



*Mahila Samakhya Karnataka Training Programme in progress*

## Mahila manthana: Using ICTs for women's empowerment

**Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can create, disseminate, store, bring value and manage information in a way that few could have imagined. ICTs have made it possible to reach the unreached women. It has provided them with an opportunity to participate in their own economic and social progress, and make informed decision on issues that affect them.**

**This issue of the ICTD Project newsletter thus reviews some of ICT for development initiatives for women and how ICTs have helped in the empowerment of women. The latter part of the article shall deal with the lessons from these projects in context to the Mahiti Manthana project, supported by NISG and implemented by IT for Change, a Bangalore based NGO working with Mahila Samakhya – Karnataka.**

### Introduction

Since early 1990's ICTs have been increasingly used by women and women's organisations, for networking and political advocacy. ICTs hold the potential for giving women new space, for political action across national boundaries, for economic gain through support for establishing local enterprises, and for enabling access to markets. Using ICTs to broaden perspectives, build up greater understanding, and initiate interactive processes for information exchange can aid women

greatly. But the need to view women as active interpreters of information has been resounded increasingly across the globe.

A number of valuable resources are available on the web to assist organisations working with women to learn and use these digital technologies. The Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is a non-governmental organisation was set up to develop the use of ICTs among women as tools to share information and address issues collectively. Says *Dorothy Okello* of

WOUGNET, "Women need to have a say in what applications are developed and promoted, and the only way is to get more women into the labs and factories. Universal access entails a gendered approach as well as gives women a chance to access learning and training opportunities, which will in turn build women's technological capacity." ([www.woughnet.org](http://www.woughnet.org))

### Areas of focus

Globally, the projects around the world that focus on gender and ICT for empowerment can broadly be grouped into projects that focus on (i) access to information for livelihoods; (ii) using other ICT tools like community radio; (iii) creating storehouses of data; (iv) education and training of women; (v) supporting women entrepreneurs; and (vi) linking of women producers to global markets.

#### i Livelihoods information access

In Eastern Europe, the Council of Women Farmers, and the State Committee of Ukraine for Entrepreneurship Development, UNDP in cooperation with an NGO has started a telecentre project in Ukraine to provide information on agriculture and farm management for supporting women farmers who identified lack of information and networking tools as the major obstacle for improved incomes from farming. The purpose of the telecentre is to provide access to information that is critical for their livelihoods

Telecentres have been set up by many government agencies as well as NGOs all across the country. The most important services that are provided relate to livelihoods issues. Self Employed Women's Association in Gujarat, India, has set up Technology

Information Centres (TIC) in 11 districts in Gujarat with the objective of providing crafts related skills, computer skills, other multi-media skills, and organizing and leadership training using ICTs effectively.

Connectivity through information networks can support women's access to information, covering technical information on sustainable agricultural practices and innovations, market news and agricultural commodity prices, weather predictions and rainfall patterns, recommended crops for the season and information on institutions that provide expertise and training.

#### ii Using other ICT tools like community radio, video etc.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS) has trained poor *dalit* (the Indian social classification for the poorest and untouchables in the caste system) women in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh to use the video to represent their lives and redefine their status. Community radio has become a popular media for women and can play important role for empowerment and the right to information for rural women. DDS has also set up a community radio station in Machnoor village, with a 100-watt FM transmitter with a 30-kilometer radius reach. Supported by UNESCO, a small team of dalit women have recorded over 300 hours of programming on issues related to women's empowerment, agricultural needs of semi-arid regions, public health and hygiene, indigenous knowledge systems, biodiversity, food security and also local song and drama. Using multiple digital technologies among the communities has proved to be very successful in initiating women to new technologies and empowering them.

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has used the video as a tool of women's empowerment from the mid-80s onwards. SEWA's cooperative, 'Video SEWA', has produced video footage on many issues including livelihoods of poor women. It has used

the medium to share information with their own members and also as a tool for training and teaching new skills, and to reach policy makers. Also, SEWA's satellite technology programme has enabled the organisation working in over 10 districts of Gujarat, to provide information on topics like Panchayati Raj (village governance institutions), nursery raising and forestry management, savings and credit through the use of satellite cable.

Since a number of women farmers and skilled worked in rural areas are unlettered, they prefer to learn about the new methods and market information through the video, phone, radio.

#### iii Creating storehouses of data

Women's groups have been organised in self-help groups, which focus on savings and micro-credit programmes as a way to access small loans to start and run their enterprises. This requires learning a number of management activities like record maintenance, fund transfers, etc. The Collectorate of West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, has introduced a software solution package called 'Mahila Spurthi', that can do most of the credit related operations.

SEWA started using ICT by piloting its computerisation for a few activities like savings and crafts activities limiting itself to one district. Today SEWA has successfully developed software which generates various customised reports such as community-wise artisan members, embroidery-wise member lists, grade-wise member lists.

#### iv Education and training of women

The Delhi based Studies in Information Technology Applications (SITA) provided computer skill training to poor and disadvantaged women. The aim was to empower low-income women from rural, suburban and urban areas, through computer training, customised to meet the demands of both the public and private sectors and generating rural employment.

Datamation Foundation's ICT Centre at the Babool-Ulm-Madarsa, Seelampur, North-East Delhi has been operating since March 2003 to take ICTs closer to Muslim women, whose mobility is restricted by cultural prescriptions. The corner stone of the project is the use of CDs for building skills of women. More than 40 vocational and skills-enrichment modules which include bead-making, dressmaking, carpentry, embroidery, candle-making, mehndi (henna), handbag-making, tailoring, etc. have been developed for income-generation.

#### v Supporting women entrepreneurs

Self-employment through ICTs is another income-earning area for the poor women. The Village Pay Phones project of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is a success story. The banks lend money to rural women to buy cellular phones, which serve as Public Call Offices (PCOs). Due to cultural barriers women often cannot leave their homes to far away places. These mobile PCOs also provide an opportunity for women to get development information through the support of the NGO's databases. A pilot program involving 300 villages revealed that women were earning about US\$700 per year after covering all their costs, over twice the per capital annual income in Bangladesh.

#### vi Linking of women producers to global markets

One of the most powerful applications of ICT in the domain of knowledge networking is electronic commerce. e-Commerce is a field which, with organisational support, can provide enormous opportunities for poor women producers to meet up the challenges of selling their products in the global market. SEWA's Trade Facilitation Centre has considerable success in its e-Commerce endeavours supported by its websites [www.banascraft.org](http://www.banascraft.org), [www.kutchcraft.org](http://www.kutchcraft.org) and [www.sewamart.com](http://www.sewamart.com)

In Lethem, a village in Guyana, an organisation 'Rupununi Weaver's

Society' formed by indigenous women of two tribes revived the ancient art of hand-weaving large hammocks from locally grown cotton and then took their exquisite wares online (<http://www.gol.net.gy/rweavers/>). Last year, they sold 17 hammocks to people around the world for as much as \$1,000 a piece- a gigantic sum in this part of the world.

PEOPLink (<http://www.peoplink.org/>) has been helping women communities traditionally involved with handicrafts to put their products online in the world market. It is building up a global network of Trading Partners (TPs) that will provide services to several community-based artisan producer groups and promote them to retail and wholesale buyers in the industrialised countries.

### The Mahiti Manthana Project

The above given projects provide insights for the newly launched project called Mahiti Manthana which is being implemented by IT for Change (ITfC), a not-for-profit organization, ([www.itforchange.net](http://www.itforchange.net)) under the Women's Empowerment theme of the ICTD Project being implemented by NISG.

The project is a response to a felt need of an established grassroots programme- Mahila Samakhya (MS) and is being piloted in three talukas of Mysore district of Karnataka- Hunsur, Nanjangud and Periyapatna. MS is active in 9000 villages of 60 districts in 10 states of India. The Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka (MSK) works in 9 districts of Karnataka. ITfC works in the domain of technology for social change and has been partnering with MSK on producing digital content and supporting the development of ICT based knowledge management processes in the organisation.

This project strives to fulfill multiple objectives at local and institutional level. It attempts to build the knowledge and capacity of the self-help groups; address the communication needs of the 'sangha' women and the adolescent girls besides building and sustaining the capacities of the MSK resource persons at various

levels. Three other key objectives focus on intra-organisational knowledge sharing and process; access to knowledge and expertise through helpline, access to justice and legal redressal processes (both formal and informal) and strengthen the government linkages.

### Meeting the knowledge needs of 'sangha' women

The motto of Mahila Samakhya is 'education for empowerment'. This project will make available the opportunity of using digital audio-visual multimedia, chiefly VCDs and textual media to maximise absorption of information and capacity by 'sangha' women. Other digital technologies like digital text, computers, e-mails, custom software, telephones, etc. will also be used to serve the objectives of MSK's activity. So while some 'sanghas' will be provided the basic equipment to access audio-visual content (VCD players with TV sets and tape recorders) the others will have full-fledged networked computers and peripherals.

VCDs will be developed in-house on important themes and well catalogued for easy referencing.

### Addressing communication and identity building needs

Participatory video techniques will be used and street plays, important 'sangha' meetings and other 'sangha' events like interactions with panchayats and government officials will be video recorded. 'Sangha' women will be encouraged to video-document their insights and representations for advocacy and for seeking intervention from authorities. A monthly newsletter will be brought out for the Mysore district programme of MSK, with content contributed by 'sangha' women, 'kishoris' as well as by the MSK functionaries. Digital content produced locally will also be put on the cable TV. As local media capability and processes are built, introducing community radio will also be explored.

### Meeting ICT needs of adolescent girls (kishoris)

The information and communication needs of the young adolescent girls or 'kishoris' will be met by providing elementary computer literacy, leveraging IT to make available reading material in print, providing life skills and conscientisation modules. The processes of making a vast choice of reading material available to 'kishories' will be worked through an innovative system



*Kishoris at an information dissemination program*

over a digital platform called the 'IT Enabled Library Extension Service' (ITELES). The ITELES software will allow 'kishoris' to browse a complete list of books and journals available at city/taluka libraries. The request for books from each 'sangha' will be aggregated and during the next visit of any member to the taluka, books due for return will be carried back, and the requisitioned books collected.

### Capacity building activities

The key resource persons are the Senior Resource Persons, Junior Resource Persons and Cluster Resource Persons at the district, taluka and cluster levels respectively. Increasingly, the Executive Council (EC) members of the federations and issue-based leaders of 'sanghas' will also emerge as key resource persons. All these resource persons will be trained to access content from computers at the Taluka Resource Centre. Significant amount of content, organised through a customised Content Management System (CMS), and interactive training modules, will be prepared for the resource persons.

## Knowledge management activities of MSK

New ICTs to support and develop efficient information and communication processes for the entire organisation of MSK will be used. It will cover knowledge management tools, and digital platforms for better planning across the tiers of the MSK. This entails internal office automation processes and promoting the use of emails.



'Sangha' formation and oath taking in progress

Other operational processes that will be automated include a Project Management System (PMS) for MSK project monitoring and reporting; developing an MIS (Management Information System) for periodic reporting; Extending the MIS system to cover the subsequent levels of the talukas and villages; Digital support for SHG accounting, micro-credit and finance management through SHG accounting systems; and Significant and meaningful web presence through an organisation web-site.

## Running 'Santhwana' helpline for redressal and justice

The 'Santhwana' helpline will be operated from the three taluka Mahiti Manthana Kendras to provide access to legal information and redressal, and to processes of justice. The helpline will develop call-centre capabilities with voice mail, effective call-classification and content support through custom software, call recognition and recording, call classification for differential processing, call-forwarding and teleconferencing with third parties,

linkages with experts and with support agencies like banks, etc. Telephones will be the main channel to access the helpline. 'Sampark Sakhis' (communication facilitators) at the helpline will be trained to give information support as well as linkages to experts and government authorities.

## Strengthening linkages to outside agencies

MSK women will use the offline digital multi-media (VCDs or video compact discs) for making petitions to government. The taluka Mahiti Manthana Kendras will serve as the key digital connection for this purpose. The project will also explore using simple e-governance software with the district administration, for better efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of linkage processes.

## Extending the services for self-sustenance

Once the 'sangha' is capable of, and comfortable with, employing the new ICTs for its own purposes, the Mahiti Manthana Kendra will be converted to a community telecentre, providing a range of information and services to the wider community. The project will also develop links with the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). Financially sustainable Mahiti Manthana Kendras are expected to come up in other places with little or no additional investments. The model after piloting in Mysore, will be absorbed in MSK activity throughout Karnataka and then throughout the 10 states in which MS operates.

## Project initiation activities

ITfC's project management team will network with the management structure of MSK, and a variety of expert consultants of the project. The Project Co-ordination office will be in Bangalore, Content Distribution Unit, Training Unit and Technical Support Unit will be in Mysore and the Mahiti Manthana Kendras at taluka and village levels.

The project is in a needs assessment and a baseline survey phase. Since Mahiti Manthana is a meta-intervention, aiming to strengthen an existing intervention (Mahila Samakhya, Karnataka or MSK), the needs are being assessed at two levels. One, at the level of the 'sangha' women - for women's empowerment, possibly through telecentres providing the information and communication needs of the whole village. The second level of survey is at MSK level, exploring how can the new technologies be used to make training and capacity building processes more efficient, what knowledge bases can be built which are easily accessible, how can MSK's internal information and communication can be made more efficient etc. ■

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