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'Empowerment of Rural Women through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)'

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Abstract: Rural Development is a process leading to sustainable improvement in the quality of life of rural people, especially poor men and women. Women represent 48 percent of India's population. Women have a key role in economic advancement of any country. Women have been working in line with men in various sectors, they hold key positions in government as well as private sector, and many have also managed their own business successfully. The competency building of women also considered as an active process enabling women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Women have been entered in almost all economic sectors: and have demonstrated the passion and the persistence to succeed. In this way women are very important part of economic activity. Economic activity can be expanded through women empowerment. Sustainability of our development lies on women's equal participation in economic, social, and political activities. In this direction more and more emphasis is laid on the need for development of women and their active participation in the main stream of development process.

Keyword: Empowerment , Communication Technologies , economic , demonstrated.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of various Government policies and programmes in this regard, Indian women continue to lag behind men in education, employment, health, social and political empowerment. Statistics such as a sex ratio of 933, female literacy levels of 54.16 percent, maternal mortality of 450 per 1000 live births, adolescent fertility rate of 68 births per 1000 live births and low level of representation of women in legislature at below 10% substantiate this assertion. Indian women suffer from life long subjugation, discrimination and exploitation. In fact, as per UNDP's Human Development Report 2010, India ranks 122 out of 138 countries and is placed below even Pakistan in case of gender equality. This index comprises four indicators, namely, economic, political, and educational and health subjects. All these four are intricately related to the status of women. However the case of rural women is particularly miserable.

The importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in stimulating socio- economic development is widely recognized. ICT can create new types of economic activity, employment opportunities and improvements in delivery of healthcare and other services. Easy widespread access to ICT can lead to a more capable work force and increase economic efficiency. It can also enhance networking, participation and advocacy within society, improve Government-Citizen interface and foster transparency and accountability in governance. Another devastating gap found especially in developing countries is the gender equity gap. In a situation where gender equity is absent we have an ethically untenable and development impeding gender gap or divide. Even when corrective laws and policies are put in place to address it, the gender divide tends to persist, as it is a deep rooted complex socio-cultural cum economic phenomenon.

It is well recognized that ICT facilities can help to bridge the gender divide. In fact women an important part of the 'have-nots' within the digital divide. Access to ICT can empower rural women by promoting basic literacy and education, providing access to knowledge, employment opportunities, banking services, government services and markets and by facilitating their health and safety. ICT is an especially powerful tool as it can achieve these desirable outcomes in a culturally acceptable manner, making pertinent information, services and assistance available to women within their homes/villages. ICT can impart distance education and create a variety of locally available jobs for rural women as is the case of women runs rural BPOs which are flourishing even in conservative states like Rajasthan and Haryana. Enabling women to access ICT entails a gender sensitive approach wherein apart from just ensuring women's access to ICT in terms of availability, affordability, convenient location, language and timing etc, the tailoring of content to address their concerns reflect their local knowledge and needs and to be of value in their daily lives, business enterprises and family responsibilities is crucial.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:

The empowering process of women in India started predominantly from the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) when obligatory quota of benefits for women in different poverty alleviation programmes had been made. This process reached its pinnacle when the Government of India brought in 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India in the year 1992 for at least one third reservations of seats for of women in rural and urban local self governments. In rural areas, local self governments have three tiers villages, blocks, and districts. This reservation is applicable to all three tiers. As a consequence thousands of women in rural and urban India have been liberated from their kitchens and brought into positions of authority and responsibility in the panchayats and municipalities. They became the members of political community at the same time, because to

be the members of local self government they have to contest party-based general elections at an interval of five years.

Information Communication Technologies in the Context of Rural Development:

ICTs 'as a range of electronic technologies can be used to interlink information technology devices such as personal computers with communication technologies such as telephones and their telecommunication networks. The PC and laptop with e-mail and Internet provides the best example. The range of technologies is increasing all the time and 'there is a convergence between the new technologies and conventional media' (Michiels and Van Crowder, 2001:8). This rapid and ongoing convergence means that devices such as digital cameras, digital video cameras and players, personal digital assistants, slide projectors and mobile telephones are also compatible with more traditional media such as radio and television. Thus most devices can now be linked to others to share and exchange information and allow it to be used in such a way that they can also be categorised as ICTs. Even books are being incorporated into ICTs either through the potential for informal web publishing or more formal digital book publishing with designated readers or 'e-books'. ICTs, therefore, are an expanding assembly of technologies that can be used to collect, store and share knowledge and information between people using ICT.

Rural areas are often characterised as information-poor and information provision has always been a central component of rural development initiatives. The rural poor typically lack access to information vital to their lives and livelihoods. It is well recognised that knowledge and information could be the key to development. The power of knowledge and information for development was highlighted in the World Development Report-1999, that can be greatly enhanced by ICTs if they are harnessed to improve access and break down barriers to knowledge because 'while education develops cognitive skills, information gives content to knowledge'. It is clear that rural areas hold substantial human and natural potential to realise development goals (reduce inequality, reduce poverty, empowerment) by harnessing knowledge. Information and communication activities are a fundamental element to access of knowledge and information.

RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. Women empowerment generally refers to the process by which women enhances their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision making and control over distribution of benefits. Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (UNPOPIN, 2010). Broadly speaking, women empowerment has three dimensions.

Economic empowerment: Women are economically empowered when they are supported to engage in a productive activity that allows them some degree of autonomy. This type of empowerment is also concerned with the quality of their economic involvement, beyond their presence as poorly paid workers.

Social empowerment: This is a process of acquiring information, knowledge and skills; and supporting participation of women in social organizations without any gender discrimination in day-to-day activities. It is also concerned with inculcating a feeling of equality instead of subordination among women.

Political empowerment: It is concerned with enhancing the power of voice and collective action by women. Besides, it ensures equitable representation of women in decision-making structures, both formal and informal, and strengthen their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies.

Economic, social and political empowerments are all inter-related and all these are critical for women empowerment, though the emphasis vary during different stages in the empowerment process. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in 2003 in Geneva, saw ICTs as vital tools for women's empowerment: “We are committed to ensuring that the information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end” (WSIS, 2003).

ICTs and Rural Women Empowerment:

India has been a major hub for rural ICT experiments in last two decades. Many of these initiatives have clearly revealed the huge potential of new ICTs in improving efficiency, effectiveness and reach of rural service delivery. They also highlight the scope in ensuring the much needed transparency in both government and business. But before we go into the details of new ICTs, it is pertinent to briefly discuss contribution of ICTs in rural women empowerment. India has a large number of ICT pilots implemented by different kinds of organizations. These include traditional and new ICTs. Traditional ICTs (Radio, Television and Print media) and New ICTs (Internet Enabled Computers (information kiosks, telecenters, rural knowledge centers (RKC), information centers, and common service centers), Portals, Call centers, Mobile, Community Radio (CR), Video, Digital photography and ICT-based enterprises).

Traditional ICTs:-

a.Radio: The most important medium for information dissemination in India. Can listen while doing work. Improved knowledge on agriculture, health, nutrition, childcare and subjects learnt through distance education for increasing productivity, achieving better health and nutrition and acquiring better employment.

b.Television: It is more effective and better retention of broadcast information due to visual appeal and offers new

formats providing interactivity in the field of agriculture, health, nutrition and education.
c.Print media: Disseminates a wide range of potentially useful information on agriculture, health, nutrition, employment, and environment. The information from the print media can be easily stored and retrieved at home.

New ICTs:-
d.Internet Enabled Computers: A device for interactive learning and social empowerment, provide a wide range of information (farm technology, weather and prices, health and nutrition, government schemes etc.
e.Portals: Very useful for knowledge workers involved in rural development and rural women empowerment. Knowledge and information gain by ways of accessing by range of useful information relevant for women.
f.Call centers: Information and advisory support especially on agriculture and health. Recent years have witnessed increasing use of this facility mainly due to increasing rural telephone density and wide publicity of these services.
g.Mobile: It offers quick access to timely and relevant information as voice or text by a large number of subscribers. Very useful for disseminating dynamic and locally generated information on weather, prices, crop tips, government schemes. Increasingly being adopted by mobile companies as a value added service to mobiles on a subscription basis.
h.Community Radio (CR): Generate and disseminate locally relevant information with community participation. Contribution to development of rural women networks in few cases leading to social empowerment. Wide range of information on rural life disseminated. Content defined by rural communities especially if the station is under community control and management. Better reception as local dialect is used for communication. Potentially useful for raising awareness and also for advocacy communication at the local level.
i.Video: Better information and knowledge gain through using videos as part of training rural communities. Creative use of video has contributed to social and political empowerment in few cases. It is also a source of employment. Video potentially support training communities in good farming practices. Potentially useful for raising awareness on issues of women's concern and mobilizing women around common Issues.
j.Digital Photography: It reduced time lag in identification of a problem and availability of expert advice. Better knowledge on managing crops through expert advice on crop protection/management.
k.ICT-based enterprises: Economic empowerment as new source of rural employment. New source of employment in rural areas for providing several web-enabled services, training rural communities in computer skills and as employees in rural BPOs.

Rural Women Empowerment through ICTs -Evidence from India:

Most of the ICT applications are disseminating new knowledge and information to rural communities including women. Rural women are increasingly gaining in terms of employment in ICT-based enterprises. There is also clear evidence on women gaining by use of ICTs in their enterprises. The review of several experiences led us to the following set of findings

ICTs do play an important role in disseminating a wide range of information and advice leading to knowledge and attitude change among rural communities. It is also supporting rural communities to acquire new skills and is also creating new employment opportunities. However, the continuing digital divide between urban and rural areas and between men and women currently constrain the realization of the full potential of ICTs in reaching rural women.
Radio (All India Radio) and Television disseminate a wide range of information relevant to socioeconomic development and these include agriculture, health, rural employment, environment, e-governance etc. Women who have access to these media have mostly benefited as passive recipients of information and advice. However with addition of new programme formats such as phone-in-programmes, these media are now becoming more interactive.
Out of the different ICTs, only Community Radio (CR) and Rural Knowledge Centres (RKCs) were found to have an agenda and a mechanism for addressing the locally relevant information needs of rural women. But its extent of effectiveness is closely dependent on two sets of factors, namely, the extent of ownership and management by women in these initiatives; and agenda, focus and vision of organizations employing these tools.
ICTs hold lots of promise for organizations working for the interests of women or having an explicit agenda for social inclusion, gender focus and pro-poor development.
ICT-based enterprises have potential to employ more number of rural women who are educated up to 10th or preferably 12th classes, in the lower end of the BPO sector. There are also opportunities to train some of these rural women for self employment in the IT sector (data management, DTP, as trainers).
In most of the other ICT initiatives that depend on print media, internet kiosks, portals, call centers, mobile, video digital photography etc, there is not enough evidence to show its wider access and use by women. This could be due to the following reasons: These tools and its applications are intended for the rural communities without any specific attention for women's special needs for information and their constraints in accessing these. Men are specifically targeted in these initiatives as they take decisions on inputs, farm operations, marketing, accessing government schemes etc. The information provided through these tools are generic and so while it adds to the information base of rural communities including women, its lack of contextualization prevents both men and women from using this information effectively. Lack of adequate research on women's access to ICTs and the resultant lack of data, constraints any specific action that might be needed to improve women's access.

Though CR and internet-enabled computers of RKCs offer greater scope for reaching rural women with locally relevant and demand led information, these initiatives are currently constrained by various factors. There is lot of experience of using these currently and addressing

some of these constraints can potentially improve women's access to relevant information.

Socio-cultural factors governing women's access and use of ICTs:

ICTs do contribute to women empowerment, though its contributions vary significantly based on the tool used. There are reasonable to conclude that ICTs have the potential to contribute towards economic, social and political empowerment of women. However many women don't have the required support (social, cultural and economical) and access to complementary set of knowledge and services to make use of this information. There are some socio cultural factors governing use and accesses of ICTs in India are as follows.

Cultural attitudes discriminate against women's access to technology and technology education.
Compared to men, rural women are less likely to own communication assets, such as a radio or mobile phone.
Rural women are less likely to allocate their income to use in public communication facilities, except when they need to communicate with family or to arrange for income transfers.
Rural women are often reluctant to visit "cyber cafes" or public internet canters, which are often owned by men and visited by men. The café culture often excludes girls and women from frequenting them.
Rural women's multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities limit the time they can allocate to learning and using ICTs until and unless they realize the potential information benefits and time-saving elements of using these technologies.

Rural Women Empowerment through ICTs- Some success stories from India:

ICTs accessibility and affordability has increased exponentially. As a result, opportunities for utilizing ICT solutions for e-services and for reaching all groups of society, including the poor men women, users in remote areas, and other disadvantaged groups, have transformed the landscape for development, some success stories from India given below.

Agrowon-Pune-Maharashtra- A success Story: Agrowon, the world's first Marathi daily on agriculture was launched in 2005 by Pune based Sakal Media. The objective of this daily was equipping farmers with factual information and the latest technology to make them globally competitive, and help them increase their income levels. This 16 page daily has now eight editions which cater to eight different agro-climatic zones. Each zone has a different mix of crops, which also changes the way people live and the kind of information they seek. Though Agrowon uses the Sakal network for distribution, it is an independently priced daily, currently priced at Rs 2. With a current circulation of 100,000 copies. Agrowon has managed to generate 80 percent revenue from advertising of core agricultural products. The paper covers cultivation practices in different crops; better management practices in dairy, poultry and fisheries; success stories; and answers to farmers questions. The paper has now gone online with an e-edition that focuses on second- generation farmers.

National Village Phone Program - Bangladesh- A success Story: In Bangladesh, through the national Village Phone Program, more than 270,000 Village Phone Operators, who purchased their phones as borrower members of the Grameen Bank, provide accessible pay-phone services in over 50,000 villages. In rural areas, where isolation and poor infrastructure services are common, access to telecommunications can play an important role in enhancing social and economic development. At the same time, the program has created significant income-earning opportunities for Village Phone operators, who are mostly women.

Kalyani - A success story: Kalyani, a programme on health communication in India, is telecast over Doordarshan in nine of the most backward and populous states of India in 3 languages and 14 dialects, targeting approximately 50% of India's population. The programme over the last nine years has been significantly advocating behavioural change on health related issues by generating awareness and discussions on particular diseases. This 30-minute programme is telecasted twice a week. Research has shown that "61.2% of Kalyani viewers are females and 38.17% of them don't own a TV set. The programme has made tangible impact, both in the knowledge and attitude. Exposure to Kalyani resulted in knowledge gains on the diseases covered, their prevalence, symptoms, and precautions to be taken and, cure" (GFK Mode, 2009). Kalyani clubs (viewer groups) – a key component of the media strategy – have village-level members, who take the messages further by organizing local activities, such as cleaning up ponds and streets, or organizing eye and blood donation camps. Currently, there are nearly 80,000 Kalyani club volunteers. It is estimated that Kalyani reaches almost 500 million viewers across the country.

Kisan Call Centres (KCC) in Tamil Nadu: At level I, the person attending the call asks for the name, name of the village and other personal details and uploads these in the data base and the caller will be assigned an ID number. Then the queries are answered. Level I team provides information about the crop protection practices, about the schemes and subsidies and if it can't be satisfactorily answered it will be passed on to the next level. Almost all queries are answered at level I only. The level I staff are trained by the TNAU experts periodically. Daily 200-250 calls are attended. The same farmer can call repeatedly with the same ID number. Six trainings are organised every year for the level I staff. The KCC in Tamil Nadu faces two challenges, Firstly, the staff at level I don't have adequate experience; most of them are fresh graduates. They answer most of the questions, not because they can confidently answer all, but due to difficulties in contacting concerned staff at level II. Secondly, the experts at Level II are working in their respective stations and they have several other responsibilities and they are not often available to answer the queries.

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Farmer Call Centre (FCC), Government of Andhra Pradesh: The Farmers Call Centre (FCC) was inaugurated in Andhra Pradesh on July 1st, 2003. It is accessible to the farmers of AP on toll free numbers 1100 or 1800 425 1110. Since its inception, 125,000 farmers from Andhra Pradesh utilized the services of FCC and benefited by taking advice from scientists of ANGRAU. The movement calls are received, the operator attends the call, as per the categories of the problem the call is transferred to the scientists. The centre on an average receives 20,000 calls an year. In the peak season the average calls /day is 300 and in off season it is in the range of 100-150. In a week the average calls come around 400-500 and in a month 1600-2000. The ANGRAU scientists posted at the FCC are from the fields of entomology, agronomy, plant physiology, and plant pathology and soil science. In addition to advice on regular package of practices for different crops, the farmers are advised on weather forecast, market rates of crop produce in different yards, input supply, rates, cost of various tools and implements and their availability, Government support for Horticultural crops (subsidies on drip irrigation, subsidy on fruit plants supply, poly houses) and address and phone numbers of various Government offices related to agriculture. Apart from these services, scientists are disseminating answers of frequently asked questions and select questions through mass media such as Television, radio, newspapers and monthly magazines so as to reach to the maximum number of farmers.

CONCLUSIONS:

Most of the ICTs are disseminating new information and knowledge on agriculture, health and nutrition among rural women. However, due to the continuing digital divide between urban and rural and also between men and women, many rural women are yet to fully benefit from the potential of ICTs. To make use of the information, women would need access to other sources of support and services. Women, who are the part of development initiatives and have access the service, are able to use the information and knowledge disseminated through ICTs. The potential of ICT tools varied widely in reaching rural women. There is no ideal ICT that fits all situations. Among the varied tools, the knowledge centres and the community radio were found to have the greatest potential in reaching women with locally relevant content. Radio and television also support distance education programmes to a very large extent. ICTs can also contribute significant gains in efficiency and effectiveness in rural women enterprises. There is a lot of potential for ICTs to create new employment opportunities for women in rural areas. Rural women however need financial, technical and managerial support to effectively utilize this opportunity. More efforts are also needed for enhancing the capacities of rural communities, especially rural women to access ICTs.