USING TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

BENGALURU, 25th APRIL 2019

EdelGive Foundation organized its second **At The Same Table** in Bangalore city (the first was convened on 14th February, 2018), on 25th April, at The Oberoi, MG Road. The session brought together representatives from the business and philanthropy to deliberate on *Using Technology to build grassroots leadership for Women Empowerment*.

Naghma Mulla, COO, EdelGive Foundation, steered the conversation by asking the group to reflect on how the use of technology has impacted the way grassroots leadership is engineered and wielded; while at the same time, how it has also imbued self-censorship practiced by the women who access it. Anita Gurumurthy of IT for Change, EdelGive's NGO partner, that uses technology as a means and end of women empowerment at the grassroots, emphasized on the criticality of acknowledging and addressing 'hegemonic masculinities' (how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women) in this self-censorship by women.

Insights from the *Philanthropy for Impact in Karnataka* – a knowledge paper highlighting development performance in the areas of Education, Health, Livelihood and women empowerment, and the status of Government and CSR spending; were also shared at the convening.

The paper may be accessed/ downloaded from this link.

During the deliberations, the participants highlighted the following points:
- The internet is transformative in nature. In that it, fortifies voice, facilitates solidarity and political organizing.
- Women's access to technology is non-negotiable and presents an opportunity for driving inclusion.
- However, the transition from 'passive' to 'active use' to technology has to be guided by building and making visible the value that its adoption guarantees. (e.g. technology as a means to access helpful information or for enabling sharing will be more widely and easily adopted)
- Programmes should also consider that women's access to technology is further governed by variables like age, religion, caste, education. One also needs to factor in heterogeneity, while providing this access.

- Design of technology driven programmes must be based on feminist ethics - empowerment through the digital platform should put control in the hands of women thereby institutionalizing leadership within them. (Gender-responsive local governance – 'women infomediaries' working towards revival of social justice committee and mechanisms to fight gender-based violence)
- There needs to be a seamless interrelationship between the online and offline elements of women empowerment. (for e.g. while technology can boost information availability in *mahiti kendras*, the role of *adhikar sakhis* in disseminating that information is key to the success of the initiative)
- It is understood that access to technology has the potential to drive a shift in the attitudes of women as well as the way society views them. However, the latter isn't always facilitative and often threatens to derail the progress that technology enablement has engineered in the first place.
- Self-censorship remains the biggest challenge to women using technology. This is a result of male-dominant ideologies of the real world, manifesting equally in the virtual.
- However, despite the challenges in its implementation, it is important to continue giving digital access to women, to ensure future generations will be able to maximally reap the benefits of this access through an un-censored voice.
- The resolution of this quandary of digital access being as disempowering as empowering, is also linked to aspirations. Access to technology enables in individuals, especially women who view in it an avenue to access opportunities and exposure they may have been earlier deprived of. This aspiration is expected to inspire the recipients to keep seeking and protecting this access.
- This however also indicates that the success of any new interventions – technology access for women – in this case is dependent on the recipients' readiness and aptitude to avail and utilize it effectively.
- Similarly, any intervention, whether technological or other, needs to be owned and driven by the community to ensure its sustainability.
- The "appropriateness" of technology components in programmes was suggested as the primary criterion for funding it.
- How can technology be used creatively for meeting development needs. For e.g. can technology solutions enable tele-medicine for remote locations (e.g. for deliveries and post-natal care in Gadag, Karnataka) where formal medical services are absent or negligible.

The session concluded with a consensus that one shouldn't be deterministic about technology and that as long as its "appropriateness" is contextual, its existence and sustenance community-owned, and its adoption steered by women themselves; it has high potential to change the narrative of women empowerment at the grassroots.

AT THE SAME TABLE