E-GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES IN AN INDIAN STATE: SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Anupama Saxena  
Department of Political Science  
Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur  
Chhattisgarh, India  
anupama66@rediffmail.com  
&  
Dr. Malathi Subramanian  
Principal  
Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, India  
msdrcdu@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have dominated the beginning of the 21st century. ICT revolution has enabled the governments, that are by far the biggest agency for social-re-engineering in developing countries towards achievement of various goals of social equity. Hence they have to deliver a range of services to citizens – from ration cards, motor license and land records to health, education and municipal services – in a manner that is timely, efficient, economical, equitable, transparent and corruption free. The application of ICT to government processes, e-governance in short, has a profound impact – on the
efficiency, responsiveness and accountability of government and thereby, on the quality of life and productivity of citizens and ultimately, on the economic output, growth and development of the country as a whole.

In India, apart from paving the way to realize the goal of good governance, dramatic changes brought about by ICT have created new economic and social opportunities, as the Indian Planning Commission’s ‘India Vision 2020’ document puts it:

“The shift from material to knowledge-based resources opens up vast opportunities for developing countries to accelerate the pace of development. India’s rate of economic growth can be substantially increased if the country becomes a superpower in knowledge and if the potentials of information and information technology are fully understood and exploited.”

But the real challenge before ICT, in Indian context, does not lie in merely using it more efficiently as a means to accelerate the current rate of economic growth of the country, but in using it for the benefit of the masses, in developing a system which provides tangible, day-to-day benefits widely spread through the society and accessible by the all sections of the population, particularly the excluded sections and especially the most excluded section – WOMEN.

Due to the patriarchal character of the society, ability to derive equal benefits from the government schemes has been a big challenge for the Indian women. It has never been easy for women to make multiple trips to far off offices, chase officials, and humor them or to network with them. When women have to depend on men to get over the intricacies and difficulties for getting these services, it does no go to gender equations. Due to the patriarchal character of the society, this process has been undoubtedly male centric, one of the major factors underlying the gender based divide in the society. What difference this emerging phenomena of e-governance will be able to make in terms of women’s relations to the realm of tangible, day-to-day benefits widely spread through the society and accessible by the all sections of the population, particularly the excluded sections and especially the most excluded section – WOMEN.

But in the most parts of the developing countries of the world e-governance is still at its inception stage and it will be too early to analyze the impact of e-governance on women particularly in the context of the deep rooted gender biased equations in the society. What we can do and should do is to explore whether women have been able to access and to use these e-governance initiatives as equally as their male counterparts and how far these e-governance initiatives been able to address and include the needs of women. The present paper is an attempt to explore answers to some of these questions with reference to a backward state of India.
The Indian State of Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh, a newly formed state of India, came into existence in the year 2000. 79% of the state population lives in rural areas, 32.55% of its population is of Scheduled Tribes (ST) and 12.22% is of Scheduled Castes (SC). The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are groups identified under the Indian Constitution as socially disadvantaged groups for affirmative action in public policies. Earlier even as a part of another state of India (Madhya Pradesh) the State was marked with severe poverty, backwardness and illiteracy. Now with the formation of the new state the people of the state are aspiring for a better and a more prosperous future.

IT Scenario and IT Policy of the State

The State has a low position in terms of social and economic infrastructure and development and this is well documented. (Kannan, K.P., Dev, Mahendra, S., 2004). The state has been ranked second last in the list of all Indian states for tele-density (Report of Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, Government of India: 2004). But after the formation of the separate state for its people the State government has framed very comprehensive and ambitious IT policy with an aim to use ICT for the benefit of all its citizens. The sum and substance of the Policy is as following:

1. Using IT as an industry to boost the economic development of the State
2. Using ICT for providing good governance to the citizens of the State

E- Governance initiatives of State Government

Following are the major e-governance initiatives that have been taken after the formation of the State:

1. **Bhuiyan** - All land records are computerized under the scheme. At a nominal charge land records and related information can be obtained. This facility is implemented in all Tehsil (Block) head quarters of the state at present, but it is planned to be extended to the villages also eventually.
2. **E Sangwari** scheme has been implemented with an objective of providing 7 services to common citizen, launched at Bilaspur district only: 1.death certificate 2. Birth certificate 3. Caste certificate 4. Form (16) pertaining to income tax, 5. Khasara (land record) 6. Income certificate 7. Domicile certificate
3. **E-Kosh scheme** was started in December 2004, to computerize all treasury transactions of the District Head Quarters.
4. **The E- Panchayat** (local self government unit) programme was launched on
26th January 2005. It is executed through *Janpad Panchayats (local self government units)*. Each *Janpad panchayat* is provided with two computers, which will be linked to the others by satellite. It is sought to be an informative programme, aimed at informing the rural people about the development and welfare schemes and making the application forms available online. It is sought to be interactive eventually.

**5. Video Conferencing** programme was launched in January 2001 and it is aimed at an interactive interface between the government agencies and the people by making it possible for the heads of various government departments to answer the questions asked by the common people through video conferencing.

**6. The Feed Back facility** is aimed at enabling most of the Departments of Government to get a feedback through the web. Any citizen of the state can register complaints or suggestions related to any of the schemes or programmes of the state government through the internet. The complaint is directly forwarded to the concerned department /official on line for her/his attention. The status of the application / complaint can also be tracked on line.

**7. Wireless Loop Line Telephone (WLL)** – Bharat Sanchar Nigam (the central agency providing telephone and Internet services all over India) has provided at least one phone to each village under this scheme with a 50%subsidy in the total expenditure. In some villages Internet facility is also sought to be made available through this scheme.

**8. CHOICE** The latest, most ambitious and citizen centric inclusion in E-Governance initiatives of the state government is CHOICE, which is an acronym for Chhattisgarh Online Information for Citizen Empowerment. This project deals with online disbursement of Government services to the citizens and it is said to be one of the most comprehensive solution covering 130 services. CHOICE is presently being operated in Raipur and would be rolled out in the remaining districts of the State. Not a single woman is working as a choice agent.

**9. Another very ambitious project in the vicinity is Common Service Centre Scheme (CSC)** to provide E-Governance services and other value added services to the people living in rural areas at their doorsteps through more then 3000 such Centers in rural areas.

The implementation of e-governance schemes in the state has been facilitated by:

1. Government Agencies like National Informatics Centre whereby the services are free
2. (CHIPS):Chhattisgarh Infotech Promotion Society is an autonomous registered society, set up by the State Government
3. Public Private partnership enterprise wherein the services are paid ones
ICT Policies & E-governance initiatives of the State through gender lens

Related to e-governance, there are two dimensions of the gender issue:

- First, whether the women are able to enjoy as equal an access to e-governance facilities as the men.
- And second, whether the e-governance facilities are being used by women as equally as their male counterparts.

There are further questions:

1. How far have the e-governance initiatives been able to address women’s needs?
2. How far are the e-governance initiatives being supported by adequate capacity building measures or measures aimed at removing the hurdles women face in using them.

To answer these questions one has to first understand the context in which these initiatives are taking place.

In Chhattisgarh the population can be divided into two segments. The segment of the population, where ICT is wide spread, ranging from traditional forms of ICT like radio, TV, to most modern forms like internet, mobile phone etc., is concentrated in urban areas of the state, covering about 20% of the population. It is here that the most of the e-governance related programme are being implemented and most of the educational and training centers are also operating. In a discussion with some private and public service providers it was clear that the density of the population and the capacity to pay for the services are the two factors that are important for taking any decision for expanding the operations to different areas. As the rural and tribal population do not satisfy these criteria (why?) they are not interested in expanding/providing their services to these areas. The CEO of the IT department of Chhattisgarh also indirectly echoed the same feelings, adding that as the population of urban areas is more aware than those of the rural areas, there is stronger pressure to implement the schemes in these areas first. Right now the areas most benefiting by the e-governance initiatives include the capital city of Raipur, Bilaspur-the seat of finance minister, Durg, the most industrialized, densely populated and richest district of the state. Thus as far as the implementation and application of ICT in Chhattisgarh is concerned an urban bias is clearly visible, due to some of the reasons cited.

The other segment of population belongs to rural areas where the traditional forms of ICT, like Radio, TV, landline telephone etc. are used. And then there are also people to whom even these traditional forms of ICT are not available. At
least 20% of the population comes under the category that does not even have a radio.

On the basis of extensive field survey it was found that as far as the access and use of traditional forms of ICT like TV, Radio, telephone etc. and the modern forms like internet are concerned, due to the following reasons women and girls do not enjoy equal access to these in the state:

- The families are male dominated families and males are considered to have the first right in using whatever belongs to the family.

- In most of the families the male is considered to be the bread earner so he automatically gets hold of every thing first.

- Women are mostly busy in house hold affairs and they do not have time to use these facilities.

- Cyber cafés, telephone departments and all other implementation points are mostly run by men and their users are also mostly men.

- One has to spend money to use these facilities and money is available more to men. Even if women and men have equal monetary powers, women are less interested in spending it on mobile phones, laptops, or in cyber café etc.

- Use of technology whether driving a car, using a camera and likewise using internet or information kiosk is considered as the male domain, especially in rural areas. So even if a woman tries using these the male community considers it as an intrusion into the male domain.

In some places in the rural and tribal areas we have observed that even if a woman is the earning member of the family instead of spending her earning on buying a TV or a radio, she is more likely to spend it on the family needs whereas the male prefers spending it on television (TV), radio or other things and not necessarily on the family needs. Even if the woman buys TV or a radio under the pressure of the male members of the family she herself is not interested in using these.

Getting information is understood to be the responsibility of male members. So right from the childhood getting information or being informed is considered to be the duty of males, and women remain excluded and do not take interest in it. This
gender-specific antecedent impedes women’s access and use of e-governance technologies and initiatives.

**USE OF CYBER CAFÉ BY MALE AND FEMALE**

This view gains support from the information gathered from a sample survey:

1. Although no official data is available about the percentage of women having the ownership of telephone connections, whether it is landline connections or mobile connections, through the official directory of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (the official phone line providers of Indian Government), it is clear that only 09% of total phones are in the name of women.

2. A sample survey of the use of cyber café shows the following trend:

Duration -01-02-2005-01-03-2005
Bilaspur City

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the café</th>
<th>Name of the owner</th>
<th>Total Visitors</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Hours used by male</th>
<th>Hours used by female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotline</td>
<td>Mr. Kailash B.</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>685 (74.12%)</td>
<td>215 (23.88%)</td>
<td>2223 (66.40%)</td>
<td>1125 (33.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed Computer</td>
<td>Mrs. Anuradha S.</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>175 (58.44%)</td>
<td>125 (41.66%)</td>
<td>130 (52%)</td>
<td>120 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Om Cyber Cafe</td>
<td>Mr. Manish</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>110 (66.32%)</td>
<td>85 (33.68%)</td>
<td>150 (71.43%)</td>
<td>60 (28.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocean C. Online</td>
<td>Mr. Prakash C.</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>85 (87.63%)</td>
<td>12 (12.37%)</td>
<td>102 (80.48%)</td>
<td>12 (19.52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right Click</td>
<td>Mr. Devkant R.</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>471 (88.90%)</td>
<td>126 (21.10%)</td>
<td>502 (71.925)</td>
<td>196 (28.08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Bite</td>
<td>Mr. Ashish A.</td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>1350 (64.29%)</td>
<td>750 (35.71%)</td>
<td>2145 (66.21%)</td>
<td>1095 (33.79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Cafe</td>
<td>Mr. Sunil S.</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>600 (64.64%)</td>
<td>300 (33.33%)</td>
<td>1600 (84.22%)</td>
<td>300 (15.78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saber Café</td>
<td>Mr. Rizvan Khan</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>364 (65%)</td>
<td>196 (35%)</td>
<td>1119 (83.26%)</td>
<td>225 (16.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Cafe</td>
<td>Mr. Yogesh A.</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>464 (80%)</td>
<td>116 (20%)</td>
<td>404 (77.70%)</td>
<td>116 (22.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>6229</td>
<td>4304 (70.10%)</td>
<td>1925 (30.90%)</td>
<td>8375 (72.05%)</td>
<td>3249 (27.95%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data Collected from the documents available with the owners of cyber cafes and through personal interviews

The following factors could explain the negligible presence of women in the data indicated above:

- Lower literacy rate among women
- Women are not as computer savvy as men. Only very few women might visit cyber cafés for occasional academic and professional needs whereas men, apart from these purposes, might visit cyber cafés for recreation and other purposes also.
- Generally the male members of the family do the cyber café related work
- The environment in cyber café is not found to be woman friendly, except for a few cyber cafés
- The local milieu is also somewhat backward as socializing among males and females is not so common and not socially accepted
- There are no cyber cafes exclusively for women or there are no separate arrangements for women in cyber cafés.
- Cyber cafes are assumed to be a place where women should avoid visiting. Most of the parents as well as women students and hostel wardens also hold this view.

**Video Conferencing facility (Bilaspur and Durg Districts of Chhattisgarh)**

From the foregoing one could establish a clear linkage between lack of equal access to sources of information for women as well as men and consequently the lack of their equal access to e-governance services and this is supported by the findings of a field survey of one of the major e-governance Initiatives which has shown the following results:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the district</th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>Cases by women</th>
<th>Cases by men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bilaspur</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>77 (20.42%)</td>
<td>300 (79.58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durg</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>44 (34.92%)</td>
<td>82 (65.08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>121 (24.05%)</td>
<td>382 (75.95%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the concentrated implementation of e-governance services in urban areas, among the rural folk it is easier for rural men to come to city and benefit from these facilities such as e-land records, or making complaints or taking a license etc or getting education in an institution in the urban areas rather than for rural women without proper transportation facility or a safe environment in the city. So this urban bias is also a major contributory gender factor.

Thus women do not have same access to e-governance facilities as the men and nor are the e-governance facilities being used by women as equally as men.

The question therefore which needs to be addressed is:

1. How far have the e-governance initiatives been able to address women’s needs both at the content level and at the implementation level.

2. How far the e-governance initiatives are being supported by adequate capacity building measures or the measures aimed at removing the hurdles women face in using them.

Content wise, while designing and implementing e-governance schemes, the dominance of the male perspective is clearly visible. All the services, which are now being brought under the umbrella of e-governance, have the male as the norm though vicariously, and hence are related to the needs and convenience of men. A close analysis of services provided in the state under e-governance reveals the fact that these services are mostly used by men. There are no efforts to identify the convenience and needs of women in relation to e-governance initiatives. One could identify some services in reference to the needs of women of Chhattisgarh that can be brought under the e-governance Initiatives such as:

- The health related information can be provided by using ICT through the use of the Video with instructions for reproductive health care for instance regarding small precautions that should be taken at the time of delivery.
for safe delivery (Chhattisgarh has a very low safe delivery percentage)

- While studying the Self Help Groups in Chhattisgarh it was found that the women groups that are involved in making bamboo items or other handicrafts with Jute etc are always in need of new designs. Though government and NGOs provide them training it does not have a wide reach. With the availability of an internet connected computer in Aganwadi Kendras (local village level women’s groups) this information can be provided to a larger number of women and the information can be put online also. Even the illiterate rural women will be able to learn new designs for all the handicrafts.

At the implementation/operational level, consideration for the specific problems women face in accessing or using these services is completely missing. If we analyse closely, we find that the lack of mobility has been the main factor responsible for Indian women to have less access to government services and for their dependence on males. The burden of house hold responsibilities, lack of transportation facilities, an insecure outside environment, a male dominated gender insensitive administration, lack of facilities for women in administrative offices are some of the factors due to which even the educated and aware women have hesitation in approaching the officials themselves. If ‘government any time anywhere’ through internet could be provided, women would then be able to obtain information more easily and will be able to register complaints or convey problems regarding administration to the concerned officers without facing some of the constraints mentioned above. But unfortunately even with this potential of ICT there have been no efforts to adopt this gender sensitive approach while planning and implementing the e-governance initiatives in the state. Though many small measures can be taken very easily just as the V-Sat based computer which is available in the office of CEO and the Janapad Panchayats (units of the local self government) and are controlled by the male officers there, computers can be given to women self help groups and can be placed in an Aganwadi Kendra (centre for women and child care), where women sit together and interact with each other very frequently and freely. One of the literate women members of the group can be trained to operate the computer. Like wise while selecting the places for the proposed Cyber Agent Scheme, locations can be selected taking care of women’s needs and convenience. This could be in a residential colony or nearer a women’s college etc. Though these may seem small measures, but they would make the difference.

More over keeping in view the benefits that ICT can provide to women i.e. governance at finger tips any time any where, special subsidy schemes can be started by banks and government for women to buy computers and internet connection. The NGOs can help in creating awareness and providing required
training to women to use these facilities. This can be a major step towards the empowerment of women as women may be able to access the government schemes and the officials easily and as and when required. We have to keep in view the fact that the problems related to governance may be different for men and women. While women and men face many common problems, women face added problems merely being women. And we are sure that many of those problems which women face merely being women can be solved to some extent by women friendly rather than merely ‘user’ friendly ICT.

One factor that is very important while discussing the issue of ‘Women Friendly’ ICT is the share of women in policy making and implementation structure. This is almost negligible in the State. One of the factors responsible for this may be the very low percentage of women in the ICT related courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% Of Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001-02</td>
<td>26.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-03</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>23.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>25.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons for fewer shares of women in the ICT related courses could be:

- Historically there has been a tendency to divide the disciplines of study as masculine and feminine, the more technical professional ones being considered as masculine and the arts, humanities and the social sciences as feminine and this has been followed up with a congealed socialization reflecting and perpetuating the patriarchal mind set of the society.

- Following this and in addition, though technical education has a better chance of employability, since it is comparatively costlier in the state of Chhattisgarh and because in the Indian society the son
is considered to be the bread earner, parents generally prefer to provide technical education to their sons rather than to their daughters.

- In Chhattisgarh State the institutes of technical education are mostly limited to urban areas, and the village communities even today have reservations in sending their daughters to study outside their villages due to deep rooted socio-cultural factors.

- Some of the prevailing social customs like dowry (bride price) also prevent parents to encourage their daughters to join technical education, as they assume that the more educated the girl, they would have to find an equally educated bridegroom apart from spending more money in such a marriage.

- The uncertain social factors and the real and perceived fears of the parents about the ‘unsafe’ social environment including the campuses, and lack of adequate arrangements of boarding etc also make parents hesitant to send their daughters to far off places to study or work.

The question therefore remains as to how far the e-governance initiatives are being supported by adequate capacity building measures or the measures aimed at removing the hurdles women face in using them.

There is only one such programme called ‘Suchna Shakti’ Programme for girls who are studying in classes 10th, 11th and 12th. The programme aims at providing computer education to these students. Conceptually it is a good capacity building measure for young girls but because of the administrative sluggishness the programme has not achieved its stated objectives. More over this programme is limited to the girls who are studying in class 10th to 12th where as more then 60% of girls never get a chance to reach the level of these classes. Other then this programme there is no capacity building programme for women.

It is obvious from the above analysis that the e-governance initiatives in the State do not have the required gender perspective which could be attributed to the following reasons:

- As the policy makers and those who implement them are males, they generally overlook or ignore women’s needs either because of the lack of gender sensitivity or due to just plain patriarchal socialization.
There is a often a common tendency in India among policy makers and among those who implement them to treat some areas as gender neutral, and this is the case with the ICT policies and programmes in Chattisgarh. This is clearly reflected in the fact that though the State has a very comprehensive Women Policy, there is no mention of ICT in this Policy and in the State IT Policy there is no mention of women. Not a single programme of Women and Child Development Department is using ICT or is being included under e-governance schemes in the State.

Even if one tries to draw their attention towards this, they might agree to the suggestions but then since there is a limited amount of fund available for e-governance that is preferably being used in the set mould addressing the needs of the male population as they are perhaps politically more beneficial.

Interestingly the women organizations of the region also do not assign any importance to e-governance. They feel that problems like domestic violence, water scarcity, poverty etc. are more important and fundamental arenas of struggle for women. They fail to understand that though ICT may not be the panacea to all the age old problems that women continue to face it can be used as a powerful supporting instruments to address these age old problems in one way or other. For instance if we take the cases of domestic violence, a number of women organizations are eager to help the victims but the real problem is that the victim may not want to disclose her identity or is not allowed to have any contact with these women groups. If e-Governance services that are being provided by E Panchayatas (Local Self Government Unit at Village Level) or CHOICE is also extended to include such complaints, women organizations and government machinery may prove to be more helpful/useful to such women.

Field surveys show that while it is generally assumed by policy makers (mainly male) that e-governance programmes will benefit men and women equally, the ground reality is that there is a vast difference in the availability, use, and access of e-governance schemes for men and women. Hence, it is necessary to examine the gender perspective in the e-governance. The ICT policies, programmes, and schemes in Chattisgarh seem to bypass the question of women’s capacity building and empowerment. The impact of this at the user end for women may be one of exclusion due to various reasons that need to be
addressed urgently to avoid the digital gender divide superimposed on the already existing gender disadvantages for women arising from socio-cultural factors. Without a gender perspective, the low participation of women in accessing and using the e-governance facilities may not be noticed. This is the case in the Chattisgarh region where even in urban areas, as compared to men, a very low number of women use the e-governance facilities and services such as videoconferencing with public bodies, accessing Internet-based services like e-sangwari for obtaining records regarding births, deaths, or land, or using local government-information kiosks for obtaining information under the e-panchayat scheme. In fact, as already stated, very few women have telephones registered in their own names. Similarly, in the educational sphere, there is low enrollment, retention, and visibility of women in ICT-related courses of study.

Thus, in the Indian context, where women are already less visible in the public spheres due to socio-cultural factors and men already dominate, e-governance is more available and accessible to men. This is also because ICTs have masculine connotations due to the traditionally larger presence of men in technological disciplines. Such is the picture in even urban areas in Chattisgarh where more women are literate, aware, and considered to face comparatively less socio-cultural constraints. Even if these programmes and facilities based on ICT are made available in the rural areas, women would still find it difficult to benefit from them due to the already existing limitations of a male-dominated society. This would be especially true for women in areas dominated by the scheduled castes and tribes, who have been recognized as socially disadvantaged in the Indian Constitution, and who already suffer from severe poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness, to which is added the restrictive limitations imposed by the domination of patriarchal values, traditions, and attitudes.

**Conclusion**

One might conclude that while poverty is a gender-neutral attribute affecting the access of both men and women to the gains from e-governance, there are certain gender-specific antecedents that impede women’s access to it where available, in ways different from that for men. Apart from literacy and education, social and cultural norms also constrain women’s mobility and access to e-governance schemes. These constraints have to be identified and should be examined carefully to determine what impact this gendered exclusion from e-governance might have on women and whether a digital gap is being added to the already existing gender gap, and ways and means to address and reduce the gap.
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