Empowering Women in Rural Areas through Mobile Learning and Information and Communication Technology

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Abstract--- Women consider ICT to be a major element in their personal growth and development for improving studies, staying informed and earning a living. Women empowerment expands women’s abilities to make strategic life choices in a context where they were previously denied of this ability. In this connection, this study brings forth a conceptual framework emphasizing on the importance of using ICT and mobile learning to rural women, whereby they may be supported to alleviate themselves into the main stream of society.

Keywords--- Mobile Learning, ICT, Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Women’s empowerment is focused on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access resources, participation in decision making and control over distribution of benefits. For women who can access and use them, ICT offers potential in terms of reducing poverty, improving governance, overcoming isolation and providing a voice. Women consider ICT to be a major element in their personal growth and development for improving studies, staying informed and earning a living. Women empowerment expands their ability to make strategic life choices in a context where they were previously denied of this ability. They say it reduces their sense of isolation, helps acquire new skills, actively participate in national and global dialogues, makes them feel safe, to be more in touch with family and friends and strengthens their self-esteem. They also feel ICT helps them improve their ability to express themselves, speak in public and engage with learned and decision makers to negotiate their needs and rights.

Attitude Changes

To make it possible for girls to participate fully in their family and community at broader levels, it requires a shift in thinking - social behavior and attitude needs to be changed. When family members and male peers are aware, engaged and supportive of women development and their rights, they play a very strong role in changing broader norms and perceptions. Female role models can also help to change mentalities. Having a device or new technology in their possession can increase the status and strength of women to become as role models and enable them to carry out different and important roles in the community.

DOI: 10.9756/BP2018.1012/11
**Information and Communication Technology:** The world is in the midst of a knowledge revolution, complemented by opening up of entirely new vistas in communication technologies. Recent developments in the fields of information and communication technology are indeed revolutionary in nature. In fact, IT has become the chief determinant for the progress of nations, communities and individual.

**The Mobile Phone as a Tool:** Mobile phones are increasingly being used in various formal, non-formal and informal learning contexts by disadvantaged communities with the aim of improving their lives. In addition to enhancing learning, mobile phones can help people access other tools, resources and information, enabling them to participate more actively in their communities and at national and even global levels. A variety of mobile phones can be used in ICT development projects involving different costs, access and operability.

**Literature Review**

A UNESCO report on “Gender Issues in the Information Society” stated that the capability of women to use information through ICT is dependent on many social factors, including literacy and education, geographic location, mobility and social class. Various kinds of social development movements and activities, programmers, welfare schemes and constitutional facilities have helped women to reach the main stream of society. In the process of women empowerment, the ICTs are also playing a major role especially through technologies like cell phones and internet. The cell phone is an extremely efficient ICT for the empowerment of women. It has been accessed by the majority of people, rural and urban, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, because of its features. Sharples et al. in 2007 supposed value of mobiles also arises from the manner in which they facilitate lifelong learning. Mobiles can support great amount of learning that occurs during many activities of everyday life, learning that occurs spontaneously in impromptu settings outside the classroom and outside the usual environment of home and office. They enable learning that occurs across time and place as learners apply what they learn in one environment for development in another environment. Motlik in 2008 analyzed the benefit of increased access afforded by mobile learning is particularly relevant in the developing country context. Many developing countries are completely bypassing investments in costly, fixed telephone infrastructure for the installation of mobile phone networks. Mobile Learning provides a potential way forward in expansion of education programs to larger segments of the population rather than via eLearning model which has been adopted in some of the developed countries. Mobile Learning allows a more cost effective method of educational delivery than eLearning methods, not to mention the ubiquity of mobile phones, meaning that many people are already familiar with mobile phone applications. Chanchary and Samiul in 2009 attempted to determine how the mobile technology can be utilized to improve student’s retention at bachelor degree. Similarly, several researches have been carried out in developing countries as well. In Saudi Arabia, a recent paper report on the results of survey conducted at King Saud University indicated that the introduction of mobile teaching and learning can enhance the teaching and learning situation in that country.
A research study illustrated the effective usage of technology for small-scale industries, which are promoted by women under self-employment scheme. The authors have found that the IT based microenterprises by self-help groups of poor women have demystified the perception of common man that a few elite ones in society are the only beneficiaries of the powerful IT. They have begun to consider IT as a tool for attaining knowledge and development by everyone. Further, the author opines that by encouraging participation of poor women in digital revolution is expected to reduce the gap in digital and gender divide. The authors have concluded that the economic empowerment of women via IT enables them to challenge discrimination and overcome gender barriers (Raman & Rajesh, 2011). Kabeer in 2011 uses a mixed-methodology approach to identify the economic pathways through which women’s empowerment operates in Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana. Education (secondary education in particular) is found to be a major force of change in all the three countries and a significant determinant of women’s attitudes and agency. The study also finds education to enable greater access to formal employment, but more specifically it has direct positive effects on other aspects of women's lives (such as their political participation, attitudes and decision-making power). The results imply that formal employment is not the only pathway through which the transformative power of education operates. Another key finding from this study is the powerful role that men play in both women’s lives and in shaping their empowerment. For instance, in Bangladesh, the study found that male support to women’s paid work to be critical in enhancing its transformative potential for women.

Padmini et al. in 2013 stated the role of Mobile Technology in the field of women empowerment is not only for communication, but is also used in different ways - for safety during unforeseen events, as a media connector with current updates in day to day life and as an e-learning device to become literate. Further, the authors have recommended that IT can be applied in the empowerment of rural women through imparting virtual classroom education, providing training with the help of Internet and email services, developing web-based information system about the SHGs and they can be popularized in papers, magazines and internet, which will act as a motivational factor. Furthermore, the study has recognized that the scaling of women-centered mobile programs and applications can only be achieved with improved financial, commercial and marketing incentives, and also cooperation. Also, Arivanandan in 2013 analyzed the socio-economic inclusions of rural women through two kinds of information and communication technologies, i.e., cell phones and internet in rural areas. For empirical study, the author has selected 60 women, aged between 15 and 30 years from Tiruchirappalli District of Tamil Nadu. The author has found that the accessibility of cell phones is creating decision-making capacity and economic liberalization to women in the study area. Furthermore, women now search jobs by using cell phones and personal contacts. This ability to get jobs mean that rural women are earning money, which will probably go towards the cost of their marriage as well as their siblings.
Need & Importance

The reach of mobile phone technology as a tool to enhance learning, including information communication technology is generally addressed in terms of technology and communication services: Access, connectivity, mobile services and subscriptions, mobile phone ownership and affordability. Regarding the above, sex-disaggregated data helps to understand up to a certain point, the extent to which there is digital divide in accessing and using mobile phone technology. Though it is useful to know how, where and whom mobile phone technology reaches, it is important to interpret such statistics considering human development purposes beyond marketing studies of the mobile sector. The various social problems faced by women in Indian society have to be addressed. Unless the violence against women, dowry, eve teasing and feminization of poverty gets reduced, it may not offer a conducive atmosphere for women to learn further. This study is conducted on the mobile learning and information communication technology in rural women to improve the socio-economic and cultural development. It also focuses on understanding few problems that arise in familiarizing this technology in rural women. The adoption of mobile learning is not the same in rural areas of Tamil Nadu as compared to urban region due to the level of awareness of technology, availability of infrastructure, expertise in new technology and willingness of users to implement and use the technology. Therefore, this research intends to investigate and suggest measures to remove the problems and improve rural women in India.

Objectives

- To study the socio-economic profile of rural women in selected districts of Tamil Nadu
- To study the Mobile learning and ICT infrastructure in rural areas of selected districts of Tamil Nadu
- To identify the problem faced by rural women through mobile learning and ICT
- To examine government support for mobile learning as a tool in empowering rural women
- To suggest strategies to overcome barriers and offer some practical suggestions for policy makers to improve women's access to mobile learning and ICT

Conceptual Framework

Women empowerment through Mobile Learning and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a wonderful tool which benefits all spectrums of women in the world and reaches millions of people every day. It is the communally and economically marginalized, predominantly women in rural areas, who do not get the benefit of it. Recent developments in the fields of mobile learning, information and communication technology are undeniably revolutionary in nature. Information has become the principal determinant of progression of nations, communities and individual. There is a potential for ICTs to purge gender discrimination and to empower women in society.
Technological Changes: Although Mobile Learning and ICT are used to examine women's empowerment in Tamilnadu, there is no rigorous method for measuring and tracking changes in levels of empowerment by ICT intervention. Hence, without appropriate utilization, ICT cannot bring individual or collective change to the lives of women. The resources are not the only component of women's empowerment; they can only be a catalyst. The awareness must be developed among women and the stereotype mindset towards women's mobile learning and ICT use must be removed. This is exhibited in the below figure 1.

Relational Changes: Policy is needed to ensure that investment in ICTs contributes to more equitable and sustainable development, as these technologies are neither gender-neutral nor irrelevant to the lives of resource-poor women. Women want information to get engaged in communication that will improve their livelihoods and help them to achieve their human rights. Hence, in spite of success stories of ICTs amongst the poorer sections of society, it remains a challenge for the government and other agencies to successfully permeate the impact of such technologies in all the nook and corners. Existing literature from many quarters have revealed that except the influential lot and some chunks of middle class, ICTs have remained out of access to most of the rural, poor and marginalized communities.

Economical Changes: Rural women in developing countries may be able to sell their products directly without going through intermediaries. One of the most powerful applications of ICT is electronic commerce. E-commerce refers not just to selling of products and services online but also to the promotion of a new class of ICT-savvy women entrepreneurs in both rural and urban areas. E-commerce initiatives can link producers and traders directly to markets at national, regional and even global levels, allowing them to restructure their economic activities and bypass intermediaries and the male-dominated and exploitative market structure.

Scope

Women are equal beneficiaries to advantages offered by mobile technology, and the products and processes, which are byproducts of technology use. However, it should not be confined to an elite group of society but to flow to other segments of women in Indian society. The study is to know about infrastructure (social, economic, educational, etc.) available to different segments of women, and social freedom and opportunities in rural and urban areas. The applicability may invite government intervention to stop digital divide among women and also to empower women through mobile usage.
**Suggestion**

Technological initiatives are one of the tools for rural women empowerment which requires reasonable preparatory phase before undertaking any such initiative. They are often preceded by their membership in women’s groups or self-help groups. After working together in view of space, further technological developments are initiated to receive training in a common place and to download and retrieve information. It is pertinent for one to take a critical look at whether mobile learning technology or technology in general actually enhances the process of teaching and successful implementation of mobile learning in Tamil Nadu that are missing in women empowerment.

**Conclusion**

The study focuses on a detailed analysis of the current state of mobile technology in the country including the environment, stakeholders and strategies put in place for adoption and sustenance of mobile learning strategy targeted in assisting women empowerment towards quality and accessibility of education. It also outlines how women and the disadvantaged are empowered by access to technology in education. Digital tools help increase connectivity and access to information along with access to financial and business opportunities. Mobile technology can transform learning and act as a catalyst for creating impactful change in the current system.

**References**


