

Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centre of SEWA

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This case study is a part of the broader research study *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, undertaken by IT for Change, which sought to understand how principles promoting women's inclusion and gender sensitivity can be incorporated into Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICTD) projects through an analysis of five interventions: *Abhiyan's Mahiti Mitra* kiosks, DHAN Foundation's Village Information Centres, the *E-Krishi* application within the *Akshaya* project, rural *eSeva* kiosks and the Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centres of SEWA¹. These specific projects were selected on the basis of their representation of different development typologies², geographical coverage, scale, type of ownership (government or civil society sector) and their stated approach to gender and social justice. In addition to the field research undertaken between February and April 2007 using qualitative methods, the research also built on secondary sources. Each of the five interventions aims to improve community development and linkages with external institutions to better address community needs, while women's empowerment was not necessarily an explicit objective for all cases. This case study analyses the Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centre of SEWA³.

SEWA's background and approach to development

The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was established in 1972 as an alternative trade union for women workers from the informal sector. The main objectives of SEWA centre around full employment and self-reliance of its women members, advocacy on policy regarding steady income and ownership of assets (at both individual and collective levels), health insurance and equality. Currently, SEWA functions through 20 sister organisations, most of which are structured as federated cooperatives. SEWA believes that small, targeted measures can make huge differences in the livelihoods of

women. Cooperatives formally own all the collective assets, including all equipment and technology applications, used by SEWA.

Along with its focus on women's economic stability, SEWA also considers the enhanced leadership skills, decision-making capabilities and literacy of its members as indicators of self-reliance. Literacy has therefore gradually permeated the basic strategies of the organisation.

SEWA has developed custom-made training sessions in computer literacy, English, life skills, and SEWA's core values, for school-going girls and drop outs which were piloted in Ahmedabad city (Gujarat state) due to the difficulty in getting instructors to travel to rural

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areas. The initiative emerged from a demand of young girls, mostly daughters of SEWA members, who articulated their aspiration to be exposed to new technologies and computers and to be trained in the skills required by emerging job opportunities in various sectors.

Alongside these training courses, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) were established in several districts⁴ of Gujarat to provide a range of services and interact with the communities.

A CLC is a nodal point for information in rural areas and usually services a cluster of villages through the use of ICTs.

E-commerce activities were initiated in the year 2000 through the SEWA Trade Facilitation Centre (STFC). Their main goal is livelihood enhancement of women artisans and traders in the Kutch and Patan Districts, by providing women better access to markets, better prices and more efficient production systems.

When SEWA started, technologies were perceived as a resource for mainstream society, excluding poor women from the new information and communication possibilities. However, from the very beginning, SEWA used technologies that would include marginalised non-literate women, disproving the myth that these women could not handle technology. ICTs are also mainstreamed into SEWA strategies to enhance productivity and efficiency in its various activities, e.g. training, advocacy and mobilisation. SEWA adopts a shared ownership model for ICTs whereby the technology is placed in the hands of the collectives. SEWA envisages the spread of technology amongst women members and the regularising of their use in ways that address women's needs, rights and empowerment goals.

ICTD implementation model and actors

The diverse services and activities carried out at the

CLCs mean that the importance of these spaces in addressing the central livelihood and empowerment needs of SEWA members cannot be underestimated. CLCs have become sources of power at the village level because of their role in disseminating information and knowledge, based on the needs of women members and the community. Activities and services include storing historical, geographic, demographic, social and economic data, and providing ICT tools, such as computers, Internet and calculators. They further serve as: computer training centres for all women (educated as well as older and non-literate); grain and fodder banks; spaces for daily training sessions for *aagewans* (grassroots leaders), field workers and organisers; and as spaces to improve women's occupational needs by addressing skill upgrades and new skill learning.

In addition, the centres link with the governmental *Gram Mitra* job programme and help women apply for jobs online. Software available at the centres helps determine market pricing of various agricultural inputs and finished products. The CLC also links with SEWA's rural product marketing organisation, *Gram Haat*, to facilitate the sale of locally produced products branded under the name of Rudi. Such processes that mainstream and structure trade into a transparent system ensure that women gain a decent income for their produce, which fits within

SEWA's larger goals of economic self-reliance.

Participation in non-technical training sessions has led to women becoming more aware of important health and education issues, and recognising the roles of the *Panchayats*⁵ and responsibilities of leadership positions. SEWA also engages with issues of women's citizenship through interventions at the CLCs. Video screenings, training sessions and group discussions encourage women to take an active role in the public sphere and institutions. For instance, Ms. Maya from Mehsana CLC recounted the story of a woman *sarpanch*⁶ who had not attended a single village meeting, and whose husband attended as a proxy for her. She was merely putting her thumb impression on any document her husband asked her to. The CLC workers encouraged this woman to visit the centre, engage in group sessions and provided her with exclusive training on the functioning of the *Panchayat*. These exposure visits served to invest in her a sense of responsibility toward her role as a *sarpanch*. She began accompanying her husband to meetings and later went on her own. SEWA's CLC model exemplifies an approach in which the effort is directed towards synchronising and harmonising 'online' technology platforms with 'offline' community processes.

SEWA goes a step further and actively intervenes at the grassroots level to widen user constituencies at the CLCs.

Staff have a structured role in grassroots mobilisation efforts and in sharing the potential benefits of ICTs with women who have had no previous exposure. Interventions aim at reaching marginalised populations whose exposure to mainstream advancements is poor, and whose perceived value of technology platforms to alleviate daily struggles is minimal, thereby, going beyond demand-based interventions.

The use of ICTs in e-commerce has played a crucial role in enabling the buffering activities of STFC. ICTs are employed extensively to facilitate and improve the process of organising women traders on a large scale. They also allow for increased visibility of women's work in international markets that generate high demand, and streamline and improve the efficiency of the spatially disparate production, collection and distribution chains. The e-commerce project has been a resounding success. In its first 18 months, STFC's annual sales grew by 62 per cent and exports by 311 per cent over the preceding year, as attested in SEWA's 2005 Annual Report. With their new-found access to large markets, artisans have

realised the actual value of their work, which they earlier sold at throw-away prices.

Challenges and positive outcomes

As reflected above, SEWA's CLC centres form a holistic space in which information and communication activities are carried out across a very broad spectrum defining their meaning. The activities may involve the use of newer technologies but also continue to use the more 'traditional' ICTs, including lectures, peer-to-peer sharing and booklets. More specifically, the CLC is the grassroots interface for e-commerce activities, and is thus positioned as an important resource for women's self-reliance. The availability of a space with this broad development ambit, which is owned, run and monitored by women members, creates a new perception of SEWA as a central information and communication hub. SEWA emphasises the importance of an external resource agency to: support the activities of local women through the development of content; negotiate with institutions such as banks, local government bodies and the market; and raise awareness and training on new trends, products, opportunities and other key areas that local

women may not be able to handle completely on their own. Thus, while continuously pushing for local women's ownership of ICT spaces, participation in ICT activities and use of ICTs to generate and share knowledge, SEWA also prioritises the employment of ICTs to bring in external knowledge, linkages and networks to improve women's well-being and self-reliance.

What do SEWA's Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centre tell us about gender in ICTD projects?

ICTs within a holistic strategy of empowerment

In SEWA's strategy, ICTs have been systemically adopted according to the needs of the community, expressing a strong conviction that ICT tools can help achieve SEWA's goals of full employment and self-reliance more meaningfully and effectively. Acknowledging their empowerment possibilities, SEWA has embraced various ICT tools – video, radio, computers, Internet, mobile phones – only if it believes that they can be integrated and sustained and if they can get the women members to contribute and participate in the ICT initiative. SEWA recognises that ICTs can work only: if they are placed within the activities of larger collective or group; where women are trained not just in IT, but also in other non-technical areas; where appropriate and timely content is available; and where there is a clear vision for

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ICTs as a new space for women to capture

A significant aspect of SEWA's adoption of ICTs is that women should be able to use the tools of the mainstream, controlling them in their own ways and towards their own ends. Use of ICTs is seen as a means to bring visibility and worth to women's issues in the mainstream, while concomitantly working to spread literacy. SEWA believes that organisations interested in adopting ICTs should also invest in basic literacy when working with the poorest of the poor women. Furthermore, engaging with technology plays a key role in increasing women's agency and in overcoming discrimination.

Ownership not just of the tools but also of the design

SEWA's strategy clearly reflects its vision of women's collective ownership of assets, whose uses are created around women's expressed

needs. Yet, conversations with representatives, especially in the area of e-commerce, revealed that ICTs tend to be incorporated as management tools with less emphasis on women's direct involvement and control over technology usage decisions or product design decisions that use new technologies. Even though the e-commerce venture indirectly enables women's economic empowerment and citizenship, the sustainable ownership and management possibilities over these technologies has not been considered beyond the coordination levels.

Shaping the market as a women-friendly space

A critical question SEWA must address concerns the larger issue of gender and social justice in relation to globalised markets. For instance, when selling video footages to local channels, SEWA may want to ensure that the commercials played during the programme do not undermine its overall values.

Being market players brings about a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, SEWA engages with key players of software and agricultural markets, whose policies have been much critiqued for their direct and indirect effects on the poor. On the other, can a grassroots women's organisation like SEWA, which assists women's struggles for a decent life, re-shape the market system and confront it on more gender equal terms? This apparent contradiction echoes the complexities that arise when negotiating knowledge and power in ICT projects, especially where monopolistic or oligopolistic markets create dependencies and lock-ins, thereby undermining freedom and choice in a larger developmental sense.

Reference

Gurumurthy A., Swamy M., Nuggehalli R., Vaidyanathan V. (2008), *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, Bangalore: IT for Change. The study can be found at www.ITforChange.net/images/locating.pdf.

Four films have been made about these case studies. Write to communications@ITforChange.net for a copy of the CD.

Endnotes

- 1 Gurumurthy A., Swamy M., Nuggehalli R., Vaidyanathan V. (2008), *Locating gender in ICTD projects: five cases from India*, Bangalore: IT for Change. Available at www.ITforChange.net/images/locating.pdf. The study was part of the ICT for Development project implemented by the National Institute for Smart Government (NISG), supported by UNDP and the Department of Information Technology, Government of India.
- 2 The ICTD framework used in this research to typify different approaches includes the following:
 - i. ICTs as a vehicle for market extension.
 - ii. ICTs as efficiency enhancing tools for development institutions, including of the government.
 - iii. ICTs as community-centred development tools that can be used to specifically address education, health, livelihoods, agriculture, and other goals.
 - iv. ICTs as a new strategy for empowerment that can shift social power relationships and facilitate institutional transformation towards the realisation of rights of marginalised groups.
- 3 More information about SEWA on www.sewa.org.
- 4 The district is an important node of local governance at the sub-national level in the Indian administrative system.
- 5 *Panchayats* are village level self-governance institutions in the Indian administrative system.
- 6 A *sarpanch* is the head of a *panchayat*.

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The Community Learning Centres and Trade Facilitation Centre of SEWA were selected to represent type 3.