

E-COMMERCE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: STATUS AND STRATEGIES

Shilpi Saxena, Roopam Kothari

"You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women."

-By Jawaharlal Nehru.

ABSTRACT

In 21st century women empowerment has become one of the most important area of concern across the globe. A nation's economy can sustain only when all its eligible members participate in the process of development. Women now have been identified as key agents in the process of sustainable development of a nation especially in developing countries. Nowadays, the role of women entrepreneur or business women has become very significant in various areas of business. In 21st century it is being observed that empowering women to participate in economic development is not only a daunting and challenging task but also paving path for future sustainable development. In developing countries like India the issue of women empowerment requires serious and immediate attention. With reference to this Indian government has made many efforts like Swayamsidha Programme, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level, Swa- Shakti Project, Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP), Swalamban, Swadhar, Rashtriya Mahila Kosha (RMK), Self Help Groups (SHGs) hostels for working women, etc. Even Various projects have been launched by government to provide employment to women in different sectors. When talking about Indian economy, one sector which can't be left unnoticed is -e commerce sector. The e-commerce in last 10 years, is one of the biggest things that have taken the Indian business by storm. It is creating an entirely new economy, which has a huge potential and is fundamentally changing the way business is done. It has advantages for both buyers as well as sellers and this win-win situation is at the core of its phenomenal rise. It has allowed firms to capture a greater market share by providing a cheaper and more efficient distribution chain for their products or services. This paper discusses the role which e commerce has played in

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empowering the women in developing countries and also suggests ways to improve the participation of women in e-commerce sector.

INTRODUCTION

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. In the history of human development, woman is considered as important as man. Women constitute half of the humanity. In fact, a nation's overall progress can be accessed by the statistical figure of employment and work performed by the women in society. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated. Women's contribution in total working of the world is equal to two-thirds of world's work hours. They earn only one-third of the total income and own less than one-tenth of the world's resources. Among total Indian population of 1027.10 million, women constitute 495.73 million. Therefore, "women constitute nearly 50 per cent of population, perform two-thirds of the work and produce 50 per cent of food commodities consumed by the country. They earn one third of remuneration and own 10 per cent of the property or wealth of the country" (Reddy et al., 1994). This shows that the economic status of women is in pathetic condition and this is more so in a country like India.

All these statistical figures draw our attention on an issue of immense importance and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide i.e. Women Empowerment. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across the globe to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women. In recent years it has become an important concern area of most of the government plans & programs. If we compare the socio economic status of women in developed and developing countries like India, we find that the developing countries are lagging far behind. In developing countries the situation is pathetic especially in rural areas. There is immense need to focus on empowerment of rural women in developing countries today. In the field of empowerment, economic empowerment of rural women is regarded as an issue of paramount importance by economists, political thinkers, social scientists and economic reformers. As economic empowerment of rural women leads to the development of family, community, society, state and nation, it is necessary to give our attention to empowerment of women in the rural area for the development of our country in all spheres.

CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process, which enables women or group of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999). It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or to have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free from shocks imposed on them by custom, belief and practice. It was civil rights movement of USA in 1960 during which the concept of empowerment originated. With passage of time many definitions of empowerment have been provided by various thinkers. Out of those various definitions, some defined empowerment as an individual process which takes control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and some defined it as a political process through which human rights and social justice are provided to disadvantaged groups of people.

The empowerment of women is an important issue which is an integral component of various agendas of international development organizations. It is also considered to be a means to achieve of gender equality in today's society. In 1993 at the Social Summit in Copenhagen and in 1994 at Cairo in International Conference on Population and Development the governments of various countries committed themselves for the empowerment of women. This commitment was formulated into a clear action plan at the fourth world conference on Women in Beijing 1995 wherein the Government took pledge for the "empowerment and advancement of women, by providing them the right of freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby ensuring them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations."

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

The stature of Women in India has been subject to sea changes over the past few decades. Starting with the early Vedic time, this was the when both women and men enjoyed equal status in society. Near about 500 B.C., the status of women began to deteriorate and the situation became worse with arrival of Mughals and later on by the entry of Britishers on Indian land.

Before independence some rigorous efforts were made by the social reformers like Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwar

Chandra Vidya Sagar, Rama Bai and others which provided some relief to condition of women of that time period. Even Britishers had enacted some laws like "Abolition of practice of Sati", Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc. for improving the condition of women.

The real change in condition of women in India came after independence, on adoption of Indian constitution. Constitution framers while framing the Indian Constitution ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality should be enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Article 14 of Indian Constitution provides guarantee for equality to women in India. There are also other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Moreover, the Constitution also provide power to the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. During 1970 the process of women empowerment also gained momentum. Later on many groups and NGOs came into picture raising their voice for the empowerment of women. Various women empowerment movement gained speed with launch of Indra Mahila Yojana under the Priministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Later on various schemes were launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level, etc. Even government has established National Commission for Women and State Commissions for Women to represent the rights of women in India and to raise voice related to women. In the year 2001, Indian government launched the National Policy for the Empowerment of women. This policy was aimed to achieve the objective of women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the overall development of women. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in social, political and economic life of the nation. The National Policy also aims at making legal system stronger for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with civil Society, particularly women's organizations.

E-COMMERCE

E-commerce in India has evolved significantly in the last ten years, and there are many aspects of e-commerce like TV shopping, online shopping and mobile shopping, which together are referred to as digital commerce. The number of internet users around the world has been unwaveringly growing and this growth has provided the impetus and the opportunity for development of e-commerce business at global as well as regional level. India has maximum number of internet users in world after USA. Electronic commerce or e-commerce is a term used for any

of business, or commercial transaction, that involves the transfer of information and goods through the internet. It includes a wide range of businesses, from online retailing, auction or music sites, to business exchanges trading goods and services between corporations. E-commerce allows consumers to electronically exchange goods and services with no barriers of time or distance. E-commerce has achieved maximum growth in the last five years and is predicted to continue at the same rate, or even at an accelerated rate. Looking at such accelerated rate of growth it is predicated that in near future the boundaries between "conventional" and "electronic" commerce will become increasingly blurred as more and more businesses are shifting their operations onto the internet. Thus E-commerce can be defined as utilization of technology relating to electronic communications and digital information processing in business transactions to create, transform, and redefine relationships for building value between or among organizations, and between organizations and individuals. The concept of E-commerce is applicable to any business because it involves the whole business cycle from production, procurement, distribution, sales, payment, fulfillment, restocking, and marketing. There are several models of e-commerce like B2C, B2B, C2B, C2C, G2C, G2B and B2G. Among all these models B2C is the most popular one as with the increasing number of internet users, the tendency to shop online is also increasing rapidly among the customers worldwide. Today the online shopping list of buyers not only includes books and clothes but also groceries, precious items like gold & silver jewellery, furniture, services and many more items. In India, presently there are more than 200 million internet users, with 89 million users visiting online shopping sites. The size of India's e-commerce market in 2013 was around \$13 billion, according to a joint report generated jointly by KPMG and Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI).

WOMEN AND E-COMMERCE

In modern India the condition of women is paradoxical. On one hand women in India are touching the pinnacle of success, whereas on the other hand they are suffering from violence on her by her own family members and the world outside. In comparison to the past scenario, present day women have achieved a lot but in reality they still have to travel a long way. Women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armoured with their talent. India has examples of commendable women not only from history like Rani Lakshmi Bai but also in present time like Indra Noyi, Chanda Kochar, Shahnaz Hussain etc. Thus at one extreme Indian women are found to be victims of misbehavior from society and at the other extreme

they are coming up as perfect examples of brain and beauty. This perfection is result of improvement in literacy level among Indians along with betterment of infrastructural facilities and adoption of new technologies. New information and communication technologies in this connection are the powerful tools for contributing towards overall development of the country.

However, in many areas, women especially those who are residing in rural India are still not able to access internet and even there are many areas where women even do not have the skills to use internet in a profitable manner. It has been found that in developing countries other than India, when women entrepreneurs were given access and knowledge, they have benefited from using the information & communication technologies in a large number of areas, like getting access to valuable business information, finding new (export) markets, promoting their products and services over the internet, acquiring large orders through networking with community members, and generally achieving economies of scale through adopting efficient business tactics. In developing countries except India there are found many cases of women empowerment through e-commerce that too from B2C model of e-commerce. Some of such cases are as follows:

SOME LIVE CASES

1. The Guyanan Weavers Cooperative is an organization of 30 females belonging to tribal community from the Wapishana and Macushi in Guyana, northern South America. The cooperative established the ancient art of hammock weaving using information provided by 19th century European travellers. The women of cooperation use to do hammock hand-weaving by using co-cultivated on agricultural plots. The Cooperative then created a website by outsourcing someone, which resulted in the promotion of wares. As a result of it in the mid-1990s, the Guyanese Weavers were able to sell hammocks to the clients like Elizabeth, Prince Philip, etc.
2. Tortasperu.com (<http://www.tortasperu.com.pe>), is another website for marketing and selling cakes in Peru operated by women of Peru for earning money.
3. Ethiogift (<http://ethiogift.com>), is another example of business in Ethiopia through which cattle and other products are delivered through internet to the families in other parts of the world.

country, thereby dispensing with the physical delivery of goods abroad.

4. In Northern Province of South Africa, Rural Women's Association used internet to advertise its chicken to rich prospects in Pietersburg.
5. SoukOrjuwan.com is an E-shop for poor and underdeveloped Lebanese women from where they can sell their homemade products, such as rose water and jam, as well as hand-made artisanal wears such as baskets and woolen sweaters. This e-shop was established by an NGO which conducted a series of trainings in basic computer literacy skills, internet usage and English and arabic-language reading and writing. Participating Lebanese women also received e-commerce training that included instruction in photographing their products, posting pictures online and processing orders from customers. The second phase of the project focused on hands-on training in pricing, photographing and packaging products.
6. SasaAfrica is an e-commerce platform for selling products of African artisan established by three visionaries in 2012 in Africa.
7. In India, in Davangere district of Karnataka a training program has been launched which aims at training 250 women in using computers and the Internet in order to make them capable of offering services like handling bank accounts, buying railway tickets, etc.

STRATEGIES TO EMPOWER WOMEN THROUGH E-COMMERCE

Cases mentioned above very clearly depict the role of e-commerce in empowering status of women around the world. Indian economy can also be benefited if proper efforts are made by government as well as the society. India has a large segment of population residing in rural areas and half of it consists of women. Indian rural women have many skills ranging from making homemade products like spices, pickles, beauty products, to weaving, knitting, producing handicraft products etc. The creations resulting from skills of Indian rural women have its demand not only in local but also in international market. This demand for Indian skill at international level can be satisfied by imparting e-commerce skill to Indian rural women. This not only will help in economic empowerment of Indian women but at the same time also increases their personal capabilities and improve decision making status in the family and society as well. In India several B2C websites are there like Indiamart,

Craftvilla which are offering handicraft products but these are not serving the purpose of upliftment of Indian rural women. Indian government has also launched various schemes and programmes to improve the condition of women in society. Now it is time to improve the status of women by equipping them with e-commerce skills for which following initiative can be taken-

- Awareness should be created among rural women about the concept of e-commerce and its benefits.
- Training programmes should be launched related to basic computer literacy skills, internet usage.
- Training program which included instruction in photographing the products, posting pictures online and processing orders from customers should be conducted frequently.
- Hands-on training in pricing and packaging products should be given to women.
- Some e-shops should be provided to them to advertise and sell their products. Presently two such e-shops are existing - craftsvilla and indiamart.
- Website developers should be made available to them at discounted price.

On incorporation of these suggestions Indian rural women will be able to utilize modern technology, which will ultimately result in creation of a niche for them in the global market, thereby resulting in economic empowerment of women.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary Indian society women are not only having a say in everyday life but also in business and political world. India is offering lot of opportunities to women of today. But the Indian society is still a male dominated society and as an ill effect of this for solving the problem of women empowerment, there is an acute requirement of sea-change in the mind-set of the people of the country. Indian women in past and present have the potential to change their own economic status, as well as that of the communities and of the country. Today the concept of work and workplace have been changed tremendously because of Information and Communication Technology. There is a perception that the Information Technology and Information Technology Enabled Service (IT/IT-ES) sectors have apparently provided huge amount of employment opportunities without any gender bias (Padmannavar, S.S., 2011)

the most promising sectors of present time. If our government as well as the members of the society take proper initiatives and efforts then surely e-commerce can play a vital role in empowering Indian women.

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