



SEWA Samvaad 2020: Bridging the Digital Divide for Women in the Informal Economy

A SEWA Webinar in Partnership with Facebook and Sattva

August 11, 2020

SEWA has long recognised the positive role that technology can play to empower women in the informal economy. Through targeted initiatives as part of SEWA Programs including Digital Beti in Rajasthan, Uttarakhand and West Bengal and Digital Sakhi in Madhya Pradesh and Odisha, we have helped build women's¹ capacity to effectively use digital tools and digital platforms for economic empowerment. As we work to connect our members with essential services and alternate livelihoods during the ongoing pandemic, we believe the need to advance women's meaningful access to technology is urgent.

In an effort to address the prevailing gender digital divide, particularly for women in the informal economy, as we move our efforts from enabling access to technology to technological empowerment itself, SEWA Bharat recently organised a webinar on August 11, 2020, in partnership with Sattva and Facebook. The webinar brought together SEWA Sisters from Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand accompanied by experts and practitioners from Sattva, Facebook, CSC Academy under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Digital Empowerment Foundation, Government e-Marketplace (GeM), International Innovation Corps., and L&T Financial Services.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, "women" in this document refers to women in the informal economy.

The key highlights from the conversation are as follows:

- **Women's meaningful access to technology is hindered due to stigma and structural inequalities between men and women in India:**

Persistent socio-economic and other barriers have put women in a disadvantageous position when it comes to access and meaningful usage of technology. Mobile phones are usually owned or controlled by male members of the family, women are discouraged from using smartphones even when they have access. Lack of formal education and training on how to use digital technologies coupled with connectivity issues also hinder women's engagement with technology-based services and solutions. This has further aggravated during the pandemic when financial and other resources in the family are scarce. There's also a distrust when it comes to women's access to technology. This has more to do with patriarchy than technology itself. While social media platforms can be unsafe, increasing women's representation on them can help challenge the inherent bias against women's use of technology.

- **There's a need to invest in upskilling and training to use digital technology:**

Increased reliance on technology is likely to continue beyond the pandemic. There is, therefore, a definite need to invest in digital literacy and awareness programs. It is important that women aren't overwhelmed but feel comfortable using technology, programs should thus focus on highlighting the range of opportunities for employment, banking and business that can open up. Moreover, they must focus on activity-based learning so that lack of formal education is not a barrier to participation. Resources must be made available in local languages and should include information to combat digital fraud. Women entrepreneurs and small businesses must be prioritised in this exercise.

- **Women's experiences must be centred and their involvement in any interventions prioritised:**

It is critical to understand women's needs and voices. Online/e-platforms must account for specific barriers that women face while engaging at all stages of development and implementation. It is important to understand the types of women seeking opportunities to understand the kind of opportunities (and barriers to access) that exist. Policies and programs on digital literacy and awareness must, therefore, apply a gendered lens to the

gaps they look to bridge. Women from the community must be engaged in any research, planning and decision-making processes. Engaging SHG and ASHA women can help bring in more women, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, sector-specific barriers must be identified and addressed.

- **Equip entrepreneurs and clusters with digital tools and assets:**

Experience from the field has shown that women's empowerment is more likely when they are trained and are digitally literate. On a policy level, women's asset ownership in each family must be emphasised. Usage of digital tools for marketing, accessing markets, providing services has exploded during the pandemic. Social media has been a key market for artisans, micro and nano entrepreneurs. Moreover, access to digital services can help provide flexibility to women as they tap into livelihood opportunities and circumvent existing socio-cultural barriers. Equipping women with digital assets and tools can, therefore, encourage entrepreneurship and income generation, particularly during the ongoing pandemic and also in the long term.

- **Meaningful connectivity/access must be viewed as a human right at the policy level:**

Merely owning a digital asset is not the benchmark. The conversation must embrace "meaningful connectivity/access" which goes beyond access to the actual use of technology. There's a need for a concerted effort to view this as a human right. Policymakers must prioritise this and subsidise digital access.

SEWA Bharat is the national federation of the SEWA movement. In its fight for women informal workers' rights in India, SEWA has taken critical steps across our various program themes to ensure digital inclusion. We are currently working towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on women in the informal economy. To know more about the SEWA Movement and initiatives, visit: SEWA Bharat and SEWA Bharat's research website.

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