

ICT learning: Is it more valuable for the young? ¹

Savithri Subramanian
UNESCO, India

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on ethnographic action research undertaken in a rural area of Tamil Nadu, India. Small centres are set up in the houses of women in the villages, in order to create access to ICTs (information and communication technology) for these rural women. While women have learnt to use some of these modern ICTs and do make use of them, increasingly it is the young boys and girls of the community who more often access the centres. The paper explores some of the socio-cultural factors that may be leading to this subtle but definite change.

The paper is based on findings from ethnographic action research² done in community-based initiatives aimed at reaching ICTs to the poor and marginalised. The research was conducted from early 2003 to July 2005. It attempts to explore the question of why in some contexts children and youth may be preferred over adult members by the community for learning ICTs.

Keywords: *India; ethnographic action research; women; poverty alleviation.*

BACKGROUND

The pilot initiatives that the paper deals with are supported by UNESCO and are located in Tamil Nadu in south India. The centres were set up by TANUVAS, an agricultural and veterinary sciences university and are presently being facilitated by Madras University. Tamil Nadu is the southern-most and one of the largest and most populous states in India, on the shores of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. The language Tamil is widely spoken and is one of the 18 official languages of the country.

The project is located in the districts of Chennai (urban), Kancheepuram (with semi-urban characteristics) and Cuddalore (rural). The paper focuses on the findings from the Cuddalore district. Yet, its arguments gain support also from the research findings at the centers in the two other districts. The initiative seeks to reach the most marginalised sections and in the context of Cuddalore district it is the poor, illiterate, low caste women³ in the villages.

Cuddalore district is located around 200 kilometres away from Chennai city, the capital of Tamil Nadu. It has got 6 *taluks* (sub-districts), and 16 town *panchayats* (bodies for local self-government). It has a total population of approximately 2.28 millions, out of which the female population is 1.13 million. The literacy rate of the district is 71.85%, close to that of the state at 73.47%. The female literacy rate is remarkably low at 60.86%, showing gender disparities in access to educational opportunities. The main occupation of the people in this district is agriculture. A private firm, EID Parry Ltd has a sugar mill in Nellikuppam, Cuddalore District and has established Parry's Corner (telecentres) in 30 villages mainly for the use of cane growers and for capacity building of the rural people.

Experiences from such interventions revealed that women's participation in telecentres is low. One of the significant factors for this seemed to be their location in public spaces in a context where there are mobility restrictions on women. There are relatively more men than women present in public spaces. Thus, in this initiative the ICT centers draw upon the existing networks

of self-help groups (SHG)⁴ to create access for women. Each center is located in a separate enclosed space in the residence of one of the SHG's members.

The Initiative

SHGs were identified through interactions with non-governmental NGOs, social workers, banks/insurance companies, and government agencies such as District Rural Development Agency and Tamilnadu Co-operative for the Development of Women. Selection was done of groups with relatively lower socio-economic status and which were more marginalised and on the basis of questionnaire-based interviews.

There are two centres in Cuddalore district. Each centre primarily consists of a computer with internet connectivity, printer and various relevant software and content CDs. Each centre has an animator-instructor who helps to encourage and facilitate women's participation. The instructor trains the people coming to the centre on computers and different software, is responsible for general upkeep of the equipments and also provides support to the community members who visit to use the facility for other purposes such as printing or making a phone call. Each of the centres was initially accessed by the 15 members of the particular self-help group with which it is associated. But gradually as the word spread, over 20 women (age range 23-45) who were not all members of that SHG visited the centre. The number of youth and children (age range 7-22) visiting in a day is higher, around 30 and is even higher than 50 occasionally. While some of them visit with a specific purpose - to attend classes, to type some document and so on - there are many who visit just to try working on the computer or for practice.

Research methodology

Ethnographic action research is employed in the project and aims to integrate qualitative research methods within project development. Action researchers are trained to use the normal repertoire of ethnographic research (interviews, participant observation, diaries, surveys) to understand the dynamic structures of both poverty and media use in their locality. Ethnographic research also ensures that any interpretation is done in the context of the given cultural context and there is an emphasis on the everyday lives of the people.

Researchers seek to understand how poverty is experienced and dealt with in the everyday by their target groups rather than to approach it through measurement or indicators. Understanding the 'communicative ecology' of the area helps to investigate the full range of means of communication that are employed and the local social networks through which information and communication flow. This gives them the detailed understanding necessary to see how ICT interventions fit into local poverty and communication networks, and how these interventions might be more effective.

The methodology used in this particular site is as follows. Initially a sample survey was done to gather background information for planning the intervention. Mapping of resources and communication networks was also done. Once the centre was set up, fieldnotes have become the main research tool. Apart from this, group discussions and interviews are held periodically to assess changes taking place as a result of the intervention and in order to gain better understanding of the context and people's lives in it. One of other significant tools that the intervention used is centre-based user feedback. Taken in a structured format, this really helped in understanding the users' perceptions of the centre and what they needed from it.

This paper explores an area that emerged from the research being undertaken at a site and to which the intervention has adapted itself. In order to comprehend the context better, the paper

begins with a discussion on some dimensions of poverty in this site before embarking on the main arguments.

POVERTY IN THE COMMUNITY

It would be stating the obvious to point out that poverty is experienced in complex and inter-related ways. That is, often poverty may deprive individuals in more than one ways that reinforce each other and intensify this condition.

Definition

Some women's voices⁵:

Poverty is.....

Widowhood, illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, old age not knowing English, lack of relatives, lack of water, lack of rain, drunkard father.... (Children's Day group discussion)

"Those who are living without three meals a day and don't have a house to live. Those who have too many children without having any property. But I am not living in extreme poverty because I am having three meals a day out of my hard work. But now I have the fear and feel insecure, how many days can I work like this?" (In-depth interview)

"We think, if we have money we don't have any problem, but more than that living without freedom under a drunkard husband is poverty". (In-depth interview)

"Limited opportunities for women to explore their talents is poverty". (In-depth interview)

"Living without a husband in a young age and depending on sister and brothers for everything, denial of participating in public functions and any good event, always having fear in the mind how to talk, how to laugh... and not having courage to overcome all these can be called as poverty". (In-depth interview)

"No choice to choose big items in life, like government job, expect agriculture work because of illiteracy and lack of wealth". (In-depth interview)
(Excerpts from fieldnotes and in-depth interviews)

A lack of resources to fulfil basic needs and also, other desires comes out of their narratives over and over again. The gender dimensions of their experience of poverty also repeatedly emerge as seen in the following sub-section as well.

Gender

Gender and the exploitation that may result out of being a woman often pervade these experiences.

I had been to Kancheepuram information centre. Mrs. Kanchana was taking care of the center. Electricity failure is the main problem. I have planned to go to Mrs. Anitha's house. Her husband also was there. She was engaged with cooking work. She told me, that she got some dress materials from friends and neighbours for stitching. I asked her husband about his Passport and Visa. He was trying to go to Malaysia for mechanic work. He said that he has spent Rs. 1000/- and gave 16 passport size photos with visa application. He complained that the officials repeatedly asked him to bring another set of photos. He has taken seven passport size photos for 4 times. He spent Rs.60/- on each and every time. He added that his friend who is having office at Malaysia is helping him to get the job for five

years contract period. Mrs. Anitha was worrying about this. They are unable to pay children school fees. Her husband is also not getting regular job and the family income is not sufficient to run the family.

Mrs. Anitha told if her husband goes to Malaysia for job they can provide good education to their children. Mrs. Anitha told that her daughter is requesting her to teach computer. I asked her why she is not teaching her daughter on basics of computer. She is studying in first standard. If she does anything wrong, mishandle the computer or damage the computer unknowingly other members will scold us. So that I do not want to bring my children to the centre. I encouraged Mrs. Anitha to teaches her children to use the computer during her presence. She agreed to my suggestion.

(Action researcher's fieldnotes)

Allocation of Resources

The cultural context shapes what is considered a priority in terms of expenditure and may further push them deeper into the vortex of poverty:

- How much are you saving through sangam?

Rs.10/- per week

- Do you have any other saving habit other than sangam?

Yes I am saving Rs.150/- per month

- For what purpose you are saving that money?

Every month I am paying Rs.150 to a private person. He will give 4 grams gold coin and 35 grams silver and half KG sweet and crackers for Rs.200/- during Deepavali festival

A famous lighting festival celebrated in India during October or November. People use to take new dresses for their family members and enjoy with their friends and relatives with sweets and crackers. She told that the gold coin would be useful during her daughter marriage in future.

Members are not only interested on their children education and they are particular on their children future. Mrs Parameshwari told that she is not in a position to buy gold for a huge amount. So she is saving gold for her daughter marriage through the above said scheme. She is also saving money through sangam. She bought loan and gave it to her husband for business. He is repaying money to her.

(Excerpts from an in-depth interview)

Getting daughters married is considered a huge responsibility and dowry is a strong and even growing and increasingly commercialised practice as a number of studies and the media have reported (Epstein, 1963 and 1972, Sharma, 1984). Dowry is the expenditure on a daughter's wedding and includes all the gifts given by the girl's family to the groom and his relatives. Many narratives from the site point to the concern women have about the impending expenditure at the time of a daughter's marriage and the burden increases where there are more than one daughters.

Because they anticipate this huge expenditure they are often less willing to spend on any other aspect of their daughter's future. Thus, in this context and especially among the poor, women have few opportunities for education and to learn livelihood skills (Author, 2002). What often adds to these difficult life circumstances is that in many households in the area the men who are the sole earners prioritise their personal expenditure – whether smoking, liquor or any other and give a small share for fulfilling basic needs of the family members. This has been reported in other sociological literature such as Mencher (1988). The centres established in Tamil Nadu aimed at creating access for these disadvantaged women to ICTs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: ICT LEARNING AND THE YOUNG

A number of women and other members of the community expressing a general curiosity initially visited the centres. Women from the selected SHG that was responsible to run the centre and some other women too in these early days came to the centre regularly and picked up some computing skills – MS Word and more often than not, Paintbrush were the applications that they learnt.

However, only a few moved beyond this level because another interesting change was happening at the time. Women started coming less frequently to the centre and even when they did, they stayed for shorter time periods. Instead children of these women and children from other poor and marginalised families in the village expressed interest in learning computers. This paper explores the process and the reasons for this change.

The research data reveals that there are three possible reasons for this change and these are discussed below.

Firstly, many women's views were as follows: After having learnt the basics of computing and sometimes often even before starting the process of learning, they say they cannot gain much from the exposure, as they are uneducated or illiterate. Having only limited literacy, the women considered that they would be unable to learn ICT skills or benefit from it.

- Why do you not feel confident to work on it?

I have forgotten the little bit I learnt.

Action researcher: Why didn't you continue learning?

I am illiterate, what will I understand? This is meant for educated people. I don't feel confident to learn all this.

(Excerpts from an interview with a 45-year old woman SHG member)

"I have such low education, even if I learn this. It will not help me particularly." Says another 35-year-old woman.

"My hands tremble when I touch the mouse, this is too overwhelming for me. It is good if the children can learn." Says a 37-year-old SHG member

(Action researcher's fieldnotes)

When asked about its usefulness one woman in her forties says, "my children and my sister's children are learning. That is good enough."

These different narratives point to not only the lack of education among many of these rural women but also poor self-confidence resulting out their lack of education as many of the women themselves state (Jeffery, 1989, Ganesh, 1993). Social norms emphasising women's inability to learn technical skills and earn an income from it creates further barriers. Services provided at the centres, such as typing or printing, are also viewed as being more useful for the youth.

Secondly, in this context of poverty, a sense of 'lack' is experienced – lack of resources, opportunities, means for livelihood - so they choose to prioritise children's needs over their own. Anthropological studies have reported that in the cultural ethos characterising Indian society and particularly among women this is often the case (Jain, 1975, Uberoi, 1993). There is an emphasis on creating opportunities for children and a strong concern about their future. And given limited resources, if someone's needs have to be prioritised it is often those of the men and children.

This was discussed earlier in the section on poverty. Women are preoccupied with fulfilling the expectations of their children and all the other members of the household often overlooking their own needs. And they are less willing to spend on a daughter than a son because even fulfilling the traditional expectation of dowry proves to be a burden. They are, thus, aware that they are unable to give their daughters any other opportunities. The ICT centre in the context may present that rare opportunity.

Visali is one of the SHG member who is living in Kancheepuram .She is keen on her children's education.

- What do you think about your children education?

I want to give good education to them

- What is your wish regarding your children education?

I have hope on them. They should get job out of their education.

- What is your children's wish?

They want to become teacher

- Do you want to consult anybody for their education?

I will consult my elder brother for my children education. Even though my husband is not giving money I will educate my children with my earnings.

- Are they studying well?

I am worrying about my children education. They are not reading well. My husband and myself used to help them in their studies.

- Are they going to a special coaching class?

My daughter is going to tuition

- How much do you pay as a special coaching class fees?

Rs. 40 /per month

(Excerpts from in-depth interview)

Kapadia (1996) and others note that the Brahmins who are traditionally considered as the upper caste have always sought high levels of education. Yet, there is an increasing emphasis on education even among the traditionally lower castes of Tamil Nadu in order to achieve upward social mobility and better living standards. Yet, the studies also note that often the many reinforcing structures of marginalisation do now allow the 'lower' castes to benefit much from new educational opportunities. For instance, they many not be able to afford the education or the associated costs or in cases where they do get educated in the absence of the right resources they may be unable to find jobs or start an enterprise of their own. Despite this the attraction for modern education and white-collar jobs is strong.

Slater and Tacchi (2004, p. 43) on analysing the research findings from the ICT initiatives in Tamil Nadu and other sites say, "ICTs are increasingly seen as an essential skill for employment, further education and everyday survival in the modern world. More negatively, these associations often mean that ICTs and centres are seen as largely for young people, as part of their education and general preparation for the modern world, and therefore as not being for those who are older and beyond education, or who have fallen more completely out of education." This need is further highlighted among the poor and marginalised groups.

Thirdly, in so far as women have gained from the exposure they felt this has even more potential for their children.

For the women who regularly attended the training and came to the centre there is notable positive impact from learning computers. The villagers, government officials, NGOs, bankers and the other SHGs identify the selected SHGs as "Computer Group". This has contributed positively to the responses towards them - such as requests for loans and has contributed to their increasing self-esteem. These SHG members have started participating in the Block level (an unit

in the Indian administrative set-up) coordination committee meeting which helps them to voice their views on many development issues of the area.



Figure 1: Young children at one of the centres expressing their amazement at the computer by worshipping it with folded hands

Some of the women have compiled and documented their SHG savings and loan details in MS Excel. They also manage to organise their own finances better through this. The SHGs have tied up with NGOs and technical training institutes to further the opportunities for gaining livelihood skills and income for themselves

Efforts to benefit the women and make the facilities more useful to them are constantly being made as given below.

We started our training programme on screen-printing at 11.30 A.M. I introduced Mr.Gunnasekar the trainer and the participants introduced themselves. It is a four-day training programme. It was a new experience for the women. The method of teaching was informal. He explained each and everything. Women were very sharp to clarify their doubts on the last day. The trained members printed visiting cards, New year cards, Marriage cards, etc themselves. (Action researcher's fieldnotes)

But even in these programmes relatively younger women participated and expressed their views thus:

Raji:

Raji is 17 years old. She finished diploma in typing and Short hand stenography. Her mother is a member of the SHG. She is a widow. Raji is the eldest member in the family. Her mother has educated her with great difficulties. She has undergone training. I asked her to write about the training. She wrote:

"First I like to thank my mother who always think about my career improvement. Next Mrs. Vijaya who is leading our SHG. Whenever I see some greetings, marriage cards I used get amazed to see the design. I used to think, how beautiful these cards are! But I never think, "Why can't I do that? I felt that it is all machine and need more education and big printing machine. I scared to come for the training because I thought it will be very difficult. Really I am lucky to learn screen-printing. My mother gave up her opportunity and asked me to attend the training. It gives me hope that I too can do some work. I have benefited through sangam. I touched the computer and learned to type. I typed a book.

I got Rs. 250/- from the centre. With this I have started my studies - Going to the typing class – higher – typing. If I do screen printing along with others I can earn money as well as I can do my studies. I like to thank Mr. Gunasekaran, who has taught us many things. I like to learn DTP – to improve techniques Screen-printing."

Vijaya:

She is the leader of the Kandrakottai Malar SHG. She is a young widow. Her husband died two years ago. She has one daughter, studying 5th Std. She is living with her sister. She only asked me to arrange for screen-printing training. She has taken all the effort to bring the women for training. She writes about the training programme:

"I like to thank Dr. Sheriff and the TANUVAS and the UNESCO for this great opportunity to learn screen printing. Whenever I see visiting card and marriage card I always think when I am going to learn this printing skill? I thought It will involve more money and it is beyond our capacity. When I attended special training for SHG leaders they talked about Screen printing. I have picked up the word screen printing there. Other than that I didn't know anything else.

When madam said about screen printing I was very happy. We can use the computer and the internet for our work. Now I should learn the search engine to trace some figures for screen printing. After learning screen printing technique I am not able to believe myself that even I too can print greetings cards. I have distributed the cards which we have printed during the training period to our neighbours. One old woman asked me, "can women do all this?" even she added that world has changed much and women are also learning the work carried out by men. Those days men only do all this work. But don't give up this work. Do it. It will be a good lesson for the future generation."

Vijayalakshimi:

"I am a young girl. I am happy that I have learnt this skill before my marriage. I can earn money by residing at home. I should learn some business skills to improve my earning capacity. I have visited the Olympic Centre and Pantruti and enquired about the card. I found that card is costly there. I should do the enquiry in Villupuram and Cuddalore. If the course is for a week we will be more confident to do this.

I have learnt one skill now. With minimum capital we can start this work. Mr.Gunasekar personal experience and his sharing about this business helped me to plan for my business. I thank everybody who offered this chance to us."

(Notes from feedback, action researcher)

These examples bring out the fact that many of the older women want to give these limited opportunities to their daughters. This is despite the fact the emphasis on getting the daughter married at a young age and giving/taking dowry continues. Dube (1986) and Hooja (1969) discuss the strengthening trend of this practice. As the practice is considered traditional few families may make an explicit mention of giving/taking dowry but dowry continues to get stronger and commercialised making it an even bigger burden than before on girl's parents. While they

want to secure their son's future, the same is true for their daughter's future. And interventions such as this help in creating opportunities for the girls. Since ICT training in these centres is free and/or subsidised, parents consider sending their girls for it.

As one woman argues,

"I know how it is to be dependent for my and my children's survival on a man who could not care less about these things. I do not want my daughter's life to be at the mercy of some man. I have learnt a lesson from my experiences. I want my son to get opportunities but even more my daughter."

(Action researcher's fieldnotes)

CONCLUSIONS

Research findings from the two centres clearly bring out that the centres are mainly accessed by children and the young presently – to learn computers, attend the structured training programmes or for services such as photocopying and printing. While the initial plan for the initiative aimed to reach even older women in the area, gradually as discussed above there is a shift. Some of the possible reasons for more youth accessing the centre were discussed in the paper.

Given the particular cultural context and the limited opportunities resulting from poverty, women desire to use this rare and limited resource for the benefit of their children. In their perception, what is useful for the children may ultimately benefit the women. Because it is in their children that they see their futures secure. But this also raises some vexing questions – this trend may reinforce many existing inequalities and norms tied to these. This is because many of the women who have had no access to ICTs before continue to keep away from the centres. On the other hand, as Caplan (1985) has noted and has been evidenced through the ethnographic action research undertaken at other sites in this network (Author 2003), opening up avenues for the daughters may gradually introduce changes in the gender status quo in the future generations. Thus, by making such a choice these women may be positively contributing to gender equality.

It is the desire among the older people, especially women, to build the capacities of their daughters to be independent which the intervention has begun to focus on. While the target initially was older women, from the understanding gained from the research project teams consider it valuable even if the younger women and girls, along with some boys, get the opportunity to learn ICT skills at no costs. The direction in which the intervention will move towards is to give the younger women and girls more opportunities for learning livelihood skills along with ICT-related skills and through ICTs build their capacities to earn a livelihood and overcome their poverty.

It would also be useful to further probe some of the findings that have emerged from the data here. Three areas are suggested for further study. Firstly, in ICT interventions that set out to target one or more groups it is important to understand whether and why such a focussed approach may or may not work in the local context. Secondly, since the ethnographic action research provides understanding in order to make the interventions more responsive, innovative strategies can be devised to reach out more effectively to the older women. And whether these strategies have an impact can be studied. Finally, in ICT interventions, the content is equally, if not more important, than the tools used for the communication. It is critical to know if more relevant and useful content can bring in those groups in a community who may continue to stay away from the centres otherwise because of either cultural norms or economic reasons such as the women discussed in this paper.

Endnotes

- 1 The article is based on findings from research undertaken in a network of ICT initiatives with support from UNESCO. The author is responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in the article and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.
- 2 For more details refer to:
Tacchi, J, Slater, D, & Hearn, G. (2003), *Ethnographic Action Research: A User's Handbook*, UNESCO, New Delhi. <http://unescodelhi.nic.in/publications/ear.pdf>
- 3 Tamil Nadu, like most other states of India, has not only had a history of caste hierarchy and discrimination but also caste-based politics and as Beteille (1969) points out the castes ranked as low traditionally have struggled to end their marginalisation though with mixed results.
- 4 SHG is a small, economically homogenous, group of women voluntarily formed for small savings and credit to group members based on the decisions taken by the group itself. The group interactions and process also allows for greater participation by these women in their own development primarily through increasing awareness and promoting self-expression.
- 5 All pieces of raw data, quotes from the field etc are italicised in the paper. These have not been edited and appear as they were recorded in the field. All names have been changed to protect the individual's identity.

REFERENCES

- Author. (2002), *Kinship, Property and Gender. Ph.D. thesis*, Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi.
- Author. (2003), *Poverty and Gender hierarchies: Can ICTs make a difference? The case of Seelampur in Delhi*, Paper for Experts meet on Development Communication organised by UNESCO, New Delhi in September 2003.
- Beteille, A.. (1969), *Caste, Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Oxford University Press, Bombay.
- Caplan, Patricia. (1985), *Class and Gender in India. Women and their Organisation in a South Indian City*, Tavistock Publications Ltd, London.
- Dube, L., et al. (eds.). (1986), *Visibility and Power. Essays on Women in Society and Development*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Epstein, T. S. (1962), *Economic Development and Social Change in South India*, Oxford University Press, Bombay.
- Epstein. T. S. (1973), *South India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Mysore villages revisited.*, Macmillan Press, London and Basingstoke.
- Ganesh, K. (1993). *Boundary Walls: Caste and Women in a Tamil Community*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, Delhi.
- Hooja, S. L. (1969), *Dowry System in India : A Case Study*, Asia Press, Delhi.

- Jain, D. (ed.). (1975), *Indian Women*, Publications Div. Ministry of I&B., GOI, New Delhi.
- Jeffery, P, et al. (1989), *Labor Pains and Labor Power: Women and Child Bearing in India*, Zed Books Ltd., New Delhi.
- Kapadia, K. (1996), *Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Mencher, Joan P. (1988), "Women's Work and Poverty: Women's Contribution to Household Maintenance in South India" in Dwyer and Bruce (eds.) *A Home Divided: Women and Income in the Third World*, Stanford University Press, California.
- Sharma, U. (1984), "On Dowry in north India" in Hirschon (ed.). *Women and Property: Women as Property*, Croom Helm, London.
- Slater, D. & Tacchi, J. (2003), *Research: ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*, UNESCO, New Delhi. <http://cirac.qut.edu.au/ictpr/downloads/research.pdf>
- Uberoi, P. (ed.). (1993), *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Copyright for articles published in this journal is retained by the authors, with first publication rights granted to the journal. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

Original article at: <http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/viewarticle.php?id=132&layout=html>