

# **A Platform for Women Empowerment by ICT: A special reference to Internet Saathi Scheme by Google and Tata Trust**

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## **1. Introduction:**

One of the powerful and most influential tools is Education through which we can bring a revolutionary change. This revolutionary change comes into effect through the extensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones, computers etc. ICT is a way to avoid the socio economic marginalisation of the economies and also to bridge the gender disparity gap. One of the strategic objectives of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 included “Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.” In several developing countries a number of ICT projects have been undertaken especially targeting the womenfolk for their empowerment and upliftment in the economy. One such ICT project is ‘Internet Saathi’ where the women of the rural areas are marching out of their homes and becoming technology friendly at least to do their necessary daily activities.

## **2. Statement of the Problem:**

In this modern technological era, everyone is moving towards the path of development with the help of information and communication technology. Although the artificial barrier of sexual discrimination has declined to an extent but still in case of technological knowledge women are still lagging far behind. Therefore, the study is concentrated on the role of ICT in empowering the women in different domains of their private and public spheres with the help of the Internet Saathi Scheme. The study will be focused on the discriminations faced by the rural women and how they are boosting up themselves with the support of the Internet Saathi members in Kamrup Rural District.

### 3. Research Questions:

The following research questions have been formulated keeping in view the topic of research-

- What are the different forms of discriminations faced by women?
- How ICT helps the rural women to empower themselves?
- What are the steps taken by the NGO have taken in collaboration with Internet Saathi Scheme for empowering the womenfolk?

### 4. Research Objectives:

The basic objectives of the present study are:

- i. To study the role of ICT and Internet Saathi Scheme in empowering women in various domains of life.
- ii. To increase the level of awareness about the Internet among the rural women.
- iii. To build the leadership capacity of the women and empower them to access their rights.
- iv. To empower the women in order to increase their level of income.

### 5. Research Methodology:

The research design of the study follows a descriptive design. The study is based on Primary Data.

**Data Collection Method:** The data has been collected through fieldwork using the following methods:

**Non-Participant Observation:** It is a method whereby the researcher watches the subject of his/her study with their knowledge but without taking an active part in the situation.

**Case Study Method:** It is a method where an investigator studies an individual or a small group of individuals with an unusual condition for an in-depth study.

**Interview (Personal and Telephonic):** An in depth interview was conducted using an unstructured interview guide with open-ended questions. In this study, the key informants were the women of the village and the head of the project Internet Saathi.

**Place of Research:** The study areas are Ukhura, Mokhania and Uttar Keteki Bari villages under the Hajo Development Block of Kamrup Rural District. The area has heterogeneous population with Hindu, Muslim

and Boro communities. The people are mostly agricultural workers. After a pilot study of the different areas where ICT was active, it became known that the Hajo Block was in a fairly better shape as far as the use of ICT is concerned in comparison to other blocks. So, the area has been purposively selected because the Internet Saathi Scheme is seen to be more extensively used and influencing the women. Since the area is well connected by roadways, it became quite convenient to collect samples and undertake survey in the respective area.

**Total Sample Size Taken:** The study was conducted among the rural women of three different villages under Hajo Development Block in order to track the importance and implications of ICT in their lives. A total sample size of 20 cases was taken which have been clearly discussed under the case studies. They include one (1) key respondent who is designated as Internet Saathi member, seven (7) women from Ukhura, four (4) girls from Mokhanian and eight (8) women from Uttar Keteki Bari villages. The data reflects a detailed discussion supported by empirical facts about the objectives.

## 6. Literature Review:

*Elizabeth Kindo* discusses about the role and impact of ICT in empowering African women to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). She clearly focused on the targets of MGDs and the obstacles that stand on the path of the achievement irrespective of the use of ICT. Although ICT is playing a significant role, still there is a need for creating an environment for the promotion of gender equality.

*Dr. Manohar K Sanap* discussed about women's empowerment for their change in socio-economic conditions of living with the help of ICT. He focused on the role of government and NGOs in promoting the welfare of the womenfolk. He highlighted the role of ICT in the context of generating women employment, how to access information through internet, and e-commerce. He also focused on certain strategies to improve women's access to ICT.

*Lal B Suresh* in his article highlighted the contrasting opinions as regards to ICT. He says that ICT provides opportunity for human development. On the other hand, it possesses challenges and bridges the gap between rural and urban and especially within the various categories of women. He laid emphasis on ICT tools like e-governance, e-education, e-marketing etc and the impact on women empowerment. The study also focused on the changes in educational system and the measure to build a socially viable Knowledge Network System.

*Vaishnavi Deshpande and Dr. Rajesh Kumar U. Sambhe* argued that information and communication are factors of progress. With ICT as a tool, any rural area of a nation can achieve the position as a developed economy. In their paper they discussed about the role of social media in IT technology such as mobile banking; participation of women; increased productivity in agriculture. They also focused on governmental projects such as E-Mitra, Wifi-Projects, Drishtee, Gyandoot and so on.

*Zebennessa Laizu, Jocelyn Armarego and Fay Sudweeks* conducted their study in two villages of Bangladesh, among the rural women as the key participants. They focused on the women's perceptions regarding the use and intervention of ICT. The study indicated that ICT intervention changed women's perception in a positive direction in one village where ICT intervention was introduced by NGOs, while in other villages no changes were found, as there was the absence of ICT.

## **7. Discrimination of Women:**

Every woman from time immemorial is an example of one or the other victim of discrimination. Right from their birth, they face the danger of female infanticide and after attaining the age of childhood, they face the problem of child marriage and due to many reasons such as financial constraints, they drop out of their respective educational institutions. This keeps the girls and women away from the light of education and thus has to step back from the path of development unlike the men folk. Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus (John Gray, 1992). This view is held by many, which clearly reflect the common idea that men and women are completely different from each other in every domain of life. A 24-year-old woman said:

“I want to learn a lot of things to support my family but my father-in-law doesn't support me. He wants me to work within the four walls of the household and look after my family.”

Patriarchy became so pervasive that it suppresses women's physical and psychological freedoms. ICT rubs off this patriarchal domination and empowers the womenfolk.

## **8. Role of Technology and Social Media:**

The study referred to the role of ICT in rural areas in empowering the women and creating awareness among them. The mobiles especially play a dominating role along with different social websites for completing various activities. Again the field of agriculture also many of the rural inhabitants are benefitted.

### Education:

Since a large section of the population comprises of rural inhabitants, it is necessary to provide education to them if literacy is to be increased. Only through the medium of education, the rural folks can fight against all odds.

### Employment:

Through ICT, people can be encouraged to work in a creative way so that a good income could be earned. In rural areas, there is a huge amount of resources but the proper channel of utilisation is lacking. The handloom industry and dairy products can be developed largely with the help of ICT.

### Women Empowerment:

One of the major goals of ICT and INTERNET SAATHI is to empower women so that they could freely live without any fear of discrimination and without any of their rights violated. Full participation of women increases the productivity level of an economy as well. Thus, socio-economically and politico culturally ICT can make a woman self-reliant.

## **9. Case Studies:**

Archana Deka is the key respondent of our whole study. She is of 34 years of age and is an active member of INTERNET SAATHI Scheme, working in these three villages namely, Ukhura, Mokhania and Uttar Keteki Bari. Her husband is a high school teacher and they have two children: one daughter and one son. She has completed her Bachelor's Degree in Assamese. She joined GVM NGO and worked in CRY Project and is also a member of INTERNET SAATHI from 28<sup>th</sup> March 2016. She has trained approximately 15,000 women and girls in these three villages for their all round development.

She stated that because of such an initiative involving ICT, many rural women have now become aware of various unknown facts such as, a world of Internet exists which is like an immediate guiding star in the journey of life. She herself learnt a lot from Internet and the women are now able to reach the external world, which they never visited physically nor knew anything about. She opined that during training the women were elated to see different things like cooking, farming, handloom, medicines, and education, etc., which they could neither imagine nor think of. Most of the respondents said:

*“We have never seen so many colourful designs of clothes and so we thought that there are always one or two simple designs that can be made by hands. Moreover, some diseases can be treated from the medicinal leaves that are found in our kitchen garden which we were totally unaware of.”*

She also argued that ICT is like a blessing for many women as it helped them to earn a living some. Many rural women are engaged in handloom activities. They have taken the help of Internet to make different colourfully designed clothes and then to sell them in the village. Many young girls have learnt different mehendi designs and hairstyles from Internet and have used them during the weddings in the villages. In this way, they earned some money, which is enough for them to purchase some of their essential items or use it in some important works. Thus, ICT in a way has helped in enhancing their source of income. She herself argued that she gets a monthly salary, which is sufficient for her to meet the necessities and to save for future.

She mainly pointed out that the ICT has helped women to be self-independent. Through this, the women have learnt how to make online payments especially through Paytm. Before, they had to depend upon their either husbands or sons for making payments of electricity bills, telephone recharges and so on or had to stand in long queues for hours to pay bills.

ICT has also helped the children to get support in their studies. Many of their study materials and instructions for projects can be found on the Internet. Many young girls and boys submit their forms or upload bio data for jobs after learning the procedures in the training. This has helped them to explore the world with just a click of the mouse. This has made the girls empowered and competent enough to march together with their male counterpart in the field of education and employment.

**(a) Ukhura village:**

Seven women were interviewed. The women that were interviewed belonged to the age group of 24 to 36 years and were from Assamese, Boro and Muslim communities. All of them were married and are housewives with least education qualification. One of them worked in the CRY Project under the GVM NGO.

Regarding ICT, they opined that there were no such opportunities to learn and girls were not encouraged much to pursue higher studies. Earlier communication gap was a major drawback because of which

much information did not reach them. They remained unaware of many important things and as a result, they remained economically as well as educationally very backward. Right from childhood, they were taught that a girl should manage the household activities and the male members should handle all the outdoor activities. However, this view has changed a lot in the modern days. Now every girl is to be equally educated so that they could stand on their own feet and stretch their hands to embrace all their rights. It's all because of the revolutionary change brought by information technology and especially because of Internet. In this context, the informant greatly supported the entire INTERNET SAATHI team, as they are now aware of many unknown facts. A 24 years old lady said:

*"I got married against my wish as my parents thought that getting married at an early age is good so that could look after my in laws properly and handle all the responsibilities. I thought of doing some work but my father-in-law is not very supportive; hence, in spite of getting this training I am not able to be engaged in any job".*

Although they were not literate enough, they tried their best to give their children a proper education and tried to make them literate enough. ICT helped their children in receiving online education, which is nowadays one of the best tools of formal and modern education system. Children complete their projects and assignments with help from Internet. Along with the children's education, the parents are also gaining new insights of knowledge, which they never got a chance to learn. A 36 years old woman said:

*"My elder daughter has filled up Nursing Form online after attaining this training. She became of aware of different courses to study and the materials to refer. As my husband is a casual labour and as we are financially not so strong, we cannot afford tuitions. So my younger daughters study different subjects from Internet itself".*

Another benefit of ICT is in the field of Agriculture. Vermicompost, which is an organic product, is used as one of the best manures for proper growth of vegetables in the agricultural land. They have learnt how to prepare it and its usefulness through the Internet, but due to scarcity of land and lack of support from their husbands; the women have not been able to start the process of vermicompost.

They also opined that they have been practising different locally available first aid activities at home learning from the Internet. Various

medical treatments from different medicinal plants act as first aid in many emergency cases and also in treating different diseases. These easy and cheap home remedies were not known to them before this training.

They have learnt much stuff such as making payments of bills, making recharge and so on. They subscribe to different designs as they prepare dresses from silk and mega. As they are engaged in handloom activities, they surf the internet for different designs of Machala chadors. The women also search the internet for mehendi designs along with their daughters.

### **(b) Mokhanja Village:**

Four girls were interviewed. The girls who were interviewed were of 22 and 23 years of age. They belonged to Hindu and Muslim communities. They were not married. Two of them completed their Bachelors Degree.

They argued that ICT is one of the most beneficial tools for all round development. Although they are quite aware of the world of internet, they are still lagging behind in many situations. As such, they are thankful that ICT is trying to bridge these gaps of communication. They are now helping their parents in making them adapted to this technological world. The 22-year-old girl said:

*“My mother is a teacher in Lower Primary School. He needs to prepare a lot of posters with messages to save water, plant trees, celebrate national festivals and so on. For such things, I taught my mother how to search for different pictures and download them and make print outs of posters. I have also taught my mother how to use Paytm and now she can freely make online mobile and television recharges”.*

ICT helped as a tool for earning income. Before the girls and women simply made mekhela chadors with simple designs in one or two colours and used them only for their personal use. But now they are learning different colourful designs from Internet and are using them. They have also learned different types of stitches and fabric paintings. Gamuchas are also prepared by them and sold at the market. This has made the women to earn their own income and become economically independent to some extent. Many women are now being able to help their husbands economically.

They also opined that living in rural areas makes them unaware of modern ways of living styles. However, ICT has brought everything closer to them. They now have learned different hairstyles, mehendi designs and beautician courses online. Financial crisis restricts them from affording a monthly visit to beauty parlours, so instead of that the girls have learnt various tips from the Internet. One of the girls said:

*"I do not go to the beauty parlour for threading or for new hairstyles. Rather I watch the Internet and do them by myself. I even do threading for my friends and make mehendi designs during marriages and this is how I earn my pocket money and my expenses. I also use Internet for preparing different food items".*

### **(c) Uttar Keteki Bari village (Nath Chuburi):**

Eight women were interviewed. The women that were interviewed belonged to the age group of 25 to 35 years. They were all from the Hindu community. All of them were married and were housewives with minimum educational qualification. This village is affected by flood every year area and electricity has not yet reached these households.

The women underwent ICT training and have benefitted a lot from it as they have learnt a lot of things. First, it has helped them in handloom activities such as their creativity has enhanced. They look into different colourful and brightening designs along with different types of matching colour threads to prepare the clothes. They earn their income by making clothes. A 35 years old lady with four (4) daughters said:

*"I am financially very weak and I have no education to work somewhere to earn. So I am mainly engaged in weaving and sometimes I work as a casual labour in agricultural lands to meet the needs of my family. My husband is an alcoholic and he always stays at home and do not work. He even does not support me in going out and working. So I am very much thankful to INTERNET SAATHI members that she taught me how to get all the information in the Internet".*

They have also learned online farming methods to be used in the fields so that they could support their husbands in some way or the other. However, most of the husbands are less supportive and some do not have sufficient land, so their learning of Vermicompost method is not being utilised.

Although they do not have mobile phones of their own, they know how to make recharge of television or mobile phones through Paytm. They find Paytm very handy and easy to exercise as it saves a lot of time and one can do it sitting at home without making any travelling expenses.

Many of the women have learned about home medicines from Internet. A 25 years old woman said:

*“The village doesn’t have a doctor. I use to go to the teacher in the village whenever my son gets sick. But now I have learnt various homemade medicinal remedies for some minor sickness. Recently, my son was affected by Trichinosis (Pelu) and I treated him with home remedies”.*

## **10. Summary of Findings and Conclusion:**

From the analysis and interpretation, the following findings are revealed:

- The women are still facing certain forms of discrimination. They are still suffering from gender disparity and are being restricted within the four walls of a house. In addition, they were not aware of the use of Internet, as they were always busy in household chores and looking after their families.
- Secondly, the study has shown a clear impact of ICT and an active work of the INTERNET SAATHI Scheme upon the womenfolk of the villages. The members of INTERNET SAATHI introduced the backward womenfolk to the world of Internet. They were elated to know that everything could be found in the tip of the fingers. Because of this initiative by GVM in collaboration with Google and Tata Trust, INTERNET SAATHI Scheme influenced almost 80% of the women of these three villages.
- Thirdly, ICT also played a significant role in helping the women in earning their source of income. They have learned different designs of mekhela chadors, floral motifs for gamuchas, fabric paintings and types of stitches women and different handloom works, beauty tips like hairstyles, mehendi designs etc which have helped the women to be economically independent as they could sell them to earn money.
- Fourthly, the use of INTERNET had enlightened the women with knowledge and has provided a way of entertainment. They now know how to use Google for different homemade remedial measures when one falls sick. Again, they use it to help their children complete their projects, assignments and home works. They even learnt about vermicompost process that is beneficial for the agricultural sector. They even learnt different recipes of food items and this helped them to enhance their cooking style. As a source of entertainment, they use YouTube and enjoy together with their families or in SHGs.

- Fifthly, ICT helped them in using Paytm and also in online shopping. The study clearly depicted that they know how to make online payments of television, mobile recharges and electricity bill payments. Although they have not used online shopping due to geographical limitations, they know how to do online shopping. In this way, the women are becoming active participants of Digital India Project, as encouraged by the Honourable Prime Minister.

## **11. Conclusion:**

The study tried to have a holistic approach towards the concerned topic, although conducting such a study was not easy due to certain limitations. The study highlighted some of the important roles of ICT in women's empowerment. The INTERNET SAATHI members tried to work for enlightening the women with the importance of technologies in self-empowerment and self-independence and they have been able to achieve their goals to some extent. However, there are still some hindrances that are restricting to get an optimum output. The society is patriarchal to some extent and so the women sometimes face certain challenges. Again, as they are devoid of using personal mobile handsets so, they sometimes forget the training, as they do not get the opportunity to use it regularly. Thus, the womenfolk are being empowered but still there is a long journey to be covered. To conclude, this is reflective of a society that has a homogeneous model of gender identity and that considers different gender practices as deviance resulting from inadequate socialization.

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