Socio-Economic Empowerment of Rural Women through ICTs

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Abstract
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a magic tool which benefits all spectrums of people in the world and reaches millions of people every day. However, considerable numbers are unable to enjoy the benefits because a digital divide still exists, especially in rural areas of developing countries. It is the socially and economically marginalized, particularly women in those countries, who do not reap the benefits. For many decades women have been controlled and dominated by men in developing countries like India. The domination is practiced in various ways; the accessibility of communication technology is a significant factor. But with science, technological innovations and socio-economic changes, women, even rural women, are gradually starting to use various kinds of technological instruments. ICTs act as an agent to empower women, allowing them into the main stream of society. Among the various kinds of ICTs used by rural people, the cell/ mobile phone and television have reached a remarkable place. These two technologies are providing knowledge, economic independence, social security, social networks and self-confidence to rural women, particularly young girls seeking employment opportunities and working in small and medium level towns. At the same time social and ethical issues are emerging from these technologies. This paper attempts to describe the situation of socio economic inclusion and empowerment of rural women through information and communication technologies in Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

A few decades ago, the post, newspapers and radio were the major communication sources in rural areas and rural people depended on these for their information needs. In the present decade, through the invention and penetration of ICTs, the situation has changed considerably. Developing countries like India enjoy the benefits of ICTs. India particularly has reached a better position in ICT usage especially in rural areas. ICTs comprise a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications and services used to produce, process, distribute and transform information. ICT consists of segments as diverse as telecommunications, television and radio, broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services and electronic media (World Bank 2005). Television and mobile phones/cell phones and to some extent the internet have reached a remarkable position in India. ICT services and service providers; teledensity, the establishment of the ICT related companies and employment opportunities show how ICT has grown. According to the TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) as on 31st May 2012 there were 15 telecom service providers in India. Among these, 88.65% were private and 11.35% government. The teledensity was 38.33% in rural areas and 62.82% in urban areas. There were 323.27 million of wireless subscribers in rural areas and 595.90 million in urban areas. If we look at the monthly growth of wireless subscribers, rural areas have moved ahead of urban areas with 1.96% compared to 0.30% in urban areas. This indicates that many rural people are using mobile phones for their communication purposes. At the same time broadband service subscribers have increased from 13.54 million at the end of February 2012 to 13.79 million at the end of March 2012. The annual growth in broadband subscribers was 14.85% from March 2011 to March 2012. As on 31st March 2012, there were 155 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) providing broadband services. From the above data, one can

understand the overall growth and usage of the cell phone and internet accessibility in India. This study shows the usage, benefits and problems of cell phones for rural women and illustrates how ICTs assist the socio economic inclusion and empowerment of rural women.

RURAL WOMEN AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In India, rural people, especially lower castes, women and socially marginalized communities, are facing problems of trouble-free communication and accessing information technologies. They are not able to communicate freely and use the technologies, because of the social control and economic factors. Indian women have traditionally been excluded from the external information sphere, both deliberately and because of lack of freedom or low levels of education. The digital divide between rich and poor, rural and urban, men and women, lower caste and upper caste has created a huge gap in the accessibility of the technology. The digital divide is often characterized by poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers. To overcome these constraints, some initiatives have been taken by world forums, for example in the year 2000, the Economic and Social Council of India adopted a ministerial declaration on the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based economy. In 2001, the Secretary-General of the Council established a high-level Information and Communication Technologies Task Force to provide overall leadership to the United Nations on the formulation of strategies to put ICT at the service of development. The Millennium Declaration adopted in 2000, underscored the urgency of ensuring that the benefits of new technologies, especially ICT, are available to all. To achieve this goal, a United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was planned in two phases. The first phase was the Geneva Summit in December 2003; it aimed to develop political will and to establish the foundations for an Information Society for all. 175 governments endorsed the Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action at the first phase.

There is potential for ICTs to eliminate gender inequality and to empower women in society. However, the existing gender divide and inequality are major barriers. The United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) (1995) identified significant gender differences in levels of accessibility of ICTs. The information revolution appears to be by-passing women. Fewer women are accessing and using ICT compared with men, even though ICTs are powerful catalysts for political and socio- economic empowerment. Technology-based social empowerment especially for rural women is a new emerging concern in the present information world.

RURAL WOMEN AND DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

The population of men and women is equally distributed. They have the same potential, knowledge and strength. However equal opportunities have been denied to them, and they are socially excluded and discriminated against in many developing and underdeveloped countries. They are unable to express their real potential, knowledge and skills. They are suppressed or controlled by the male-dominated community. They cannot communicate freely and express their ideas openly; this has led to waste of human resources in many countries. A UNESCO report on “Gender Issues in the Information Society” stated that the capability of women to use information through ICT is dependent on many social factors, including literacy and education, geographic location, mobility and social class. Social development movements, various kinds of development activities, programmes, welfare schemes and constitutional facilities have helped women to reach the main stream of society. In the process of women empowerment, the ICTs are also playing a major role especially through technologies like cell phones and the internet. The cell phone is an extremely efficient ICT for the empowerment of women. It has been accessed by the majority of the people, rural and urban, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, because of its features. The internet is not as easy as other ICTs. It needs basic education and economic support. This technology cannot

be accessed by the majority of the rural community. There are a number of projects implemented in developing countries by the UN, World Bank, government, corporate and private sectors, through the millennium development goals and local and international programmes. For example, the African Women's Network of the Association for Progressive Communications [APC] has conducted training and workshops to support electronic networking among women's groups. The Multimedia Caravan project in Senegal provided rural women with the opportunity to develop their own ideas on how ICT can be used to meet their development needs and goals. In Kenya, women and men weavers were trained in using the internet to learn new weaving techniques and access more realistic prices for their products. In Uganda, the Uganda Media Women's Association started a radio programme called Mama FM. Through this programme, women can actively participate and learn about development issues such as human rights, governance, nutrition and health. The UNDP telecentre project in the Ukraine applies ICTs for agriculture and farm management to support women farmers, to create a network to improve their entrepreneurial skills in the new market economy. The India Shop, an e-commerce website in Tamil Nadu, sells products made by rural women's co-operatives and NGOs. The DHAN Foundation and Swayam Krishi Sangam are using ICTs, such as handheld devices and smart cards, to improve micro-finance projects to empower poor women. The Self-Employed Women's Association [SEWA] has several ICT projects for women, including community learning centers, a school of science and technology for self-employed women, and the Theliphone project, which provides mobile phones to women in the informal sector. The M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) is setting up its rural tele-centres called Village Knowledge Centres (VKC) in many part of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Odisha and Maharashtra. The Chennai-based rural development ICT initiative called TeNeT has set up village information centres in many parts of Tamil Nadu and other states in India.

This study has the following objectives:

- To examine the usage of ICTs by rural women
- To investigate women's empowerment through ICTs in rural areas
- To analyze the socio and economic inclusion of rural women by ICTs
- To describe the problems of women in using ICTs

METHODOLOGY

This micro study was conducted in three selected villages in Trichirappalli district of Tamil Nadu. The descriptive research design was formulated for the study and the data collection used methods such as interview schedules, informal discussion and observation. Data were collected from 60 women, aged between 15 and 30 years. The respondents reside in the selected villages and work in the nearby towns. From each village 20 women respondents were selected, 10 from scheduled castes (SC) and 10 from other backward castes (OBCs). Around 60% of the women work in private concerns and 40% are students and housewives. Meeting with the respondents particularly the working women was not easy during the week days, because their working places are far away from their residences so the researcher collected data on the weekends. Data collection from the housewives was also complex because the researcher had to wait for them to finish their domestic work. Observation took place while the respondents were using the cell phone and internet in centres. The researcher also observed how the respondents handled the technologies and their discussion among their peers about these technologies.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis and discussion part of the study is based on the objectives. In the information world ICTs are predominantly represented by two modern ICTs such as cell phones and the internet. The study analyses some of the pros and cons of these two ICTs, how they will be a tool for women's empowerment and the social and economic inclusion of rural women.

USAGE OF THE CELL PHONE IN THE RURAL SETUP

Cell phone penetration in India is much higher than land line. In 2011 cell phone users were around 700 million and the subscription is estimated to reach 120 million by the end of 2013. But the study of GSMA Development Fund and the Cherie Blair Foundation stated that only 28% of Indian women own a cell phone, compared with 40% of men. Additional 20% women have access to mobile phones through family members or friends. Owning a cell phone differs from subscription to one because the dual and treble simcard, has now been introduced in modern cell phones. Barefoot College, a school in the northwestern state of Rajasthan, provides professional training for rural women to use cell phones and even illiterate women entrepreneurs use it in the marketplace. In Gujarat, the mobile phone is central to an innovative scheme that allows rural health care workers to compile information about pregnant women and then send a text message to the pregnant lady as a reminder for checkups and vaccinations. A Stanford University study found that "mobile phones significantly decrease tolerance for wife beating and husbands' control issues, and increase women's autonomy in mobility and economic independence." Cell phones are widely used by female beauticians, food preparers and fish and vegetable vendors.

In the present stud 60% respondents work in the nearby towns in various private sectors such as shopping centres, garment industries, medicals, small shops and construction work. Their age is from 15 to 25. 97% of them have a cell phone. Only those who are students do not have one. The age groups 26 to 30 years of respondents are married women. Most of them do not go outside for employment but do domestic work near their homes. They do not use cell phones much; however 64% of them use cell phones owned by their husbands or other family members. The majority of young working girls use the cell phone to contact their families or friends. A few use them to search for employment opportunities and bus arrival timings. These girls are going to jobs far away from their homes; they have limited bus services to their villages, so need to confirm bus timings. Apart from that, the girls use the cell phone as torchlight when they are going home in the dark. Most respondents feel that the cell phone gives them a sense of security. Another significant use of the cell phone is for agriculture coolies, small scale industry workers and women working in the MGNREGA programme. The women listen to FM music and other movie songs when they are working in the fields. They said that this makes it more interesting when they are working hard in the fields. However, it has created some problems. The age group 15 to 25 years of respondents is very interested in listening to and watching movie songs and video pictures. About 50% of respondents spent minimum Rs. 300 a month to recharge their cell phones, more than 10% of their monthly salary. Most respondents are first time users of cell phones. They said that they enjoyed making and receiving calls.

However, this has created many ethical and marital issues among both married and young unmarried women. Some of the newly married couples in the rural areas have some adjustment, understanding and adaptation problems, especially the bride with her husband and other family members of the husband. If any problems rise in the family, newly married women make a call immediately to their mothers' families expressing their emotional feelings. The parents then call their sons-in-law and start quarrelling with them. Such uncontrolled emotional feelings and immediate expression of feelings creates many marital problems in rural families. Another issue is that the excessive usage of cell phones by young unmarried girls calling their relatives and friends is something which most men in rural areas don't like for male supremacy still exists in most rural families.

Two factors influence girls in the 15 to 25 age group - freedom from family control and freedom from economic instability. In the current situation most girls are away from their families earning money. These factors create chances for them to get good as well as bad friendships in their working places and while travelling. This has led

to some ethical problems in the life style of working young girls. Most of the elders in the study areas are against cell phone usage, though it has given a lot of benefits in rural life.

In Uttar Pradesh, opposition to the cell phone was extreme. For example, a village council called Lank banned cell phone usage among unmarried women of the village. The village had experience several elopements and the council feared that mobile phones made it easier for men and women to communicate secretly. However, the ban applied only to women, not to young men. The reason is that the elopement marriages between inter-caste youths are forbidden under Hindu custom in some parts of north India. In conservative rural areas, the families sometimes give extreme punishments, including so-called honor killings, for those who violate marriage taboos. Such controversial incidents have been observed in the present study areas also. The opinion of the elders is that accessibility of cell phones also leads to illegal contact among married couples, particularly among women working in industry and construction. The elders also pointed out that those women were using dual sim-card model cell phones, one sim to contact their family members and another for their boyfriends. This kind of activity creates major marital problems between husband and wife. Mr. Jairam Ramesh (Minister for Rural Development of Govt. of India) said that 'these days women want more phones, not toilets' and that 'sanitation is the much more difficult issue, now we are talking of behavioral changes, and women demand mobile phones. They are not demanding toilets.'

Another significant modern communication tool is the internet. With help from international organizations like the World Bank, and UNDP's Millennium Development Goals, national and international development agencies and corporate bodies, rural development initiatives are introducing the internet into rural areas through the implementation of telecentres. India is one of the pioneering countries to implement telecentres in rural areas. These centres are also known as village Information centres, information centres, information kiosks, village knowledge centres etc. They provide internet and computer based information and training to rural people. They are run by rural women who are associated with village Self-help Groups (SHGs). These information centres help to empower rural women's entrepreneurship and provide computer training to young girls who can then look for clerical jobs near their villages. However, the centres are not used much by women for their information needs. This particular study also revealed that 35% of the respondents used the information centre only to know the SSLC and HSc exam results. In most cases, these information centres are used by young men to download movie songs and pictures. Very few use the centre for important information purposes.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

It is true that technology is one of the developmental tools. At the same time the new technological inventions have to be properly implemented and people trained to utilize its advancement for their development. Cell phone technology is penetrating and beneficial to the rural mass particularly women who are going far away from their homes. The accessibility of cell phones is creating decision-making capacity and economic liberalization to women in the study area. Lack of decision-making is a major setback for the empowerment of rural women, but the penetration of cell phones into rural areas has considerably improved their decision-making capacity through communication and free expression of their ideas and feelings. The expectation of parents in rural areas is that they can at least communicate with their daughters while they are away from home. Working girls can contact family at any time and from anywhere. Both parents and girls then feel safe and secure. Even a decade back these girls did not go to the towns for jobs because of the remoteness and lack of infrastructure facilities like communication, roads and transport. Now, facilities have improved considerably in the study areas. Women are getting chances to move to urban centres for jobs. Moreover, they no longer use traditional methods of searching for jobs. Most women now search for jobs by using cell phones and personal contacts. Even

job advertisements carry only the title of the jobs and a contact number, so the girls can call the number and then get a job. This ability to get jobs means that rural women are earning money which can go towards the cost of their marriage and that of their siblings.

On the other hand, we need to notice the negative impact of cell phone accessibility. It is a very new technological tool and care must be taken not to de-motivate rural women.

Another important ICT penetration in the rural set-up is the internet. It has been mainly introduced in rural areas through the concept of ICT for development. An internet-based information programme has been implemented in rural areas through village information centres from the late 90s. It was given a great hype in the implementation stage, but accessibility to the internet by rural people did not reach the expected level. This was because service providers and policy makers did not understand rural realities or the information needs of rural people. Rural people's needs are very specific; they need more local information rather than global information. In addition these initiatives did not sensitize the real benefits of internet-based information to the rural people; there was also a lack of infrastructure facilities, erratic electric power supply and internet connectivity, low levels of education and the economic condition of the people. Consequently, many of the initiatives are closed while some are in take-off level and some in the trial period. Nevertheless, if the information centres disseminate information on agriculture, domestic developments, local marketing news, government schemes and health care in local languages, this will be very useful for rural people.

There have, nevertheless, been some good effects which have already happened through this programme. The village information centre's operators now know more about entrepreneurship, and it has motivated them to approach higher officials to get their rights and facilities. Since internet technology is very new to rural women, they encourage their children to get training in computer accessibility.

The study therefore suggests that technological development is an urgent requirement for the socio and economic empowerment of rural women. However, individual attitudes, social changes and interest in accessing ICTs are also becoming increasingly important issues in the technology-based empowerment of rural women. Any technological empowerment-related initiatives should identify the significant needs of rural women in the information world. In this connection, the role of government, private and corporate sectors and the civil society is vital.

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