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# Empowerment of rural women through digital media in Karnataka: A case study

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### Abstract

Digital media has made the world a global village. It brings people together and serves them by allowing them to interact and share their views beyond the borders. India is one of the largest and fastest-growing markets for digital media consumers. Digital media can improve one's life as it connects people in real-time. Therefore, digital media has changed every aspect of the human world. Digital media plays a significant role in women's growth and has supported them to reach their voices globally. Women in rural India are not behind in this and making use of digital media to involve themselves in political, economic, and social empowerment. Now government also digitized its services irrespective of geographical areas. In this background, the objective is to find the study success stories of organizations and individuals who are empowering rural women through digital media.

The study used both qualitative research methods to gather the data. Case study and interview tools were used. The researcher conducted interviews among various NGO workers to study how they are utilizing digital media for rural women's empowerment.

The study found that digital media played a considerable role in rural women's empowerment in Karnataka. This present research will help the government to improve its digital initiatives, encourage other organizations to use digital media to reach rural women and give confidence to rural women to use digital media in their future activities.

**Keywords:** Digital media, rural women, empowerment, digital initiatives, government, impact

### Introduction

With developing technology and dependency on machines our interaction with technologies is increasing. People's everyday lives, and the way they connect and collaborate in the broader societal context, at work, and in civil society are changing due to the increased use of digital media. It has enabled communication, social interaction, and community building across boundaries of time, place, and social context. It is also enabling individuals and speeding up the democratization of knowledge by making new learning methods possible.

Thus, the role and impact of digital media is also increasing in everyone's life. Today digital media is connecting people in a way never before in history. It enables users to maintain relationships across time and distance. Digital media made it possible to connect with like-minded people and discuss issues or share knowledge etc. It also facilitates interaction across social, economic, cultural, political, religious, and ideological boundaries with enhanced understanding.

Singh, S. (2018) <sup>[10]</sup> in his article "Empower the Rural Women to Empower the Community" mentions that there are multiple government schemes to support and guide rural women through various entitlements, which has also helped them to come together to form Self Help Groups (SHGs). Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana support more than 50 million small business owners, a majority of whom (78 percent) are women. These SHGs with enterprising women help a community at large to explore business ideas, gain access to resources (human, intellectual, and financial) to begin their venture, and explore means to expand these as well. Mahila Shakti Kendra is another scheme that aims to empower rural women with opportunities for skill development, employment, digital literacy, health, and nutrition.

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## Digital Media

Digital media also plays a major role in giving people a voice, increasing civic participation, and facilitating the creation of communities. In 2011-12 during the Arab Spring, digital media served as a vehicle to mobilize resources, organize protests, and draw global attention to the events. In 2011 in India Anna Hazare movement social media played a crucial role in mobilizing supporters for the movement.

According to the 2017-18 report by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report, "In rural India, 3.8 percent of women are unemployed. While the unemployment rate was 9.7 percent to 15.2 percent for educated rural females in 2004 to 05 and 2011 to 12, it has increased to 17.3 percent by 2017-18" (Singh & Anand, 2018) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Digital media plays a key role in every aspect of human life. It is helping women to get noticed in the world. With the help of digital media women can circulate their ideas throughout the world. For example, as good cooks, women can share their recipes through social media which in turn, can earn some amount of money. Digital media also provides various business opportunities that allow them to make a profit. Even, socially women can raise their voices against sexual harassment, domestic violence, marital issues, menstruation, etc.

The introduction of the government's Digital India initiative hand in hand with the increasing internet penetration over the recent years, resulted in the country's digital population amounting to approximately 692 million active users as of January 2023 accounting for 48.7% of the total population. The traffic in the world's second-largest internet market at this stage was largely dominated by mobile internet users. The number of internet users has increased over the years in rural as well as urban areas (Statista.com).

According to a survey by Statista, 87% of internet users in India use the internet to communicate with friends and family. 84% use it to watch videos and movies, and 67% use it to listen to music.

71% of the users use the internet for educational purposes, such as taking online courses or reading educational articles. 69% use the internet to read news and current events. 61% use the Internet to shop online, and 58% use it for banking and financial services.

76% of internet users in India use social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram and 55% use it to play online games. 47% of them use the Internet to research products and services and 43% to search for jobs, 38% to plan travel.

The arrival of private players and competition in the telecommunication industry provided people in the country with schemes and subsidies that were not only attractive but easily affordable, irrespective of their income levels and socio-economic classes. Therefore, the number of internet users has increased over the years in rural as well as urban areas. Demonetization in late 2016, also resulted in increasing digital media usage for money transactions, banking activity, trade, etc., and digitization penetrated the country at a staggering rate, nearly 50 percent in 2019.

## Women Empowerment

In simple terms, women's empowerment means giving them the freedom to decide what they want to do in their lives. If she is empowered, she becomes capable of deciding herself. It includes raising the status of women through education,

raising awareness, etc. which also includes making women strong not only financially, politically, and socially but also mentally and emotionally.

Female empowerment can be defined as a process in which women challenge the existing norms and culture to effectively promote their well-being.

In the present world women empowerment is more prevalent. It is like a national commitment in almost all countries including India. Women empowerment is necessary to make a bright future for the family, society, and country and also to make their own decisions for their dependents.

In its introduction, National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (2001) mentions that the Constitution not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

Empowerment is a process by which powerless people become conscious of their situation, organize collectively to improve it, and access opportunities, as an outcome of which they take control over their own lives, gain skills, and solve problems (Poddar, 2013) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Empowerment of rural women contributes towards national development. They are significant in achieving social changes and sustainable development. With limited access to education, health care, and finance they are facing many challenges. Empowering them is not only important to families and rural communities but also overall development of society. The government is making all efforts to empower rural women. Especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought major changes in the status of women. Several initiatives have been undertaken by the government, and private and social organizations to empower rural women. For the sustainable development of a country and to achieve gender equality, women must be empowered.

Today, technology is facilitating women in their development and has enabled their voices to reach out and be viewed globally. One can say the internet is empowering women by providing them with easy access to information and allowing them to make more educated decisions in their day-to-day lives. When a person's voice is silenced, it can be amplified in any other way. Now women are learning more about their rights and powers, which every woman in a society has on an equal footing with males in every way. With the digital media platforms, women are now participating in all spheres of the society. At present, they have political awareness, financial independence, and social support due to digital media.

## Literature Review

(Jensen & Oster, 2009) <sup>[3]</sup> Reported the role of social media in the empowerment of women and stated that women faced tremendous risks at the critical juncture. The study revealed that social media was not used for human development across the world actively. The scholar suggested that women's specific social media sites would be developed to educate and active participation of women in academic, social, and economic development activities.

Kashyap (2013) <sup>[5]</sup> in her study on 'Role of alternative media in the empowerment of women' revealed that, in some sense yes new media has provided women with freedom and they feel empowered when they share their feelings, emotions, and thinking, which was earlier not paid much attention. In this virtual world, she has all freedom

where she can add friends according to her choice communicate with them, and sometimes also block them.

A study titled 'Role of media in accelerating women empowerment' conducted in Allahabad by Narayana & Ahamad (2016) + concludes that the role of media is very important to accelerate women empowerment which will lead to economic empowerment of women. The mass media, however, like all social media, are good and practical means to increase, through the dissemination of healthy concepts of being a woman, of what is the role of women in modern society, of good examples that women give us every day, of the results they have achieved and continue to reach out to women in many fields of economics and beyond, the social consideration of women, giving to young women good ideas and examples for their economic empowerment. In his study on 'Women's Empowerment in Digital Media: A Communication Paradigm, conducted in China by Han (2018) [12], concludes that the internet is claimed to provide potential, opportunity, and new practices for women, but it falls short of determining the emergence of women's empowerment.

In her research on 'Digital media: a strategic tool for women empowerment' Singh (2018) [10] opines that digital media provides multiple business opportunities that allow women to explore and make profits from.

Empowering rural women to help them get access to environmental, social, and medical necessities, as well as education would enable them to make complete use of the "Digital India" scheme, which is known to aid women in their economic development. Digitization is to create a new opportunity to empower women to improve entrepreneurship opportunities using ICT (Rajahonka & Villman, 2019) [8].

In a study on 'impact of digitization on women's empowerment: a study of rural and urban regions' Dhanamalar *et al.* (2020) [1] mentions that in India ICT mainly focuses on empowering women through the use of basic techniques and delivers large amounts of information, but all this information is often not effectively used.

The study concludes that familiarity with computers and other technical devices not only makes women technologically literate but also enables them to become economically stable. Digitalization makes them economically stronger and stable; it helps them become technically savvy individuals. Promoting digitization among women can also empower them. The arrival of digital payment modes allows women to make efficient payments without getting cheated by any sort of fraud. Digital literacy helps rural women to become digitally proficient and also helps them to become economically independent.

Sawicka *et al.* (2020) [9] conclude their study on 'Digital media: empowerment and equality' conducted in Taiwan that, digital technologies can support female empowerment, and the study provides evidence that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used in a broad way by women, for tasks such as creating awareness, marketing, or building relationships. Women also experience benefits from using these digital technologies at almost the same level as men; however, education was deemed to be a key factor for success in this area.

Social technologies, as a part of digital media, give new opportunities for business support. These technologies also provide customer service and support to gain exposure and create awareness about products or companies, acquire new

customers, look for a new market or brand products and businesses, network and build relationships, or recruitment process of employees.

The same study, investigated the use of digital media, specifically social media technologies, in the workplace in Taiwan. The study concludes that digital technologies can support female empowerment, and this study provides evidence that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are used broadly by women, for tasks such as creating awareness, marketing, or building relationships. Women also experience benefits from using these digital technologies at almost the same level as men; however, education was deemed to be a key factor for success in this area.

Dhanamalar *et al.* (2020) [1], conducted a study on 'Impact of digitization on women's empowerment: a study of rural and urban regions in India' concludes that technology-oriented programs are being conducted in rural India for the benefit of women, but the projects are not successful because of the lack of equipment provided to the women. However, the policies of ICT are focused on bringing greater benefits to women. Digitalization makes them economically stronger and stable; it helps them become technically savvy individuals. Promoting digitization among women can also empower them.

A study which was conducted in Vijayapura district by Kakade & Tattimani (2021) [4], on 'the role of digital India in rural women empowerment- a case study of Vijayapura district', concludes that digital India is improving the quality of women's life. It shows that digital India is forming digital infrastructure as a utility for every citizen. It provides all government services accessible to common people and ensures the efficiency, transparency, and reliability of such services at affordable costs. Digital India is empowering women digitally and it also emphasizes universal digital literacy and the availability of digital resources or services in Indian languages.

The review of the literature indicates that the role and impact of digital media in rural women's empowerment has become a thrust area from a media research point of view. Very few articles in journals were found on this topic. However, no research has been carried out on the important aspect of empowerment of rural women through digital media concerning Karnataka. Therefore, this study is deemed to be necessary in the present context where everything is happening through digital media, and objectives are set based on the research gap.

### Statement of the Problem

Digital media has become an integral part of our life today. Previous studies in other countries and states have also proven that digital media plays a significant role in the overall development of rural women.

From paying electricity bill to booking a ticket everything is digitized now. In this scenario, some NGOs in Karnataka are utilizing digital media for rural women's development. Therefore, the researcher would like to seek the answer to the following question. "How digital media empowered the rural women in Karnataka"

### Significance of the Study

Governments have digitalized farming, banking, food and civil supply, health, MGNREGA, scholarships, revenue services, etc. Therefore, the rural community is now



gradually developing the habit of digital devices. This may be in the form of direct or indirect usage.

Therefore, the present study emphasizes the role of digital media in rural women's empowerment. In rural Karnataka, many non-government organizations are using digital media to empower rural women by encouraging them to participate in political, social, and economic activities. The findings would help assist the policymakers in analyzing the role of digital media on rural women. So that policymakers can launch more digital initiatives to improve women's lives.

### Objectives of the study

- To study success stories of organizations and individuals who are assisting rural women through digital media
- To analyze how rural women are responding to this digitization process
- To explore how rural women are making use of digital media

### Research Design

The study is both qualitative and quantitative. To analyze the success stories of organizations and individuals who are assisting rural women through digital media case study and interview tool was used. Two NGOs from Karnataka were selected for the study and 10 women who are living in rural Karnataka and used digital media for their empowerment were interviewed for the study. The third objective survey was conducted with a structured questionnaire among the rural women of Karnataka.

For the survey researcher has selected 310 samples. According to the TRAI report (August 2021) in Karnataka as of March 2021, there are 32.15 million rural internet users. Based on this number using the formula given by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) researcher obtained the 271-sample size for the survey. The confidence level is 90% with a sampling error margin rate of  $\pm 5\%$  and the population proportion is 50%. The obtained sample is the minimum sample for the research. Hence, on this basis researcher has selected 310 samples to give equal representation for all the districts in Karnataka and the present study considers the entire state as a sampling area.

### Analysis and Discussion

#### Case Study

Many non-governmental organizations and individuals in Karnataka are working for women's development and empowerment in Karnataka. Few institutions are training rural women online; few women have made online groups to discuss many issues and many have created online marketing groups to sell their products through which they are helping rural women to get economic empowerment.

IT for Change is a Bangalore-based NGO established in the year 2000 as a nonprofit organization to create a society in which digital technologies contribute to human rights, social justice, and equity.

They work in the areas of education, gender, governance, and community. It is sensitizing and creating awareness among rural women through digital media.

They have a field unit namely Namma Mahithi Kendra (Our information Centre) in the rural areas of H.D. Kote and Hunsur Taluk. This unit has one woman who is in charge of 8 villages. She visits every village 2 to 3 times a month and meets rural women in a place such as Anganavadi, a school

or convenient to them. She interacts with them, listens to their problems, and communicates with NGOs. Based on these problems organizations create videos on women's rights, women's political participation, violence against women, health and hygiene, social messages, gender equality, government programs, motivational and exhibit to rural women. They have seven information centers in two taluks and cover 56 villages.

They are also generating IVR (Interactive Voice Response) on the same topics and sending them to rural women. IVR includes slogans on various issues like election awareness, health messages, and precautionary messages about floods and rain.

Before the intervention of this NGO women of these villages were not aware of their political and other rights. After watching videos and debating with the experts sent by the NGO these women are now aware of their children's vaccination, and sanitary pad usage, raise their voices against domestic violence, participate in the democratic process by contesting elections, avoid men intervention in their political activity, getting legal aid, counseling, have basic knowledge about COVID-19 precautions. One of the project associates said that the field unit successfully motivated these rural women to contest in the Gram panchayat election.

Sukhibhava Foundation, which works to empower marginalized women and adolescent girls, also utilized digital media to assist women during floods in Karnataka.

Co-founded by Dilip Kumar Pattubala & Sahana P Bhat with a vision to make menstruation a non-issue. This NGO works with urban poor and rural communities across India to end menstrual stigma and improve menstrual hygiene practices, sexual reproductive health-seeking behavior, and mobility of women and girls. They create safe spaces to encourage dialogue around these taboo topics in communities and schools, partnering with state governments, teachers, and frontline workers to spark awareness and sustain a change in knowledge, attitude, and behavior towards women and girls.

They are currently working with women, girls, men, and boys in Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, and previously worked in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu.

They have different programs and an important among them is 'Hello Saheli' is Sukhibhava's four-point response to the issues faced by women and girls. Under this program, women are encouraged to give us a missed call on +918047104234 and they will receive a call back (ensuring that the call is free of charge). They can choose to proceed in Hindi or Kannada. 'Hello Saheli' provides them the option to enroll in Sukhi Raho Sakhi, where they will receive regular calls with engaging 1-2-minute audio recordings sharing MHH & SRH knowledge or connect to a helpline agent to speak about a health concern. If this is a clinical concern, women will schedule a telehealth appointment with a gynecologist or general practitioner, and a helpline assistant will facilitate this consultation to resolution. Doctors may request a 7-day follow-up consultation, in which case we will arrange another appointment and continue to facilitate until their concern is resolved.

In another program, Periodshala, a person designated as Swasthya Saathi works with the community. She gathers a group of adult women and men and teaches them about

menstrual and sexual reproductive health separately with the help of videos. Finally, she joins the group together and allows them to discuss openly, thus creating an environment for girl children to seek support at home. Next, she goes to schools and sensitizes teachers, and principals about the needs of their students while menstruating.

This NGO has impacted 200000 (Two Lakhs) menstruators in marginalized communities across 10 states in India. Post Periodshala program conversation around menstruation increased by 70%, 7 out of 10 felt comfortable visiting the temple said one of the officials of this NGO. They are planning to reach 2.5 million menstruators and allies by 2025 to improve gender equity.

During floods in 2019, NGO people received a call from a girl staying at a relief camp in North Karnataka. Besides talking about the lack of sanitary napkins at the camp, the girl also pointed out that it was difficult to dispose of since there were only floodwaters around them. Then NGO team decided to use social media to raise funds to distribute menstrual cups. The campaign took off and within three days, they were able to raise funds and cross the set target and sent menstrual cups to at least 1,000 women in flood-affected regions of North Karnataka. They coordinated with doctors, Asha workers, and other social activists working in the relief camps of North Karnataka and asked them to assist the women with using menstrual cups.

### Interview Analysis

Sanjyothi V K a filmmaker maker, social activist used digital media during the floods in various districts of Karnataka such as Gadag, Chikkamagaluru, Shivamogga, Bagalakote, Mysuru, and Kodagu to distribute menstrual cups. When everyone was contributing something to flood victims with her friends Sanjyothi wanted to help women with menstrual cups. Women in flood areas who menstruating were in trouble as water surrounded them. Therefore, Sanjyothi and equal-minded women joined together and raised funds to purchase the menstrual cups through social media. They got an overwhelming response and were able to purchase more than 500 cups. They took the help of local doctors, Asha workers, and social activists to reach them with menstrual cups. That team showed videos and shared demos through mobiles to assist women in using the cups. "Digital media lend a hand in the crisis to help out rural women and create awareness among them. Along with the live demo we shared videos through WhatsApp and showed videos. Women also felt very comfortable because they could watch them without any hesitation. We can do wonders with digital media and we are a live example of it"- said Sanjyothi.

"Digital media played a significant role in assisting rural women" mentioned Jyothi Hitnal, a freelance and one of the ex-employees of an NGO in her interview. During lockdown, we taught rural women about how to use digital money in their day-to-day activities and business. When the need for something becomes essential, you are forced to find ways of getting or achieving it. In the beginning, their response was not good. Gradually they started responding. Now women in rural who sell vegetables, and groceries also know digital money transactions. Though they are facing many challenges in using digital devices such as language, network, poverty, etc., digital media is part of their life now. Lakshmi, a rural young woman from the Chitradurga district is running a computer center in a village called Maskal. She

studied till PUC and pursued a certificate course in basic computer skills. When she got married, she stayed with her husband in Bangalore for two to three years, due to some economic problems they returned to their village. Then she worked in a local NGO as a DTP operator for some time. Later she invested some money to purchase a desktop, printer and started a small computer center in the village. Now her computer center is the busiest shop. She types and takes prints of all types of land records, Xerox, photo printing, etc. for her customers. She is also marketing a few new products for which she has to place orders online and it is happening successfully. "I am earning bread and butter for my family with the help of this computer system and mobile. When I was in Bangalore, the computer center was near my house. Just as time passed, I did the certificate course. Now it is helping me to feed my family. Digital media knowledge supported me in a great manner to live my life without any financial crisis" she said with happy tears.

Dr. Sabitha, a rural woman from Udupi, who has pursued her PhD degree from Mangalore University, opined that digital media helped to read more e-books related to her PhD. As she is from a poor background, she could not visit the libraries of other universities. Instead, she learned a lot about her topic by looking at videos and e-content related to the research topic. It made competitive exams easy. Dr. Sabitha is a school dropout student, able to continue her education with scholarships and donations. Saligrama village Gramapanchayat gifted her computer after her post-graduation degree in Sociology. She is now working as an Assistant Professor at Mangalore University and pride fully remembers the role of digital media in her academic achievement. "Digital media helped me to attend conferences, workshops, seminars and now it is helping me to hold classes and interact with my students".

Ashwini Nachappa, an athlete and actress from the Kodagu district, says that digital media helped her to learn many techniques of sports. She could buy sportswear and gadgets being sitting in rural areas. "It has provided a lot of opportunities to advance myself and my knowledge about the sports world. Digital media has become an integral part of every individual".

Apart from this many rural women are leading their lives with the support of digital media. Some are successfully selling their homemade products through various digital platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and other Applications. Some are running their own YouTube channels for cooking, beauty tips, etc. Some are successfully using digital media to run businesses like cyber centers, and computer-based service centers like applying and downloading Aadhar, ration cards, PAN cards, land documents, etc. Thus, it can be concluded that digital media is contributing to the empowerment of rural women magnificently.

NGOs are making use of digital media to create awareness among rural women about political participation, entrepreneurship, menstrual and sexual health, and other women's development activities. Digital media has changed the lives of a few rural individuals.

### Conclusion

An empowered woman is an asset to a country and she contributes to the national development. In the last few decades, there has been a steady growth in women's empowerment. Women must possess self-worth,

confidence, and freedom to choose their needs and requirements. In rural India women are still paid less, restricted to staying within the four walls, and expected to cook by their family members. However, this attitude is gradually changing as women are equally contributing to the family welfare with their earnings, knowledge, and political participation.

It is found that in recent times NGOs are making effective use of digital media to make rural women aware of various issues from the menstrual message to political participation. The government also digitized many of its schemes digitally. Rural women also effectively make use of digital media to develop morally, physically, socially, and financially, which is basic in their empowerment.

Rural women act as key agents for development. They play a significant in achieving the economic, political, and social changes required for sustainable development. Empowerment of rural women is essential, not only for the well-being of individuals, families, and rural communities but also for the overall development of the nation. Digital media platforms are effective in achieving NGO's goals among the community. Digital media changed the destiny of rural women. With the help of digital media, women are now getting social, economic, and political empowerment. They use digital media to transfer money, for their business, political participation, social interaction, and even to develop their education. Therefore, one cannot deny the inclusive role of digital media in rural women's empowerment.

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