Making 'Digital India' Work for Women

Posted by Devkanya Chakravarty in Public Policy Advisory

India's Cellphone Gender Gap

About a fortnight before International Women's Day, GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report (2018) estimated that women in India are 23% less likely to own cellphones than men. The difference appears starker if one investigates the ways in which citizens use cellphones. 26% of male cellphone owners use mobile internet, in comparison with only 8% of female cellphone owners. According to another estimate, just 29% of internet users in India are women.

In general, barriers to accessing digital technologies can be two-fold. Provision of additional material support can help overcome hard barriers of infrastructure and affordability. More complex issues, such as digital illiteracy and lack of appropriate content may disproportionately hinder women's access. There are also concerns surrounding the threat of online violence and cyber-stalking, along with cultural disapproval of technology use. Tackling these clearly goes beyond the realm of monetary or technological solutions.

The GSMA (2018) report points to the importance of both these barrier types in the case of India. Affordability of handset/SIM and usage is without doubt an important barrier, especially given women's low labor force participation rates. This is in addition to the issue of financial dependence on male family members. However, an even more important reason for the digital divide in access and usage seems to be reading/writing difficulties. This is a disparity that infrastructure improvements alone cannot correct. Similarly, the relatively higher insistence among female non-users that the internet is irrelevant for them, may point to the role of social norms in de-emphasizing access to technology for women. Some evidence of this can be seen in the fact that more women than men assert that their families do not approve of their cellphone ownership and internet use (though the overall proportions are low).

Equalizing Digital Access to Solve Development Challenges

Unequal access and usage emerge as critical impediments to digital technologies and ICTs solving key development challenges. Multiple donor agencies and national governments also share this view. Karl Schwab of the World Economic Forum sees ICT, and especially digital technologies, as the mark of a Fourth Industrial Revolution – enabling the world to achieve higher income and better quality of life than ever before. The World Bank believes that digital technologies can contribute to socio-economic development by providing opportunities for inclusion, greater efficiency and innovation. The global development agenda, as encapsulated by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also acknowledges the inextricable role played by ICT (Figure 1). Notably, the SDGs recognize the instrumental role of ICT in empowering women. ICT offers flexibility in terms of time and space requirement, rendering it particularly suitable to the said objective.
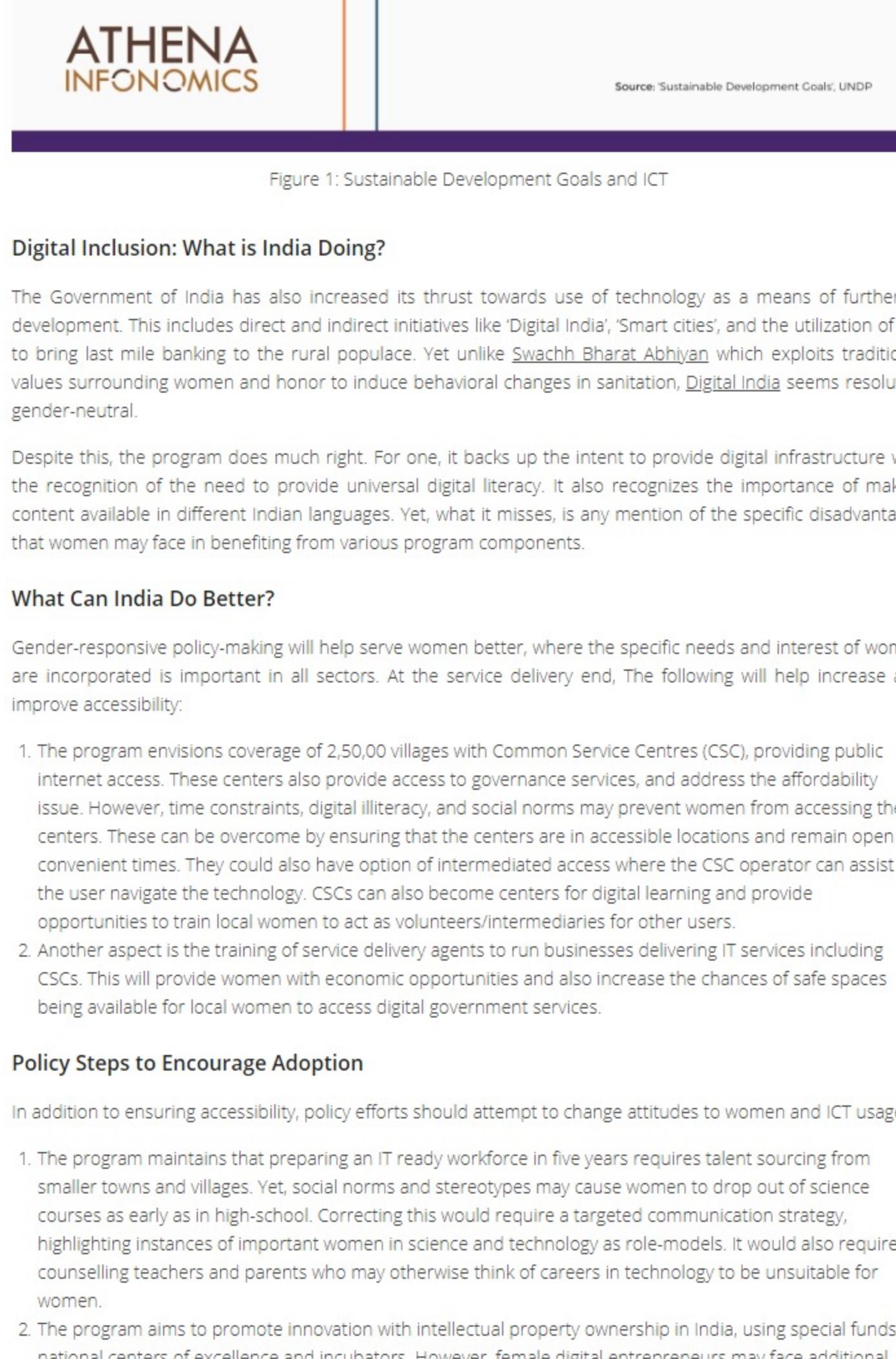

Figure 1: Sustainable Development Goals and ICT

Digital Inclusion: What is India Doing?

The Government of India has also increased its thrust towards use of technology as a means of furthering development. This includes direct and indirect initiatives like 'Digital India', 'Smart cities', and the utilization of ICT to bring last mile banking to the rural populace. Yet unlike Swachh Bharat Abhiyan which exploits traditional values surrounding women and honor to induce behavioral changes in sanitation, Digital India seems resolutely gender-neutral.

Despite this, the program does much right. For one, it backs up the intent to provide digital infrastructure with the recognition of the need to provide universal digital literacy. It also recognizes the importance of making content available in different Indian languages. Yet, what it misses, is any mention of the specific disadvantages that women may face in benefiting from various program components.

What Can India Do Better?

Gender-responsive policy-making will help serve women better, where the specific needs and interest of women are incorporated is important in all sectors. At the service delivery end, The following will help increase and improve accessibility:

1. The program envisions coverage of 2,50,00 villages with Common Service Centres (CSC), providing public internet access. These centers also provide access to governance services, and address the affordability issue. However, time constraints, digital illiteracy, and social norms may prevent women from accessing these centers. These can be overcome by ensuring that the centers are in accessible locations and remain open at convenient times. They could also have option of intermediated access where the CSC operator can assist the user navigate the technology. CSCs can also become centers for digital learning and provide opportunities to train local women to act as volunteers/intermediaries for other users.
2. Another aspect is the training of service delivery agents to run businesses delivering IT services including CSCs. This will provide women with economic opportunities and also increase the chances of safe spaces being available for local women to access digital government services.

Policy Steps to Encourage Adoption

In addition to ensuring accessibility, policy efforts should attempt to change attitudes to women and ICT usage:

1. The program maintains that preparing an IT ready workforce in five years requires talent sourcing from smaller towns and villages. Yet, social norms and stereotypes may cause women to drop out of science courses as early as in high-school. Correcting this would require a targeted communication strategy, highlighting instances of important women in science and technology as role-models. It would also require counselling teachers and parents who may otherwise think of careers in technology to be unsuitable for women.
2. The program aims to promote innovation with intellectual property ownership in India, using special funds, national centers of excellence and incubators. However, female digital entrepreneurs may face additional barriers in accessing entrepreneurial networks. Holding special events to connect them with successful women in the same domain could be an important boost. This could also mean that female entrepreneurs and coders bring an understanding of women's needs, thus generating more relevant content. For example, the Rwanda Girl Impact Map brings together varying sex-disaggregated data sets into one central repository to help policy makers take the right decisions. It will also help in the identification of data sets that need correcting.

An inclusive vision of Digital India must go beyond mere provision of infrastructure and cheaper handsets. Implementing the above policy steps will ensure that Digital India is more inclusive and will help achieve greater outcomes.

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About Devkanya Chakravarty

Devkanya holds a master's degree in Economics from the Delhi School of Economics and a bachelor's degree in Economics from Hindu College, University of Delhi.

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