

Refurbishing the Women's Empowerment Strategy - The New ICT Opportunity

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Women's empowerment has been a quintessential cornerstone concept in social change theory; much discussed, often elusive and sometimes abused. Yet in the context of development, women's leadership and agency in social change have been levers for women's empowerment within communities. Women have sought to fight entrenched interests for community benefits, and have garnered through their collective strength, a new identity. And often, these processes have called for great ingenuity from women - the tight rope walk that requires gender equality ideals to be sought and pursued all the time and with the greatest passion even while the fight against poverty, oppressive social structures or repressive state policies is on.

In the interlocking grid where feminist politics and strategic pragmatism go in parallel as the warp and weft, what are the ways in which organisations can nurture and encourage grassroots women to be autonomous agents of change? How do feminists apply their learning towards context-appropriate strategies on the ground? And what tools do they have today, to employ in their effort? This article presents one example of how information and communication technologies can be adapted as a tool for women's empowerment and associated social change.

Our context to this example is the Mahila Samakhya intervention in India (see info box). Like many others in the developing world, this government initiated project has taken the route of initiating women's self help groups, in the process of helping them on the path of empowerment. Such interventions recognize that one of the biggest disadvantages for women as an oppressed group is the structural isolation faced by women. Through Mahila Samakhya, women's self help groups become the vehicles of knowledge development among women; sharing knowledge for greater well being, developing women's personal and collective identities, increasing their political awareness about gender inequality and providing the psycho-social tools to fight discrimination at individual and collective levels.

But the Mahila Samakhya strategy has run into some practical limitations. The information and communication processes for organisation building and support face constraints, most importantly, because of the high intensity effort required to provide constant and dynamic human resource support to hundreds of village level structures and the consequential demands on the personnel / human resource capacity of Mahila Samakhya. Such system and process building is also invariably a function of available 'technology' choices. Due to low levels of literacy among these women, Mahila Samakhya knowledge activities must also mostly rely on oral processes. Compounding this, the vision of Mahila Samakhya is to withdraw its professional staff at some point, handing over the processes to SHGs and its sub-district representative structures or federations. However, the SHG-federation structure and robustness of its knowledge processes are not yet strong enough to enable such a withdrawal.

In order to address the stalemate that Mahila Samakhya processes seem to have reached, IT for Change, an organisation involved in the area of ICTs for development, designed and is currently implementing a pilot project, *Mahiti Manthana* (MM), in one district where the Mahila Samakhya programme operates. Mahiti Manthana attempts to accelerate the move towards withdrawal of intensive institutional support from the outside and the 'handing over' of organisational processes to the SHGs. It aims to do so by building on developments in the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) arena and looks at adopting these, where appropriate, into Mahila Samakhya activity. These changes range from low cost radio technologies, low cost and (increasingly) omnipresent telephony, new helpline/ call-centre technologies, easy to make, distribute and use videos, computer-based communication technologies and community based/owned wireless networks.

The dominant perception that these technologies are unaffordable or otherwise inappropriate needs to be debunked. New ICTs in themselves are very malleable. Therefore, the key to the appropriation of ICTs for development is not to take technology as a given, but to see them as a set of possibilities that need elaboration within a specific social context, so that they clearly serve the desired social ends.

The Mahiti Manthana project is currently using radio in a design that combines elements of both community and campus radio formats. Community-led radio initiatives allow women to use media for telling their own stories, to assert their perspectives and for peer to peer communication. The campus radio format, on the other hand, provides both a pedagogic tool as well as an organisation building space. Mahiti Manthana seeks to enable women from the SHGs to use radio in creative ways for perspective building, for sharing educational and development content, and as an organisational platform that links Mahila Samakhya's membership across distances.

The video component of MM has spent considerable time dislodging the accepted meanings of video in development communication. Typically, development programs use video in the form of a standard 20 to 30 minute documentary, made with considerable resource investment, and catering to a non-specific audience. At the other end is the 'community video', very powerful as people's media, and an excellent tool for asserting the voice of the marginalized. Yet both approaches have limitations. Documentaries often do not speak the idiom of the community while participatory 'community video' undermines the tremendous value of 'external' knowledge for community development.

MM places its video strategy squarely within the present Mahila Samakhya strategy, using an approach to video which is tailored very specifically for a highly localized audience and made *for* women although not necessarily *by* women. The video strategy is basically inexpensive, relying by and large on such content that dovetails into the activity plans and immediate priorities of Mahila Samakhya staff and SHG women. One video document for example, is a simple recording of the presentation by a trainer on the roles of village self-government representatives. This 'instructional session' is being used for village-level training programs, and the document is also being modified to include footage on viewer response in a content creation cycle that is dynamic and

iterative. Another video document records the story of two young girls who stood up against child marriage to pursue their education.

The video strategy aims for flexibility and versatility through one or more of many possible uses, including for example; a stand-alone training tool, a medium of self-expression, a mechanism for identity building, a record of organisational history, a peer-to-peer communication vehicle, a lobbying platform for representing issues to government officials.

For both radio and video components, processes and structures for content generation and use have been set up and fine-tuned to be participatory and also to eventually move towards a capacity transfer to enable Mahila Samakhya to be able to assimilate these tools appropriately.

Finally, MM is also setting up telecentres with computers, but pivotally, community-owned, and owned by women. Even with no knowledge about computers, SHG women were eager to 'own' the telecentre in their village. They could sense the importance of such a powerful 'institution' in the village, and the empowerment that its ownership could bring. This became clear when the MM team asked for a community space for the telecentre, where many dominant interests in the village were more than willing to pitch in. However, SHG women fought to keep the location and supervision of the telecentre under their control. MM proposes to use the SHG women's ownership of the village telecentre as an empowerment strategy in itself. Such ownership places illiterate and marginalized women at the centre of an important node of information and communication processes in the village, and its interaction with the world outside, be they government departments, banks or other NGOs. The MM project hopes that at least some women will find incentive to acquire and retain the skills to operate a computer in the uses that the project will demonstrate.

Lessons from Mahiti Manthana are now beginning to emerge. Our experience so far shows that a quantum change is indeed possible through use of the new technologies in the processes of women's empowerment. New technologies offer innovative options to promote the autonomy and build the capacities of SHGs, enabling women's organisations like Mahila Samakhya to address localized needs in creative and effective ways. The introduction, incubation and integration of technology processes cannot be led by technologists or neo-convert, 'ICT for Development' enthusiasts. The shaping of what can be termed, new 'techno-social' processes that will serve the interests of disadvantaged women, requires women's empowerment groups to directly engage with technology options.

As feminist activism continues to seek ways to straddle the ideological and the practical dimensions to women's empowerment, a fresh lease of life is available in new technologies for this challenge. Initial critiques of the new technologies saw them as powerful instruments of globalisation and the marginalisation of the disadvantaged. But the conceptual frameworks to understand these technologies have moved considerably from this position. Even as the market may define the diffusion of the new technologies,

women's groups need to challenge and deconstruct this dominant paradigm, and appropriate them for their use.

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Info box

Mahila Samakhya is a programme launched by the Department of Education and Literacy, Government of India, seeking to empower low caste, rural women by organizing them into *Sanghas*, or collectives, and mobilizing them towards social change. The programme, which began in 1988, currently operates 9 states in India - Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand and Assam - covering 15,823 villages in 63 districts. For more details, visit: <http://www.education.nic.in/ms/ms.asp>

IT for Change is a Bangalore based NGO which is engaged in research and advocacy on information society issues.
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