

Digital Literacy – the future of ALE**By Archana Dwivedi, Nirantar Trust,
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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused immense loss of life and slowed down economic growth to a record that is going down in history. India is now one of the worst affected countries. However, India is not just affected by the pandemic, but even more severely due to the countrywide lockdown announced by the Government of India to contain the pandemic. We have witnessed one of the worst movements of populations, walking thousands of kilometres in despair. The images of pregnant women delivering on the road and then continuing to walk, carrying new born in their arms, will haunt us for long time. An unplanned and poorly managed lockdown has created havoc for the poor and marginalised communities of India leading to an unprecedented loss of livelihoods¹ and an existential crisis for the nation.



The deep divides of caste, class, and gender are amplified ten times over during the pandemic. While most of the unskilled labour force is non-literate, a majority of the people in the unorganised sector are also women, who are non-literate. India still has an illiteracy rate of 41.25% among rural women² and the literacy rate among women of SC and ST communities are 48.6% and 40.2%, respectively. Literacy rate of transgender communities in India is a meagre 46%. Thus, when lockdown made everything go online, people who were marginalised on accounts of resources and employment became doubly marginalized. The ability to access information and services was no longer dependant on being just literate; one had to be digitally literate.

Women and Girls on Frontline

As the pandemic struck, Nirantar Trust, a resource centre for gender and education, working in the domain of adult education, and its ability to empower women and girls in urban and rural areas, had to meet the challenge of going online when the communities it worked with were still largely offline.

¹ Loss of livelihoods of at least 20 million people, a majority of them being unskilled and semiskilled labourers including women.

² Ministry of Human Resource Development Department of School Education & Literacy (2016). Educational Statistics At A Glance. New Delhi: Government of India.



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In response, our adult educators and mobilizers joined hands with the women and girls who studied with them, and became our eyes, ears and hands in more than 10 resettlement colonies and 8 districts across three states. They reached out to families and people in distress and connected them to government services and non-governmental interventions. They did this not just because they were literate; these women and girls had the knowledge and skills to operate digital devices and navigate digital platforms to connect communities with solutions, wherever they may lie.

They also played an important role in providing correct information regarding the COVID-19 infection, its spread, and preventive protocols, to combat rampant misinformation. And through this, they became unlikely leaders at a very local level for communities that didn't have any other way of mitigating their crisis. They looked for possibilities in each challenge, and made sure they kept up the efforts of continuous learning.

A lot of the information related to COVID-19 has been available online, and was not reaching all people because of a lack of infrastructure – absence of smart phones, sketchy internet connectivity, and inadequate resources to purchase data packs being some of the infrastructural leaks. Moreover, with 40 per cent of the population still not literate, the messages had a limited impact. Nirantar played a crucial role in collecting all the COVID-19 relief updates from authentic sources and disseminated it to the adult educators, field mobilisers and volunteers so that information reached to the last person in the community. As most of the information related to COVID-19 is available online and in mainstream languages, we developed material in local languages, with a gender perspective, and in audio formats, so that it can be downloaded easily and used offline.

The lockdown, and its after-effects, plays out most on marginalized communities, especially women, from Dalit, tribal, Muslim and other minority communities, daily wage earners, people with chronic illness especially women, pregnant women, single women (especially those deserted by marital family), persons with disabilities and transgender persons. During this time, we have managed to distribute dry ration to 1,857 families, facilitated rights and entitlements of the government schemes to more than 15,000 families and linked 2,800 families to sites where cooked meals are provided.

Digital Literacy – The Future of ALE

We were able to develop a local leadership of girls and women to help communities navigate the COVID-19 aftermath, because we had already taken the crucial step in creating an enabling environment. We had helped skill women with digital literacy, and hence, they could access services in times of crisis.

We have been arguing that digital knowledge and skills have become a new structure of power, more powerful than any other machinery in the world. With the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on physical mobility, digital is now a superpower, working as a superstructure. Once we look at the digital space, its superstructure, from a gender lens, we find marginalised women trapped in a vicious cycle; on one hand they don't possess the basic tools to actively participate on digital platforms, and on the other, they face social stigma and surveillance for being active in digital spaces.



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Which is why, holistic digital literacy is no longer just a need; it is the very tool for survival. With physical and social distancing becoming a lived reality, and most of the government schemes and services now available only online, most of information available through social media platforms and government websites really holds up to the dictum: knowledge is power. People with access to digital information and knowledge networks will be the only ones able to negotiate structural power, and hence, their own rights.

Our adult educators already engaged in digital literacy with women and adolescent girls, adapted quickly during lockdown. They understood the need to re-skill in order to survive a new reality, and they worked on figuring out new technologies, apps and other solutions to keep connected to the learners. But this was not true for millions of semi-skilled, unskilled and non-literate workers. Going forward, digital literacy and skills will be an essential requirement to access livelihoods opportunities and become employable. In an Indian context which has an eleven year low economic growth, with the highest rate of unemployment in last 45 years, skilling and re-skilling to enter the digital domain, along with literacy, is thus the future of survival.

The situation becomes even more acute with girls and women. With an increase in cases of surveillance and violence against women, lockdown has not only highlighted, but also reinforced, the gendered norms and practices. While lockdown restricted mobility of all, women and girls are particularly impacted due to the presence of men at home 24x7. This has also led to increased drudgery and heightened stress levels due to surveillance over their mobile phones and communication with others. Our teachers and coordinators from the field have shared many stories of husbands or brothers snatching phones, or restricting talk time of wives and daughters in order to keep an eye on them.

There is also a personal cost to frontline work, as we discovered, and the cost is gendered. All the frontline workers, adult educators, field mobilizers, volunteers and learners, working in isolation, have been extremely overwhelmed. But their challenges were not just limited to personal abilities; they also faced severe backlash from the families as they were expected to first fulfil their gendered roles. All women frontline workers had to justify their work outside their homes, and do it only if their prescribed work inside the homes was finished. A crucial part of Nirantar's work during this time is thus to provide psychological support to our adult educators who were dealing with seismic shifts in personal and social realities.

Thus, access to digital infrastructure and skills is not a simple solution for women. While it gives them a power and tool to negotiate, it can also become a medium of control and surveillance. Hence, the argument is not limited to giving women access to digital technologies and providing them with the basic skills; it runs deeper. We need to build an understanding that the digital space is highly masculine in nature, reflects the physical social structures, and hence, is patriarchal.

Applied Digital Literacy (AppDiL) for Women and Girls from marginalized communities

The AppDiL intervention was set up to demystify digital for the most marginalised, with a special emphasis on women and girls. We intend to bring literacy and digital literacy together in one space, and use the potential of digital mediums to underline the patriarchal practices



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threatening freedom and security concerns of women. Additionally, it will also link digital with livelihood sources for women to expand their livelihood opportunities and boost additional skill sets, to make them more employable.

The AppDiL program will have following strands of interventions:

Building women's claims to citizenship rights and entitlements: Using digital skills and platforms to raise issues of governance, access to entitlements, participation in both public policy making and in democratic political processes. It will focus on addressing the ways in which digital literacy can aid women from marginalized communities in furthering and enhancing their claims of rights and entitlements from systems of governance, be it panchayats, state or central governments.

Enhancing existing livelihoods and creating new opportunities of livelihood for women at the micro level by upgrading their skills through digital literacy. The promotion of livelihoods through digital skills as a route to women's empowerment is a pivotal part of AppDiL.

Locate literacy itself as a primary skill and upgrade it with digital to give new sets of capabilities required to adapt to the post COVID realities. The digital skills will also enable women the acquisition of a vast array of other skills needed to become more employable.

The people already marginalized due to existing patriarchal structures of power are getting further pushed back due to a lack of digital know-how. Emerging economic and livelihood crisis due to COVID-19 will sharpen this downward curve, significantly. Hence, we need to move at a much faster pace than ever to develop new pedagogies, user-friendly methodologies, and context specific content. We envision creating a fast paced enabling environment for our women and girls where they can travel from being non-literate to being digitally literate, skilled to deal with a new language of technology and media. This vision is a race against time to ensure that the most vulnerable get their share of knowledge, skills and infrastructure to claim their rights and secure sustainable livelihoods, in a climate that is pushing us back into a survival of the fittest.