

Topic: Impact of digital marketing platforms on women's micro-businesses in rural India: A case study of Women's Entrepreneurs using Mahila E-Haats

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## Background

Women's economic empowerment as a critical tool to achieve gender equality is well-established, as is the gender disparity in the booming e-commerce industry in India. Further, digitization of service delivery has evolved as an integral component of programme interventions by Governments, INGOs, IOs, Civil Society, while there remain challenges to on-ground access to internet, gender parity in digital literacy, ownership of devices, etc.

Cognizant of these linkages, the Govt. of India, recognizing the digital gender gap, as well as the economic potential in expanding the market for rural women led small businesses to digital platforms, aligned to its Digital India programme, has developed innovative virtual platforms such as *Mahila E-Haat* (women's virtual marketplace). This free online platform enabled women-led small businesses to directly sell their products to consumers, thus expanding their access to markets through digital inclusion.

Although successfully launched and implemented across states, its usage is limited, with only over 300 registered women vendors,<sup>1</sup> and limited public information on the experiences of women-led micro-businesses in navigating digital marketing platforms. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which leveraging technology has impacted the livelihoods of small-scale women entrepreneurs, benefitting from gender-focused government programs that aim for digital inclusion of marginalized women.

### Objectives:

1. The paper aims to examine the impact of creation of a specialized digital platform and capacity development on e-commerce, digital payments, etc. on the livelihoods of the beneficiary women. (It seeks to explore whether the technology has been able to bring a change in customer reach, quality of the products offered, scale of production, sustainability of the enterprise as well as individual empowerment through ownership of production processes, marketing and sales.)
2. The paper seeks to understand the gaps in policy, discourse, programme implementation and environment creation that would serve to make e-commerce platforms accessible for women-led small businesses.

### Research Questions:

To reach the objectives, the paper sets out broadly the following research questions:

1. To what extent have online marketing platforms such as Mahila E-Haats helped women-led businesses in expanding their markets through policy interventions?
  - a. Impact of digitization on sales, production, profits, sustainability
  - b. Efficacy in consumer relations and customer service

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<sup>1</sup> Press Information Bureau, 2021. Mahila E-Haats. See link : <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1695509> (Last accessed 28 August 2021)

2. Has capacity building and market linkages through the scheme empowered women-led businesses to navigate digital marketing platforms, including exploring other platforms such as e-commerce and social media marketing?
  - a. What more do the entrepreneurs wish they had access to, to equip themselves with the tools, resources and capacities to navigate the same
3. Are grievance redressal mechanisms in place and implemented? If so, are they continued beyond the project period? How does this impact the businesses of women entrepreneurs?

## Approach & Methodology

The research will adopt a mixed-methods approach, undertaking a survey of beneficiaries under the scheme and compound the primary data with in-depth qualitative enquiry through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders integral to the scheme ecosystem. Following this, an inductive qualitative analysis of the data will be conducted. Informed consent of the participants will be taken before administering the survey and the interview. Confidentiality of personally identifiable information will be maintained.

### 1. Pan-India Beneficiary Survey

The Survey will have a structured questionnaire with primarily objective and selected subjective questions, aligned to the research objectives and questions.

#### *Sample Size:*

According to the Minister of Women and Child Development in 2021, there are presently 321 vendors registered in the Mahila E-Haat from 21 States/Union Territories. The Survey sample will include 10 percent of the vendors registered on the platform. Effort will be made to cover women entrepreneurs from each zone of the country, viz. North, Central, South, East, West and North-East.

### 2. Key Informant Interviews

KIIs will be conducted with about approx. 20 percent of the survey respondents who consent, using a semi-structured questionnaire, over call, to better unravel the beneficiary context and a ***needs assessment of demands for sustainable inclusion in digitization***. Apart from the beneficiaries, key stakeholders in the ecosystem will be interviewed, where possible such as Government Officials, representatives from Government credit and SHG institutions working on women's livelihoods such as NABARD and Kudumbashree.

#### Updates:

- Secondary data analysis and literature review brings out:
  - there is sufficient public awareness and interest about the Mahila E-Haat, as can be seen through press coverage, YouTube videos, entrepreneurship portals, social media, etc. about the platform, spanning since its inception in 2016 till as recent as 2020.
  - the non-functionality of the Mahila E-Haat website and the intermittent functionality of the mobile application. Consequently, the E-haats, intended to facilitate ease of contact between buyer and vendor through the platform, is ineffective.
  - Application support mechanisms are provided in the Google play store, but not active in grievance redressal.