

# **ICT: A Tool against Society's Challenges towards Enhancing Women Empowerment**

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## **1. Introduction:**

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is the gateway to the modern information skills. As it is, the era of Information and communication technology and various ICT tools are used to educate and inform the rural people. For generations, rural people have been living in complete isolation without much access to modern media of communication. Even though we are living in a modern era, today, in the rural areas, women are suffering from various problems due to lack of education and information. Thus, women empowerment is necessary. Right information given at the right time can empower the rural women and protect them from various problems. Various ICT tools like radio, television, mobile phones and internet have empowered women by enhancing their awareness, education and information. However, until today, most of the women are still suffering from various problems due to the gap between ICT and its uses. This study is designed to access the problems among rural women, the use of ICT tools by these women and how far their problems have been eradicated with access to ICT tools.

## **2. Features of ICT-Aids for Women Empowerment:**

- i. Freedom of Time and Pace:** ICT allows one to use time flexibly. One can use it at their own pace and make their own decisions about the learning method. Thus, ICTs has the ability to transcend time and space. This feature enhances participation of women by empowering them educationally and socially. Women who cannot attend regular courses in the educational institution are hereby benefitted through the self-learning courses and appear in online-based examination by studying online course material, which can be accessed twenty-four hours a day. Automation and technology enhanced (power point, video etc.) presentation may also be some of the other issues.
- ii. Self -Learning:** Quality of Self-learning is the most important aspect provided by ICT. Self -learning materials could be in the form of e-study materials, printed materials, CD-ROMs, audio- video,

DVDs, Web –based materials, etc. The women belonging to rural areas are thus self managed, independent and well-organized to learn by themselves with the help of ICT even though they are not physically present in the classroom

**iii.Promotes Equal Opportunity to Obtain Education and**

**Information:** Generally, the women in a remote area suffer severe discrimination, and this is heightened due to the lack of educational opportunities. However, ICT minimizes this and promotes equal opportunity to obtain education and information. After acquiring required knowledge they are able to make their own decision and choices, they are aware of their legal rights, and can participate equally in the society.

**iv.Social-Interaction:** ICT promotes social-interaction, peer-interaction via social-media like twitter, instagram, facebook, whatsapp, youtube etc. Now-a-days it is seen that there are very few women who do not access these social medias. The positive use of the social medias via ICT keeps them updated with the currents local and global issues by making them aware of the burning issues, problems and also by providing solutions for the same. This has affected the thinking pattern of the women as well.

**v. High Speed or Instant Delivery of Information:** ICT provides information of wide reach at low cost at an instant. ICT can deliver potentially useful information, such as information about the market prices, about the new fashion world along with education. With the help of the cell phones, women are able to call for the delivery of items at their doorstep by saving expenses and time spent on communication. Now-a-days many useful mobile apps are developed so as to provide different sets of information without the necessity of going to the concerned places or authorities.

Hence, it is seen that ICT has enhanced women’s sense of self-worth, their right to exercise and determine own choices, their right to have access to opportunity and resources, their right to have the power to control their own lives both within and outside the home, and their ability to influence the direction of social changes to create a just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. It has helped women in acquiring personal freedom and personal identity.

Through the access of ICT, women are receiving knowledge that has led to their self-security, awareness, confidence, as well as engagements in different fields in the form of employment thereby empowering them. Thus, it can be said that ICT has brought a sea change in the attitude and thinking pattern of the women in particular and the society in general.

### **3. Significance of the Study:**

Women, especially in rural areas are lagging behind men due to various factors like gender inequality, financial resources, household responsibilities, lack of education, low self-esteem which causes inferiority complex, cultural and religious restrictions etc. Women suffer discrimination because of various issues like ethnic tensions which may include problems in the family of married women, communication problem from home to institutions and attending regular courses, stereotypical thinking of family members and society etc. Thus, the women are compelled to leave their education at a very tender age and involve themselves in household chores where they have to remain aloof from the outer-world without involving themselves in any kind of productive activities, decision-making process, trade and commerce, social leadership etc.

However, these barriers have reduced in present times due to the advent of ICT. ICT is a potential tool that can reach rural women and provide them a platform to overcome these challenges. ICT has opened up numerous possibilities to improve women's position in the field of education, health, employment, etc. A growing body of studies shows that the impact of ICT is increasingly related to women's empowerment, both in socio- economic aspects.

In this present study, rural women of 8 villages, namely, *Ledo Bongali Basti, 1.no. Mulang Bongali gaon, 2.no. Mulang Bongali Gaon, 1.no. Mulang gaon, 2.no. Mulang gaon, Tikok N.C, Malugaon, Ledo gaon* under Hamukjan gaon panchayat of Margherita Developmental Block has been taken into consideration to find out if ICT has made its intervention in such remote areas and whether these women have access to it and if ICT has made significant impact on their lives. On the basis of this, the researcher has decided to conduct a research on these marginalized section of the society.

#### **4. Objectives of the Study:**

- To identify the educational status of the women under the present study.
- To identify the difference of using ICT tools by the literate and illiterate women under the present study.
- To study the challenges faced by these women in their society under present study
- To study women's empowerment through ICTs in rural areas of Margherita Developmental Block.

#### **5. Definition of Key Terms:**

##### **5.1 Information and Communication Technology (ICT):**

According to UNESCO: "*ICT is scientific, technological and engineering discipline and management technique used in handling information, its application and association with social, economical and cultural matters.*"

ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, computer, telephones, cell phones, print technology and all other technology, which may include services, and application like videoconferencing and distance learning invented for the purpose of communication, data delivery, data processing and storage.

In the present study, ICT is the key term as it is considered as the tool against society's challenges and how it empowers the women to prepare themselves for their life under the present study in various ways.

##### **5.2 Rural Women:**

Rural women belonging especially to lower castes women and are socially marginalized women who are facing problems of education, free communication and accessing information technologies. They are not able to communicate freely and use the technologies, because of the social control and economic factors. These women are often characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and insecurity. Technology-based social empowerment especially for rural women is a new emerging concern in the present information world. In the present study, rural women are women belonging to 8 villages, namely, *Ledo Bongali Basti, 1.no. Mulang Bongali gaon, 2.no. Mulang Bongali Gaon, 1.no. Mulang gaon,*

2.no.Mulang gaon, Tikok N.C, Malugaon, Ledo gaon under Hamukjan gaon panchayat of Margherita Developmental Block.

### **5.3 Empowerment of Women:**

Empowerment is defined as giving power to create power within. It is a process, which helps people to gain control over their own lives by raising their skills and being involved in various activities, awareness, and decision-making process.

The Oxford American Dictionary defines “empowerment” as “to make (someone) stronger and more confident especially in controlling their life and claiming their right. Empowerment is an individual and collective process and is based on the following five principles”

1. Self-reliance
2. Self-awareness
3. Collective mobilization and organization Capacity building
4. External exposure and interaction

In the context of this study, women empowerment means, empowerment of sampled women members of the present study who have empowered themselves socially, economically, educationally and politically with ICT.

### **6. Review of Related Literature:**

In order to conduct a successful study, it is essential for an investigator to review the work clearly by various authors or researchers in the related field of knowledge so that clear perspective of the problem might emerge. A number of studies and projects have been done on the role of ICT in empowering women.

**6.1 Voluntary association for people service (VAPS)**, Tamil Nadu, in their study on “*Enhancing Women Empowerment through Information and Communication Technology*” found out that one in the recent years, through the implementation of various ICT related projects, the state is successful. By seeing its growth in this sector, the potential work force in the state, various foreign agencies, government of India and other non-governmental agencies are seriously involved in further development of this sector. Their mission is to reach where no one had reached before. The main objective is to make the women both economically and socially strong.

**6.2 UNESCO (2004)** reports the following changes in women's agency after gaining access to information and communication through Nabanna:

- Women gained more respect in their local communities as a result of ICT skills acquired at the center – learning to use a computer and accruing and distributing the information to local people. This resulted in greater respect both at family and community level.
- Younger women felt they were able to approach the job market with greater confidence than before. ICT skills help them to find jobs and increase their income.
- Women became more creative after learning a program like Paintbrush in WindowXP.
- Women have achieved an increase in income as well as enhancement of solidarity among women in the community.

An ITU study (2005) describes ICTs as potentially powerful—development enablers. They are cost-effective with significant transformative power, allowing developing countries to take leaps in several stages of the development process and, provide individuals directly with tools for self-empowerment, avoiding top-heavy and corrupt bureaucracies.

Khalid Said Rabayah (2010) in his study *“Economic and Social Empowerment of Women through Information and Communication Technology”* demonstrated that the majority of participants seek to obtain ICT training with the intention to enhance the quality of their lives through acquiring knowledge, enhancing their employment position, and earning power or enhancing their employment opportunities. The analysis has revealed that the majority of women, whether in employment or not, did perceive a positive impact in terms of ability to gain economic empowerment.

At the personal level, an increase in self –confidence sensed by most of the women (96%) regardless of their age and occupational status have emerged as a significant outcome. Zebunnessa Laizu, Jocelyn Armarego and Fay Sudweeks ( 2010 ) in their study *“The role of ICT in Women’s Empowerment in Rural Bangladesh’* found out that that women with ICT skills have a higher confidence level, more self-esteem, self-awareness and dignity, and feel free and much more independent than non-ICT participants in Boitpur village under the D.net project. When comparing

the two groups of ICT users and non-ICT Users, ICT users show a higher perception of empowerment than the other group. This is a positive development for ICT intervention projects. The development of ICT skills in women is said to produce perceptual changes in their mental spaces, such as level of confidence, self-esteem, self-respect, freedom and so on. The results show that, after gaining knowledge and ICT skills, women's perceptual change is higher in the D.net project than the Amader Gram project.

Padmini Chattu (2013) have highlighted that the role of Mobile Technology in the field of women empowerment. The author has stated that not only for communication, women are also using the mobile for different ways: to be safe in times of difficulty, as a media connector with current updates in day to day and as an e-learning device to become literate. The scaling of women centered mobile programs and applications can only be achieved with improved financial, commercial, and marketing incentives and of course, cooperation.

Arivanandan (2013) has analyzed the socio-economic inclusions of rural women through the two kinds of information and communication technologies i.e. cell phones and internet in rural areas. Most women now search for jobs by using cell phones and personal contacts.

## **7. Research Design and Methodology:**

### **7.1 Method of the Study:**

The research design and methodology devised in this paper is being presented which has been designed keeping in mind the focused objectives and with the aim of acquiring accurate and authentic data. The nature of the research may be categorized as descriptive in nature as the researcher has adopted survey method to conduct the research.

### **7.2 Population of the Study:**

The population of the present study comprises all the women members of 8 villages namely, Ledo Bongali Basti, 1.no. Mulang Bongali gaon, 2.no. Mulang Bongali Gaon, 1.no.Mulang gaon, 2.no.Mulang gaon, Tikok N.C, Malugaon, Ledo gaon under Hamukjan gaon panchayat under Margherita Developmental Block. A total of 5653 women members from 8 villages has been taken into consideration.

### **7.3 Sample of the Study:**

Considering the objectives and the nature of the data to be collected, purposive sampling has been adopted for the present study. A sample of 5% of the total population i.e. 283 nos. of women has been selected as the sample of the study.

### **7.4 Source of Data:**

Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

**7.5 Tools and Techniques used:** The following tools and techniques are used in the following research:

- Questionnaire
- Interview Method

## **8. Analysis and Interpretation of Data:**

### **8.1 Analysis and interpretation of Objective No 1: 'To identify the educational status of the women under the present study.'**

During the course of study, emphasis was laid on finding out the educational status of the women under the present study. While observing the educational status it was found out that, out of the total number of sampled women i.e. 283, 175 are literate (61%) and 108 are illiterate women i.e. (38%).

Secondly, it was found out that out of 175 literate women, all the women i.e. 100% **have** access to ICT .Among the literate women there are no non-user of ICTs is in fact a significant result.

Thirdly, it was further seen that 98 women out of 108 i.e. 90% illiterate women have access to ICT while only 10% of illiterate women do not use ICT which is also a significant finding.

However, total number of women under the present study (both literate and illiterate) who have access to the ICT is 273 i.e. 96% is of course a significant result.

#### **Table 8.1**

Table 8.1 clearly shows the Educational status of women in the village of Hamukjan Gaon Panchayat under Margherita Developmental Block.

Name of the village	Total sampled women	Total literate	Total illiterate	ICT users		Non-ICT users	
				Literate	Illiterate	Literate	Illiterate
Ledo Bongali	36	21	15	27	9	-----	2
1. no. Mulang Bongali	36	25	11	21	15	-----	1
2. no. Mulang Bongali	34	27	7	18	12	-----	-----
1. no. Mulang Gaon	36	22	14	25	10	-----	2
2. no. Mulang Gaon	36	22	14	19	15	-----	-----
Tikok N.C	35	19	16	25	10	-----	-----
Malu Gaoon	35	17	18	16	18	-----	4
Ledo Gaon	35	22	13	24	9	-----	1
Total	283	175(61%)	108(39%)	175(100%)	98(90%)	Nil	10(10%)

**8.2 Analysis and Interpretation of Objective no.2: To identify the difference in using current ICT tools and applications by the literate and illiterate women under the present study.**

Firstly, among the sampled literate women 128( 73%) uses television, 88(50%) uses radio, 150 (85%) uses cell-phones, 90 (62%) uses internet, 33 (18%) can access video conferencing, 57(32%) can use the smart board and projector among others.

Among the illiterate sampled women 74 (68%) uses television, 47 (43%) uses radio for listening to news, regarding health care facilities etc. and 88 (81%) uses mobile phones.

The majority of women, both literate and illiterate, can use the mobile phone as an ICT tool but only the literate sampled women of the villages are able to use the Internet and other applications associated with ICT. Thus, these women can see the difference with regard to the current use of ICT tools and applications.

However, a very important fact has come to light i.e., few of the women 7% of the literate women have availed the opportunity of Open Distance Learning where ICT plays a vital role in meeting the requirements and expectations of the learners is in-fact a significant finding of the present study.

**Table 8.2 clearly shows the current use of ICT tools and applications by the literate and illiterate women of the villages**

Villages	Television		Radio		Mobile Phones		Video-Conferencing		Smart board/ Projector		internet		ODL
	L	ILL	L	ILL	L	ILL	L	ILL	L	ILL	L	ILL	
Ledo Bongali	17	10	15	14	17	12	10	----	10	----	9	---	1
1. no. Mulang Bongali	25	9	10	8	15	10	2	----	9	----	9	----	-----
2. no. Mulang Bongali	25	5	12	2	25	9	-----	-----	7	-----	12	----	-----
1. no. Mulang Gaon	21	9	11	2	19	11	-----	-----	8	----	10	----	-----
2. no. Mulang Gaon	18	11	8	2	22	16	-----	-----	5	-----	12	----	-----
Tikok N.C	17	12	13	5	17	12	11	-----	5	-----	12	----	2
Malu Gaon	9	7	9	8	15	11	-----	-----	3	-----	101	-----	-----
Ledo Gaon	17	11	10	6	20	7	10	-----	10	-----	15	----	2
TOTAL	128	74	88	47	150	88	33	NIL	57	NIL	90	NIL	5
%	73%	68%	50%	43%	85%	81%	18%	0%	32%	0%	62%	0%	7%

### **8.3 Analysis and Interpretation of Objective 3: “To study the challenges faced by these women in their society under the present study.”**

#### **Challenges faced by these women in their society**

While the researcher conducted personal interview with the sampled women of the villages on the challenges faced by them in their society, home and community, some facts came to the light that are stated below:

- i. Few of the women reported that sometimes they become the victims of domestic violence by their spouse, relative or other family member.
- ii. 39% women under the present study remain unlettered; they do not have adequate computer skills so that they could operate the computer or surf internet to remain aware about their legal rights. Some of the women even reported that they could not operate the ATM cards as well and have to take help of their family members for the same.
- iii. 20% of the illiterate women said that they are barred from social or individual freedom.
- iv. Again some of the women reported that they have to take domestic responsibility like child bearing and family care and their mobility to outside the home is thus restricted.
- v. The women under the study also said that they have financial problems and thus, suffer from a sense of low self-esteem.
- vi. Early marriages and Child bearing at young ages was a problem few years back, of which they were the victims.

### **8.4 Analysis and Interpretation of Objective 4: “To study women’s empowerment through ICTs in the rural villages of Margherita Developmental block.”**

#### **Impact of ICT on the Illiterate Women Members of the Villages under the Present Study?**

The above stated problems are basically seen with the illiterate women of the villages. 80% of the illiterate women of the village reports that they are empowered socially and politically now as they gain knowledge and information via mobile phones, television news, radio

news but they cannot use internet. However, they report that they also get to learn many things now from their neighbours, community people who are educated members of the village.

On being asked, they report that with the use of the ICT tools like television, radio, mobile phones they have now become aware of the various rules and regulations, acts and laws made by the Indian government regarding the safety of women in India.

Another very important fact brought to light by these women that most of them almost 80% (both literate and illiterate) are involved in Self Help Groups (SHGs). Here, for them mobile phones play a significant role for receiving important calls for meetings in the block offices, receiving messages for important works and 40% of the women reported that the mobile phone are of great help for them, as the streets they travel by to reach their villages tend to be insecure for them and thus, mobile phones ensure quick contact with their husbands or other members of their house. Today, women are actively involved in SHGs and somehow ICT has a positive impact on these women in terms of their ability to gain economic empowerment, which is also a significant finding of the study.

How ICT has it affects upon the literate members of the villages under the present study.

99% of the literate sampled women reports that they are empowered both socially and politically. Most of the women report that they surf internet and get to know things related to education, various educational courses, online form fill-ups, online payment of admission fees, aware of their rights, employment opportunities etc. through the use of ICT. 60% of the educated girls of the village report that they use ICT tools like smart-board and projector in their classrooms for making presentation, seminars, workshops in their colleges and schools. The educated women of the villages says that they are now aware of their legal rights and are able to avail the opportunities provided by the government for the welfare of the women. The ICT applications, social medias keep them connected with their peers and help them to exchange their thought and views. Thus, they are empowered socially and politically. The women in such remote villages having access to ICT and are able to avail the opportunities to empower themselves is indeed a significant finding.

The significant part of the study is that the women members of the villages are empowered socially, economically, politically and ICT has a positive impact upon it. Thus from the above study it is clear that the women under the present study have access to the benefits of ICT as mentioned below;

- Provides a second chance to continue their education(ODL)
- Allows women to study at their own place, time and pace.
- Enables women to pursue education along with household task.
- Enables women to earn income and become financially independent (SGH)
- Enables them to gain more respect in the family and in the community.
- To avail educational facilities and opportunities like Open Distance Learning.
- To know about various career opportunities.
- To remain aware of the rights against social injustice and domestic violence against women
- To gain knowledge regarding health care facilities provided by the government
- To remain connected with their peers through social media and exchange their thought and views.

## **9. Suggestions:**

During the period of study, the researcher found that although Information and Communication Technology has made its access to the remote areas, the women of the villages remain deprived in terms of making the best use of it. There are no evidences of computer-associated programs conducted for the upliftment of the women in the villages. Nalso, no such sound Vocational trainings on ICT (except one computer centre) has been emphasized by the Block level or by the DRDAs (District Rural Development Agencies) .The researcher on the basis of the present study would like to suggest the following topics for further research:

1. Effort made by government in the empowerment of women through ICTs

2. A study on Trainings imparted at various levels for Skill Development of the Rural Women through ICTs. etc.

## 10. Conclusion:

The discussion on the findings of this particular study have served to highlight the challenges faced by the rural women in their society and that how the advent of ICT tool has removed the barriers regarding their social rights, educational rights, political rights and financial assistance which are the only factors in which they lag behind. However now ICT has given these women a scope to acquire knowledge and has provided them a scope of earning money on their own. However, the study has found that the knowledge they gain is also limited in case of the illiterate women of the villages as they are limited to the use of ICT tools except very few illiterate women being handy with a cell phone. Trainings regarding Computer Skill are also not very sound. To address this gap there is a need for the government to provide trainings at regular intervals to impart at least the basic computer knowledge skills of these women and to help them to be updated with newer activities and works.

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