order to close the ICT gender gap, especially from the perspective of women at the grassroots level. Their active participation in designing and delivering content is the need of the hour for their own emancipation and for the development of the country.

'ICT initiatives need to be pro-poor, pro-rural and above all pro-women'.

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