

Empowering Women Worldwide Series : 10

Future Directions in Bridging the Digital Divide

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Engaging the Excluded: From the Lens of Community Radio *Alfaz-e-Mewat*

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O, Lord, why have you not given women the right to conquer her destiny?
Why does she have to wait, head bowed,
By the roadside, waiting with tired patience.
Hoping for a miracle in the marrow?

— Rabindranath Tagore¹

The lines of Rabindranath Tagore reverberate with the conditions of women in many parts of the world. Women have struggled for equality, fair representation and in finding a strong resounding voice within society. Even our folk stories and songs feature accounts of sorrow in the struggle of women. The worst affected are the rural women of the country. Constituting a major portion of population, the rural regions show much variation with today's rapidly evolving India. They are marked by enduring poverty, low literacy level and poor socio-cultural progress. Here women are silenced and excluded from all decision making processes, despite being primary stakeholders. In the villages, women also have limited access to resources and opportunities, which leads to their systematic exclusion from positions of decision making.

The roles of women in rural society are bordered within their homes. They are not conditioned to share their opinions with the outside world. "I

1. National Commission for Women; 1999-2000: A decade of endeavor.

don't know how to express what I feel. Like men, I also have opinions, but they are never formulated into words. Initially, I was sceptical about the community women broadcasters' training but after attending, I feel that it gave me confidence to talk about issues that matter to me", said Asri, a woman from village Bhadas, Mewat. Every woman in Mewat, a district in Haryana, resonates with Asri's view. The reasons for this could be many. Primarily, socialization of a girl child plays a crucial part. It has followed a set pattern from ages. She is conditioned by deep-rooted cultures of patriarchy and hierarchy.

The situation of women in India calls for an immediate change in the conditioned mindset of both men and women. On one hand, where men have to be sensitized to treat women with equality, respect their human rights and dignity, and ensure economic and political participation of women; women themselves have to stop perpetuating their subordination. It is seen that often women do not treat themselves, and other women, at par with men due to their low educational standard and social conditioning. Here, it becomes pertinent to promote an alternative empowered image of a woman, so that she knows that there are choices from which she CAN and SHOULD begin to choose. This can be done through the effective use of mass and community media. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have undoubtedly an important role to play in defining gender roles in society.

The function of media in ensuring equal rights for women has also been acknowledged in the section J of the Beijing Women's Platform for Action. The experiences of S.M. Sehgal Foundation, a public charitable trust registered in India since 1999, have proved that participatory and development-oriented communication can go a long way in empowering women and help them to gain control over the development process. Participatory media not only give a chance to women to voice their concerns but also makes them equal stakeholders in the process. In fact, a shift from mainstream media forms to participatory approaches can bring about sustainable change in the mind-sets of those in the rural hinterland.

Newspapers, magazines, television, radio sets, computers are some of the commonly found mass media available worldwide. However, these mass media are often concentrated in the urban areas and the situation is not the same in rural regions. Accessibility and availability of media options varies substantially between physical territories and social communities. Media access and availability for men and women also tends to differ. A study examining the

Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China reflects on the greater inclination of men towards technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it². Further, as rural women are mostly illiterate, they lack access to most of the vehicles of information.

Community radio, one of oldest and inexpensive forms of ICT tools acts as a medium for channelizing the flow of information in rural areas. It carries information from policy makers to the grassroot level. It further facilitates the achievement of national and international goals of development. A community radio station operates in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community (UNESCO, 2002). A boon to rural women, community radio serves as a connecting bridge between literate and not so literate sections of the society. It empowers women by giving them an opportunity to speak about their own issues at the local level. According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting compendium on 'Community Radio for Social Change' (March 2014), there were a total of 160 community radio stations in India. Tamil Nadu is the state with highest number (19) of community radio stations; whereas Uttar Pradesh (10), Delhi (6) and Haryana (5) lag far behind.

Alfaz-e-Mewat (AEM)

The chapter is focused on the challenges to the empowerment of women, illustrated with the help of the Sehgal Foundation's experience in Mewat. This chapter will also throw light on the benefits of the community radio station in bringing social change in Mewat. Mewat is one of most backward districts in India despite being close to the national capital and the millennium city – Gurgaon. The area is largely inhabited by an ethnic tribe, Meo Muslims, which is characterized by some of the lowest socioeconomic development indices. Further, it has only 50% of literate population, in which female literacy accounts for 37%³. Aggressive and deep-rooted patriarchy at home and violent behaviour of their male counterparts have kept the women of the region silent. To worsen the situation, child marriage is a norm in Mewat, even in the 21st century. The situation of poor health-related practices is also quite alarming.

2. Bray, Francesca. July 1997. *Technology and Gender* (<http://web.mit.edu/~shaslang/www/WGS/BrayGT.pdf>)
3. Census 2011; District Level Household and Facility Survey-III, 2010; Sample Registration Survey 2011.

Only 15% of child births take place in hospitals. The large family size and small farm size have kept the people poor, adding to the apathy of the region.

Aimed at uplifting women in the Mewat region, *Alfaz-e-Mewat* is a community radio that was established in February 2012 at the foothills of Aravallis in Haryana and housed in a community centre of Ghaghas village. The community radio broadcasts socially relevant information reaching out to over 183 villages in Mewat. It raises issues and concerns at the local level with an aim to improve the quality of life of the residents by increasing their awareness on many social issues. It offers a unique blend of programmes on health and hygiene, girl child education, sanitation, family welfare, role of women in governance and entertainment based programmes on local culture and folklore.

To upscale the development of rural women, the Government of India has introduced several schemes and policies, including 73rd amendment of the Constitution which accounts for 33% reservation for women in panchayats (village councils). However, the women in the region are unable to avail the benefits of the schemes due to the lack of information. To ensure that the subsidies and benefits of the government policies reach the right people, AEM strives to make them aware of the government initiatives, and motivate them to adopt better practices. It includes health, hygiene, sanitation, family welfare, etc.

To measure the success of the community radio in the region, it is essential to know how it has touched the lives of the women in Mewat. An evaluative study conducted by Sehgal Foundation's Rural Research Center with 1878 respondents from AEM coverage area shows that only 20% of the AEM respondents are women. The majority of them belong to backward castes. Education also plays a primary role in holistic development of society. As a majority of women are illiterate in Mewat, there is a need to motivate people to send their girls to schools (see table 9.1). It not only escalates their skill building but also helps in personality development of girls, which is conducive for effective living.

The education level of women gains importance as community radio is operated by the community. Education help women plan and design better programmes for the welfare of other women in the community. It also helps them understand the operations of the community radio, much faster and in an easier way.

Awareness of AEM programmes

Out of the total 1878 respondents taken for the study, 582 respondents were aware about the AEM programmes. In *Radio School*, recorded chapters

Table 9.1: Educational status of AEM respondents

Category	Respondents
Illiterate	48.6
Illiterate but write and speak	4.0
Primary education	15.2
Middle education	13.6
Secondary education	8.6
Senior Secondary	5.3
Graduate	2.3
Others*	2.3
Total**	99.9

*Others includes post -graduates professionals (IT) and diploma. ** 2 households constitute no response. Figures are in percentage.*

by expert teachers of Mathematics, English and Science are broadcast. It is done with an aim to reach children, especially girl dropouts, in five villages, so that even if they are unable to go to school, they are not deprived as the school reaches them. The program is very popular among secondary and senior secondary students. *Galli Galli Sim Sim* has started inculcating the importance of education in the traditional mindsets of the Mewati inhabitants, who either do not prefer sending their girls to schools or force them to drop out. It is laying the foundation for bringing girls at par with their male counterparts. Further qualitative actions reveal that parents have now become sensitized to send their girls to school.

The awareness of women-centric program dealing with cleanliness and hygiene issues, *Saaf Safai aur Sehat*, is almost 35 percent. Women shared that they have started inculcating the habit of keeping the surroundings clean. There is an increasing understanding of health and hygiene among households, such as use of toilets for defecation and avoiding eating pre-cut fruits.

"Women are generally very reluctant to call the radio station and often ask men or children in the house to speak on their behalf. We have been receiving feedback from our station team that often women are heard prompting from the back, while someone from their family makes a call", said Sohrab and Mamta, community reporters of *Alfaz-e-Mewat*.

Asha ki Kiran is a motivational radio campaign, featuring unsung women heroes at the grassroots. It is meant to inspire the community women not to surrender to their destiny but fight to live their dreams. Under this, 65 women were recognized for their good work. Further, to increase women's participation in panchayats (village councils) and gram sabha (women-only general body meetings), the radio covers issues of representation and participation of women in local governance. Highlighting the good practices of *Mahila Gram Sabhas*, *Alfaz-e-Mewat* plays its part in empowering more women to come forward and talk about their issues. The station joined hands with another community radio station in Alwar to broadcast a series of programs, titled *Dastak*, on women's role in village governance.

AEM as an Agent of Social Change

AEM, since its inception in February 2012, is working as an agent of social change in the lives of the women of Mewat. It is a platform that connects the local people by airing and discussing their local needs, issues and concerns. It has been found out that the women in the community are gradually gaining confidence to share their voices on radio. Some of the ambitious young women are motivated to make their career in community radio and pitch-in to contribute to the welfare of the women in their region. There are many like Mamta, Savita, Saroj and Shabana, the RJs of *Alfaz-e-Mewat*, who have come out and found voices for themselves.

"Earlier I was very scared. In fact, in my first recording, I was shivering with fear of voicing my thoughts. However, gradually, I got used to the radio environment. I have gained so much confidence by working in a radio station that today I go out and talk to the men in community fearlessly. I like this freedom. With the help of Sehgal Foundation, I have also attended trainings/ workshops with other community radio stations, which further helped me in getting acquainted with the outside world", said Savita Verma, a radio jockey.

Alfaz-e-Mewat is also providing opportunities to rural women to learn new skills, and bring a positive change. The radio project has trained 19 community members through a 6-month course, in which they have learned about operating radio equipments, producing programs and managing the station as technicians, producers and facilitators. Further, 24 women have also received training as community radio broadcasters. The objective of the training was to make women equal and active participants, instead of being at the receiving end. It has been observed that female radio jockeys motivate women better to come to the radio station and take part in the programming.

Besides helping women of the district to break the shackles, the community radio has also proved beneficial in making people of the village adopt better practices in health and hygiene. For instance, the respondents of AEM talk about the importance of washing hands before eating food, drinking boiled water, etc. A workshop of children, conducted in the village school in Bhadas, falling within the reach area of the community radio revealed that they have adopted the practice of brushing teeth, walking on the left side of the road and thus abiding by traffic rules, cleaning nails, keeping home and surroundings clean and taking bath regularly and many other health tips by listening to radio programs.

Case Studies

Razia: Taking the Road Less Travelled

Razia belongs to a community where women are hardly allowed out of the house, their age at marriage is around 15 years, and the average family size is seven. Despite such a milieu, Razia continued her education far past the norm and proceeded to fulfil her desire to serve her community. Each year, her family tried to stop her studies, and each year, she defied their expectations by performing well. As she continued to succeed in school and won prizes for academic excellence, her family acknowledged their pride in her. They kept relenting to her wishes, for another year, despite taunts from the community. Eventually, she not only went to college, which is rare for a woman in her circumstances, but finished first in her class. Her achievement was acknowledged in 1998 when she won the Mewat Development Agency's "Best Woman Award."

Gearing up for even greater opportunity, Razia completed her master's degree in Sociology. Keeping her gaze fixed on the aspirations of many other

girls like her, she decided to work for the uplift of women in her society. She took up full-time social work with the Sehgal Foundation and served as a community mobilizer par excellence. She has been instrumental in getting Meo women step out of their homes to receive a proper health care, seek vocational and life-skills training, and participate in community work. She was also able to inspire male youth towards community work. "I think the key to positive change is to pose questions around problems and initiate participatory dialogue", Razia proclaims.

An excellent worker and manager, Razia climbed the professional ladder swiftly, juggling varied challenges. Always wanting to support girls' education, she was made the project leader and in-charge of TARA Akshar literacy program. She already had many successes under her belt. In no time, Razia graduated to the level of Block Coordinator with Sehgal Foundation, working for a cluster of villages under her purview. As Block Coordinator of Nagina, she implemented the government's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) to provide rural employment. Her journey from a conservative homely girl to an active development worker serving the government was made possible with a desire to outshine.

Her getting back to managing activities of community radio AEM, an altogether new area, is certainly an example worth emulating for other women in the region. She worked towards realising the dream to have a platform that enables information sharing for the Meo community. She agreed to be the Station Director of the radio and started mobilizing other women of her community, through her programmes. While handling the health program on *Alfaz-e-Mewat*, she built her capacities on the subject such that she is now working as the District Coordinator under National Rural Health Mission of the government. When asked what motivates her to work for the community, she says, "Mewat is a backward area and I didn't have many opportunities. But I wanted the girls of Mewat to have all that I had to struggle for." Community radio, thus, also elevates the knowledge and skills of the station staff as well enables them to get better positions in life.

Mamta: Rising Above All Odds

A simple girl living in Kheri Kalan village of Mewat, Mamta had a desire to express herself. However, like many others, she was brought up in a patriarchal culture where women are supposed to spend their lives doing

household chores. They are not conditioned to think for themselves, have opinion, participate or express themselves. There were not many opportunities in the village and living beyond the secured bounds of her house was beyond imagination.

When the Sehgal Foundation started the capacity building exercise of training broadcasters, she was in it instantly. Availing the opportunity, she learned to operate community radio and decided to become the role model for her community. Today, she is a successful radio jockey, working with AEM. Realizing the difference that radio made in her life, she motivates other women in the community to come forward and speak out. With her efforts, the number of women listeners of AEM has increased substantially. She has also supported and conducted women broadcasters' workshop. Today, in the village, women feel associated with the medium and their voices are heard.

Way Forward

The story of *Alfaz-e-Mewat* is a small step in the process of bringing sustainable development in the Mewat region. It is an effort of community radio to bring change in the attitude and lifestyles of people by breaking traditionally held notions of a disparate society. To realise this, the entire planning and designing of AEM is focussed on the uplift of women in the community. In order to fulfill this goal, we are training a group of community women to make women equal and active participants of media, instead of keeping them at the receiving end. Also, it has been observed that female radio jockeys motivate women better to call at the radio stations and take part in creating an inclusive society.

AEM can be counted as a stepping stone of creating a platform of expression for the women of Mewat. Initially, it faced many challenges, beginning with the reluctance of women to speak on radio to sensitizing the male members of their families towards women's dignity and equality. With sustainable efforts, AEM saw a rising number of women callers from none to 300. The experience and a new found confidence in women of Mewat has made them feel an equal part of the society. Also, enhanced personality and increased awareness of the outside world have opened many employment avenues for the community women.

However, it is essential to understand that women's empowerment must not be seen in isolation. Women's empowerment and the development of the

society must go hand-in-hand. The increased awareness among women results in better living conditions and knowledge of the family, including children. Hence, women are the tools of social development. To empower women globally, as well as locally, in every part of the world, it is essential that change occurs in the mindset of every single person of the society. Only that can result in the better conditions for women and will make them aware, active, confident and motivated citizens of the society. In fact, the various government initiatives that are designed for the uplift of women would not bring the desired result till the time people are ready to accept change. Sustainability in terms of people is the key to every developmental project and if the women of the community are not equal stakeholders, it will result in losing half of the war initially and whole of it eventually. Hence, engaging with women is the vital part to sustain the community radio or any women's empowerment initiative for that matter.

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