

# Building Capacity and Enhancing Employability of Rural Women in India through ICT Development

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**Abstract**—*The potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth and socio-economic development is well recognized. ICT provides unlimited opportunities for development and social engagement through new innovative thinking and tools. One such development area is the role of ICTs in empowering Indian rural women. The development of ICT brings new opportunities for capacity building of rural women and helps them to become more economically active, which transforms their conditions of life. If rural women are educated and empowered in the use of ICT tools such as computers, internet, mobile phones etc. then it would amount to development of marketable skills, which would enhance their employability and bring employment opportunities. Independent income of women would give them autonomy, bring social and cultural inclusion and also increase control and confidence, resulting in their empowerment.*

*Despite these great promises, rural women face significant challenges in the use and development of ICTs. Most prominent of which are: lack of time, lack of mobility, lack of basic education, language barriers, health issues, social norms, financial considerations and above all, access to information and communication tools and education. A community based approach to provide ICT training, tailor-made ICT solutions for rural women's development, use of ICT to enhance collaboration with other women and women agencies, access to ICT tools to women rural entrepreneurs, empowering self help groups with ICT, encouraging industry responsiveness are some of the measures which may be undertaken to increase the use of ICT by rural women.*

**Keywords:** *Employability, Women Empowerment, ICT Development, Opportunities, Challenges, Strategies*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for men, women, families and communities.

Given the capacity of ICTs to access, transfer and apply knowledge and information to almost every aspect of human life, they are increasingly being recognized for their potential in capacity building to transform the conditions of life for women and especially for rural women.

In developing countries like India, more than 90% of women work in informal sector and also in rural areas. These women engage in economic activities such as handicrafts, sewing, weaving in tea gardens or as small vendors. If these women are provided ICT knowledge and tools, then it can definitely make a difference in their income generation potential. ICT can play a large role by helping rural women entrepreneurs in their search of information and markets. Further, acquisition of ICT skills can create new areas of employment for them such as tele-working, data entry, back office work, programming, accounting, banking, education, health and so on. A high proportion of jobs outsourced by big firms may go to these women. They can work from outside the office, often from their own homes and with flexibility of work hours. This can help them raise their incomes to become more financially independent and empowered.

The present paper is an attempt to understand the role of ICT in enhancing women employability and empowering them. The challenges in the field are also explored and the strategies for overcoming challenges and increasing women employability through ICT development are discussed.

## 2. UNPACKING ICT

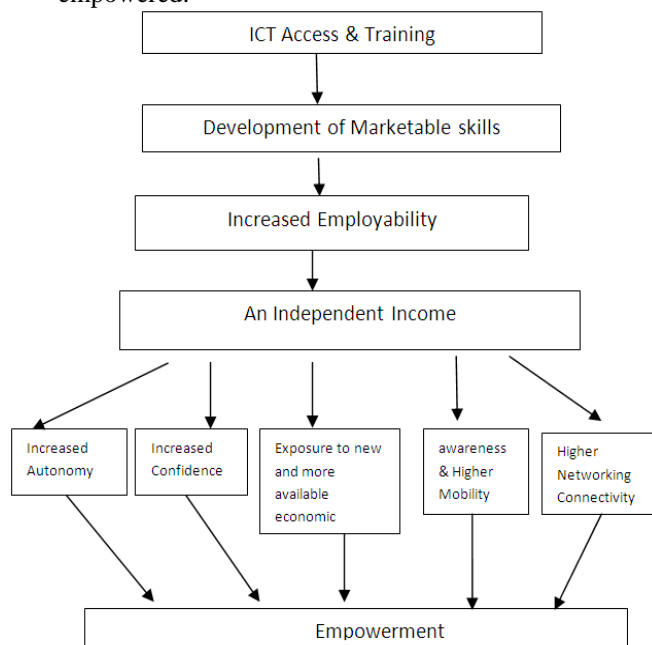
ICT refers to technologies which are used to handle information and aid communication. It does not only mean the internet but also includes radio, mobiles, computers, telephone, television, digital cameras, wide variety of software, hardware or tools such as operating systems, databases, emails or office productivity applications and networks etc. ICTs are mainly classified into two groups. Radio, television, telephones and print media are considered as traditional ICT. Applications or technologies that rely on the Internet, telecommunication networks, mobiles, personal computers and data bases fall under new ICTs. Both the groups of ICTs complement each other in the achievement of a common goal i.e. empowerment of women. In today's world, the most prevalent ICT device is the mobile phone, with almost 4 billion users around the world.

### 3. RURAL WOMEN EMPLOYABILITY, EMPOWERMENT & ICT

The final declaration of Principles of World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) states that “We affirm that development of ICTS provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of and key factors in the Information Society. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICT as a tool.”

The ICT provides tools for knowledge gathering, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation that could, if developed correctly address to a long standing task of women empowerment. Women empowerment means participation of women as equal partners in cultural, social, economic and political development of a nation. Broadly, women empowerment has three aspects:-

- i. Economic Empowerment:- When women are able to engage in productive activities that generate income for them and allow them to experience autonomy, they are said to be economically empowered.
- ii. Social Empowerment:- When women are able to participate in social activities without any gender bias, they are said to be socially empowered.
- iii. Political Empowerment:- When women are able to raise their voice and have equitable representation in policy formulation and decision making, they are politically empowered.



All the three aspects of empowerment are inter-related and can be enhanced with the ICT knowledge and tools. The acquisition and use of knowledge are keys to achievement in any set up. The access to and effective use of ICTs and ICT skill contributes to enhancement of employability and capacity

building with synergetic effects, as shown in the diagram below:-

ICT has profound implications in terms of employment, education, health and development as listed below:

- 1) Access and Training in the use of ICTs and applications of ICTs build marketable skills. ICTs create new avenues for education, communication and information gathering and sharing. They get an opportunity to work from home.
- 2) Marketable skills create alternative possibilities for income generation through increased employability.
- 3) New employment opportunities bring independent income for rural women.
- 4) An independent income is the basis of increased autonomy and control. It also brings increased self-esteem and self confidence. Increased self-confidence helps them to connect and build network. This further exposes them to new and more available economic opportunities. Rural women can get a wide audience, greater awareness and higher mobility and are enabled to come out their “indoor spaces”.
- 5) They get improved ability for sharing of experiences and avoid gender bias by connecting to women’s organizations concerned with the economic wellbeing of the rural women.
- 6) In short ,ICTs provide a key solution to development and empowerment of rural women.

### 4. CHALLENGES FACED BY RURAL WOMEN FOR ACCESS AND USE OF ICTS

No doubt, ICT has great potential in supporting rural women to acquire new skills and enhance their standards of living. However, the digital divide between men and women currently constrain the realization of the full potential of ICTs in reaching rural women. As per working papers on ICTs and Empowerment of Indian Rural Women(2011) published by Centre for Research on Innovation and Science Policy, “out of different ICTs, only community radio and Rural Knowledge Centres were found to have an agenda and a mechanism for addressing the locally relevant information needs of rural women. Radio and Television, though, disseminate a wide range of information relevant to socio-economic development, women who have access to these media have mostly benefitted as passive recipients of information and advice. Further, in most of other ICT initiatives that depend on print media, internet kiosks, portals, call centres, mobile etc., there is not enough evidence to show its wider access and use by women.”

Rural women face significant challenges to access and use ICTs and develop ICT skills. Most prominent of which are:-

- i. Lack of time:- Rural women play multiple roles and carry heavy domestic responsibilities. This limits their time and inclination for new learning.

- ii. Lack of mobility:- Rural women are largely confined to homes. Travel to ICT centres is more difficult due to cost, time and cultural reasons.
- iii. Lack of basic education:- The percentage of literate women in India lags far behind the percentage of literate men. Female literacy rate in India is only 65.46% as compared to male literacy rate of 82.14%. The inability to read and write is certainly a major barrier for rural women's access to ICTs,
- iv. Language barrier:- Most of the content on internet is not available in the local language of rural women which they speak. Training in language is often required to use ICT platforms and internet.
- v. Social & Cultural Norms:- Social and cultural factors limit women's access to shared ICT facilities such as cyber cafes, which are often the meeting places for young men. Cultural attitudes discriminate against women's access to technology and technology education.
- vi. Financial considerations:- Rural women often do not control the finances at home or do not have sufficient personal income. Therefore, they are less likely to own communication devices such as mobiles, radios, television, computers etc or to pay to internet service providers for monthly access to internet.
- vii. Health Issues:- Access to health care services for rural women is low. So, their poor health status may restrict them to look for new knowledge and opportunities.
- viii. Many a time, lack of appropriate content available through ICTs, discourages rural women to take out time and make efforts to use ICTs for improving their conditions. Thus access to ICTs is important, but is not in itself a sufficient condition for rural women's appropriation of time and efforts to use and learn ICTs.

## 5. STRATEGIES FOR RURAL WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE USE OF ICTS

As per CRISP (Centre for Research on Innovation & Science Policy) working papers 2011, there are a large number of ICT experiments or pilots going on in India. However, a few ICT initiatives have tried to explicitly focus on reaching the rural women. The constraints and challenges faced by rural women in accessing and use of ICTs needs to be addressed. Some possible solutions and strategies are listed below:-

- i. A community based approach to provide ICT training: ICT training should be made available in community owned training centres in their local vicinity, with women's space.
- ii. Tailor made ICT solutions for rural women's development:- The life of rural women can be changed by providing tailor made ICTs for specific areas and based on the needs of rural women. There is a need to develop knowledge and resources to serve women, their families and communities in ways they want it. For this, it is crucial to understand rural women's experiences with ICTs and the difficulties they faced and it is necessary to understand what is "women centered" technology. Information available through ICTs should be provided in formats, languages and visual designs, appropriate to women's needs.
- iii. ICT to enhance collaboration with other women and women's agencies:- Women organizations and agencies can play an important role in assisting the development of rural women in ICT. Apart from providing basic ICT training and capacity building, these agencies can facilitate discussions by providing meeting places to share their views. These organizations can help rural women to connect and collaborate with other rural women through websites, social networking and other communication networks.
- iv. Gender sensitive ICT Policy & Regulations:- Gender sensitive ICT policy and regulations are required to be made. For this, it is essential that women are more involved in the policy making process itself. It is required to have regulations based on an understanding of the key long term issues such as providing connectivity and adequate information to all including women, ensuring equal possibilities for ICT education and so forth.
- v. Creating awareness about the need and utility of ICTs:- Researchers have shown that women are reluctant to invest their time and resources to learn and access new knowledge through ICT unless and until they are convinced about the value of ICT and its capacity to change their lives. In this regard, the use of tools such as radio, TV and Cinema can play an important role. These tools can use local languages and present information in entertaining and informative ways to make the rural women understand the value of ICT. This can ensure adequate and sustainable technology transfer among rural women.
- vi. Empowering self help groups:- In India, women's 'self-help groups' for entrepreneurs and savings are on the increase and their efficiency is noteworthy. ICT training to the women in these groups may be provided regarding use of internet and e-mail, aspects of record keeping, managing the computer system and knowledge of portals useful for their activities, cash transfers through mobiles and so on. This will not only empower the rural women but also help them in streamlining the group activities, taking advantage of new opportunities.
- vii. Encouraging industry responsiveness:- There exists an opportunity for ICT industry to develop products and services to cater to the demand of women for ICT products. There is a potential of women as product developer and as users of technology. Men predominate in hardware and software engineering and management. The industry may be encouraged to develop unique and innovative business models to serve both the main stream and rural women. This is likely to increase the consumption and production of ICT devices, gadgets and content for and by women.

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## 6. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Rural women are the agents of rural development. Rural women need to be empowered through their participation in development activities that shape their lives. The education, training and development of ICT skills can enhance the employability of rural women which will introduce new and more employment opportunities to them. This in turn will provide them more freedom, higher confidence, increased mobility and improved quality of life.

However, the expansion of capabilities of rural women is constrained by their lack of interest, lack of education, lack of time, financial dependency, social and cultural restrictions and so on. Therefore, strengthening of women specific ICT initiatives, policies, products, applications and business models are need of the hour.

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