India Details

THE CHALLENGE:

How might we use Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to create virtual co-working spaces for young women (18–25) in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, thereby enhancing access to entrepreneurial work opportunities in a rapidly transforming economy?

Description of the challenge:

It is estimated that increasing women’s labor force participation by 10 percentage points could add $700 billion to India’s GDP by 2025 (or a 1.4% increase) and lead to significant social and environmental well-being, enabling the country to make a substantial contribution to fulfilment of global Sustainable Development Goals. Unfortunately, current development trajectories do not provide evidence of this happening and there is an urgent need for action, driven by new ideas and innovative solutions to this massive challenge.

As per Census 2011, women constitute 48.5% of India’s population of more than 1.21 billion. However as per World Gender Gap Report 2017, labour force participation of women in 2017 was only 28.5% compared to 82% of men. More alarmingly, perhaps, workforce participation of women has been continuously declining in India and the latest level is nearly half of what it was in 2004-05. This is one of the lowest work participation rates in the world.

The rate of women unemployment has increased steadily in Rural India. Joblessness of women has doubled from 1.7% in 2011-12 to 3.8% in 2017-18, in rural areas. Current statistics are even more disturbing, as per a report by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the breakdown of employment statistics tells us that 8.8 million women lost jobs in 2018, of which 6.5 million were in rural India.

In Uttar Pradesh, while the literacy levels for women went up from 42.2% in 2001 to 57.2% in 2011, there hasn’t been this jump in case of female employment. In fact, according to the EUS survey, the female worker population ratio in Uttar Pradesh increased only 0.6% from 2012-13 to 2015-

When compared to the corresponding national average, the labour force participation rate of women, both in rural and urban areas of the state were lower by 9 and 7 percentage points respectively. Moreover, the ones working are predominantly stuck with traditional occupations like beauty parlours, tailoring centres and incense stick making- restricted by the lack of exposure to new and innovative ideas and support services.

This gap stems, in large measure, out of the age-old traditions of women not having independent access to resources and opportunities. As per a study released by LIRNEAsia, in India, only 43 per cent of women own mobile phones compared to almost 80 per cent of Indian males. This gap further widens to 52% in rural areas.  

The findings of dialogue sessions in eastern Uttar Pradesh from the Work4 Progress (W4P) programme resonate with the national statistics.

There is an urgent need to enhance access to work opportunities within rural communities and build capacity of young women to undertake entrepreneurial ventures without having to necessarily re-locate themselves. This calls for more innovation, tools and platforms to overcome socio-cultural barriers and constraints such as lack of mobility, poor connectivity and aversion to risk among the young women and their families. Innovation in technology enabled by increasing internet connectivity and ICT has, in the recent past, shown tremendous potential to bring simple yet transformative solutions to underserved populations. Television, for example is one medium, which is easily accessible, is a major source of information and influences the behaviour of many. Its use as a tool for socio-economic development initiatives is however, largely unexplored.

We have discovered in the Work4Progress program that more effort need to be channelled into providing access to new opportunities in the rapidly changing economy of Uttar Pradesh. New narratives need to be built around career trajectories that young women can take to transform their lives.

4. According to a study was released by LIRNEAsia, an information, and communications technology (ICT) policy think tank that is involved in “pro-poor, pro-market” research in Asia-Pacific.
Mission of the challenge:

To overcome the lack of connectivity, mobility and safety in workspaces among young women and build a bridge to entrepreneurship opportunities of the future.

Target group:

In order for the Technology Challenge “Solver” to better understand the direct beneficiary of a potential solution, the Work4Progress team has developed a persona that is typical of tens of thousands of young women in Uttar Pradesh. This persona comprises of essential information that will help the innovator understand the target group.

TARGET PERSONA

- **Demographic Profile:** Women in the age group of 18 to 25 years in rural and peri-urban areas.
- **Career Preferences:** Would like to earn money, but is not clear on what employment option to pursue; does not actively look at becoming an entrepreneur at this stage in her life.
- **Motivation:** Perceives entrepreneurship as a means to eventually become independent or to add extra family income; has seen role models in her community or among friends and relatives do this.
- **Skill set:** Has completed at least 10th grade, often 12th grade as well; may have recently acquired a vocational skill.
- **Technology exposure:** Is able to use a cell phone but may not own one; can independently access television; usually does not know how to operate a computer. (added these points because the earlier text was not saying anything).
- **Aspiration level:** Increasing aspirations to improve quality of life (influenced by media).

Women in the 18 to 25 year age group can be in different phases of their life. They could be young women, who have completed grade 12 or dropped out of school and are in need of work opportunities. Or, they might be going to college but want to enhance their career prospects and earn some additional income. In the W4P geography, we also see newly married women or young mothers, who lack mobility, and are in search of a solution which will help them to become less economically dependent on their spouses and families.

The technology solutions’ potential users are able to operate electric and electronic devices but normally have limited digital literacy. Hence, the technology should be simple enough to be used by a group with basic digital literacy. The solution could include capacity building (preferably through remote or partially trainer assisted means) on the use of digital platforms. In our experience, it would take approximately three to five days to build capacities on basic digital literacy.
In terms of eventually meeting the needs of our target user, the technology solution should enhance access to livelihood solutions, with a strong orientation and emphasis enabling young women in rural India to:

- Think beyond conventional income generation options and ordinary jobs – to make a transition in outlook to that is more aspirational, entrepreneurial and leadership oriented.
- Access new economy job opportunities such as data entry service, online marketing and video editing among others that may not yet be apparent in today’s Indian economy.
- Build solidarity among themselves and obtain mentoring support, particularly among aspiring women entrepreneurs, through peer to peer networks and virtual interaction in the equivalent of a “co-working space”.

**Opportunity areas**

In order for women to be part of rapidly transforming economies, we foresee that ICT can unlock a solution that can create virtual co-working spaces to address the lack of connectivity, mobility and safety that inhibit economic empowerment amongst young women.

Our vision is that the solution will be based on shared infrastructure and an operating platform that, among other possibilities, creates **virtual co-working spaces**, preferably with interactive home based access (through media such as a plug-in communication device for television, local Wi-Fi networks, community radio with dial-in options, etc.) where young women can ask questions, exchange ideas, source information, enhance skills and connect to work opportunities in the “world beyond their village”.

In the context to rural U.P, women could for example gain entry into the workforce through jobs, such as marketing affiliate, beta tester of apps, offline content writing and many more. This will not only build a bridge to entrepreneurship and work opportunities, but also instil a sense of entrepreneurship and thereby secure their future income.
The following opportunities in the W4P programme can be used as a “test-bed” to gauge the market potential of the technological solution:

- The program has established and worked closely with self-help groups (SHGs) for women which can also help in the last mile dissemination of the technology.
- The virtual solution can be complimented by offline platforms like:
  - *Information kiosks* (One stop solution centres launched in the W4P for providing enterprise development solutions at local levels to the last mile customers) – work from these kiosks can be outsourced to members of the co-working platform.
  - *Safe spaces* have been prototyped under the W4P for providing a platform at village level for women to engage with each other and collectively build a vision for their economic empowerment. These safe spaces for women, currently being facilitated in the form of monthly meetings, can transition to the new virtual co working space. The women who have been part of the space spaces can be the first group to be part of the pilot.

The program also has existing knowledge products and tools that can be digitised and disseminated through the solution. In order to influence and scale the technology solution, the network of the entrepreneurship regional coalition stakeholders can be tapped. These Coalitions work towards enhancing the enterprise development ecosystem at district level and mainly consists of Govt. agencies, financial institutions, training institutes etc.

This solution will be piloted in the villages of Eastern UP (Mirzapur district).

**20 villages across Mirzapur and Chharbey blocks in Mirzapur district, Eastern UP.**
The outputs envisioned through the winning innovation are:

- **Outputs from the solution.**
  - A replicable technological model that is rolled out with 100-150 women in the pilot area (Eastern U.P).
  - A Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) report on user experiences of 20-25 women summarising the user experience (UX) and utility.
  - A perception survey conducted by a third party on potential of the technology solution.
  - A report on solution design and process to integrate the offline prototypes like safe spaces and information kiosks.

- **Program Outcomes.**
  - Demonstrate the role of technology in increasing incidences of women entrepreneurship among communities in the W4P geographies.
  - Evidence that women can overcome barriers of mobility, safety and connectivity.
  - Validation that specific prototypes of the W4P program e.g safe spaces can benefit from the solution.

**Support documentation:**

- [https://www.devalt.org/images/L2_ProjectPdfs/JobsWeCreateMonograph.pdf](https://www.devalt.org/images/L2_ProjectPdfs/JobsWeCreateMonograph.pdf)
- [https://www.devalt.org/newsletter/sep17/Edit.htm](https://www.devalt.org/newsletter/sep17/Edit.htm)
- [https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/All%20India%20Report%20of%20Sixth%20Economic%20Census.pdf](https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/All%20India%20Report%20of%20Sixth%20Economic%20Census.pdf)
- [https://medium.com/@myworkhive/can-virtual-coworking-really-work-8759ce91916c](https://medium.com/@myworkhive/can-virtual-coworking-really-work-8759ce91916c)
- [https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/316799](https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/316799) (This article has multiple types of coworking spaces)
- [https://tlr-coworking.com/](https://tlr-coworking.com/)
- [https://www.wunsystems.com/blog/virtual-coworking-continuing-expand/](https://www.wunsystems.com/blog/virtual-coworking-continuing-expand/)