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Moni, The Mobile Lady: an Initiative of D.Net, Bangladesh

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A Typical Day in Moni's Life

Every morning, Moni goes to Pallitathya Kendra (Rural Information Centre), her place of work, on her bicycle, looks into her daily work plan, picks up the necessary documents and her mobile phone and sets out on her tour of the assigned village. Her first stop is a visit with Moyna, a rural housewife, who has a health problem. Moni introduces Moyna to the concept of a Help Desk, where experts provide consultation on various problems, including health issues. Using the mobile phone, Moyna connects to the Help desk, chats with the expert and receives crucial advice, from the comfort of her own house all for the minimal cost of a phone call. Moyna is given basic information which will start her on the road to recovery. For more information and further advice, she is asked to visit the local Pallitathya Kendra. Having set Moyna's mind at ease, Moni is on her way to the next household. For the rest of the day, Moni will do a round of pre-assigned villages, meeting women and informing them of the facility of accessing expert consultation, via the mobile phone, on a wide range of issues. She provides the village folk, especially women, a valuable opportunity to access information that would otherwise be difficult to come by.



This is a typical day in the life of Moni, and others like her, the mobile ladies of D.Net, a concept that has rapidly gained in popularity. Expanding the scope of the service further, is a team of “*Monis*” is getting ready with second generation Smart Phones. In addition to providing a valuable service to the community, the initiative also provides a team of women an important role and a respectable livelihood as ‘phone ladies’.

How it all Started

Following the global ICT boom and some successful applications in development, a young team at Development Research Network (D.Net) in Bangladesh, was working on expanding the access of the new ICTs to rural areas. However, given the high user costs and low access to infrastructures, combined with very poor literacy in rural Bangladesh, ICT kiosks or telecentres, though successful elsewhere did not provide an immediate solution. Besides, in the socio-cultural milieu of rural Bangladesh, the behaviour changes that required visiting the kiosks for information was also not easily achieved. It was apparent that what was needed was a combination of technology and human interface which would bridge the gap between the people and the new ICTs imaginatively. And thus was born a new phenomenon, the mobile lady. The idea evolved from the fact that mobile phones had a much higher penetration than fixed land phones, estimated as covering 85 percent of the territory, and were considerably cheaper than making phone calls through fixed phones. Also, mobile services were already popular in several parts of the country, including rural ar-

reas, although these were primarily offered as a phone service, whereby rural people could connect with their friends and families in rest of the country and sometimes even in other parts of the world. The value addition to use it as an information service was the concept D.Net decided to explore.

The First Steps

The challenge for D.Net was to leverage the high mobile penetration to add value to the phone services and create access to a host of other services via the mobile phone. Before working out a concrete plan, some questions had to be answered:

- ❖ Who would be users of the service?
- ❖ What type of information and knowledge could be shared over a phone?
- ❖ How to increase reach of the services, given that the number of phones in village was very small?
- ❖ Who would provide the service at the user end i.e. at the village level?
- ❖ What kind of services could be made available at the service end i.e. the place where the villagers would be calling?
- ❖ What kind of local expertise was required at the service end - i.e. “Help Desk”?
- ❖ How could the entire operation be made sustainable?

It was felt that such an effort had to be backed by some research at the field level and learning-by-doing would be the way to take it forward. Financial resources to get the project off the ground was a major problem. D.Net bid for a global seed grant competition launched by the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP), and happily, the hard work and commitment paid off as, out of more than 500 proposals, D.Net's was short-listed among first ten. Thus began the experiment of a “Help Line for the Poor”.*

* Readers will recall that in an earlier issue of Educomm reported that Pallitathya, the innovative Mobile Help-Line programme won the Gender and Information & Communication Technology (GICT) Awards sponsored by the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) and the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) in 2005- Editor

To begin with, D.Net brought in educated women living in the village to work as 'change agents'. Given the few opportunities for gainful employment for poor educated women in rural areas, and high unemployment in general, this proved to be a very successful strategy. Being local women, they could easily approach other women and gain access to their households in the villages, as opposed to strangers from other parts. This also opened a window of opportunity for the change agents. D.Net was keen to address some traditional practices and beliefs that restricted women's growth and access to knowledge and bring the women new knowledge and opportunities, thus expanding their choices, leading to overall socio-economic betterment. Financial and religious constraints, superstition and myths and mind-sets rooted in ancient practices were the first hurdles that had to be overcome. Some of the initial tasks to be addressed were:

- ❖ Developing information service delivery in a cost-effective, easily scalable and affordable manner,
- ❖ Providing information services that have little or no gender bias,
- ❖ Empowering members of rural communities with access to all types of livelihood information,
- ❖ Challenging age-old perception of gender roles,
- ❖ Challenging the notion of women as a relatively unimportant client group for information services, and
- ❖ Achieving a critical mass of information service users to reach financial sustainability in partnership with the private sector.

Getting into Action

Once the task was mapped out, the key ingredients to make the concept of the help line a success were identified as:

- ❖ The Mobile lady,
- ❖ Help Desk with a Searchable Knowledge base in Bangla, the local language,
- ❖ A Database and
- ❖ Partners including local, national or international organizations.



Closely related issues were capacity building and continuing updation of the database.

The method of providing information services would begin with a trained mobile lady paying home visits to the clients or information seekers, who had queries on life and livelihood issues. The mobile lady would try to understand the nature of the information needed and help the information seekers choose the most effective method of getting the information depending on the urgency of the issue. The options available would be:

- ❖ Mobile to mobile (instant reply)
- ❖ Mobile to mobile (reply within three days)
- ❖ Mobile to letter (receiving reply through letter or e-mail depending on the availability of the Internet service),
- ❖ Letter to letter (sending questions through letter and receiving the reply in the same manner).

The last option was introduced to include those who did not wish to engage with technology for whatever reasons.

Once questions were put to the Help Desk, an associate at the service end, usually a domain expert, replied to the query, using the specially created computerized knowledge base created by D.Net. To make information easily under-

stood, both the database and the search engine are in the local language, Bangla.

Most frequent queries are about where to access certain services. The help desk expert searches an online directory, created through an extensive and rigorous survey and suggests the relevant options. The users pay for the phone call. At the D.Net end both the knowledge base and directory database are being updated regularly for providing latest information to the information seekers. It functions as a "People's call centre" using a novel medium of information delivery.

Things That Worked Well

For the users, in this case often illiterate rural women like Moyna, talking to somebody about a problem and getting advice is much easier than browsing the Internet. Furthermore, it is even more convenient when she gets the service sitting at home. Often, women, who used "Moni's" phone, felt more comfortable talking to a "unseen" person and sharing their personal health problems rather than talking to a village doctor, usually male.

The Challenges and Solutions

Initially, there was poor response from the villagers, particularly when they learnt that they had to pay for the help line services. To encourage usage, a "free hour" was introduced and a number of people tried the service and were satisfied. Once the value of the service was understood, there was less resistance to paying.

Yet another problem is that, in order to save on the cost of the calls, users are very brief, trying to complete the calls in the shortest possible time. This sometimes makes it difficult for the person at the help desk to assess the problem correctly and suggest solutions. However, with the introduction of Smart Phone based voice mail and through internet telephony like Skype, which is not based on a per minute charge, it will be soon possible to provide more cost effective solutions that will be viable to both the users and the service providers.

As with any intervention that changes existing social norms, in some places, the mobile ladies too encountered resistance and opposition from societies mired in tradition. In a couple of instances, their character was maligned and they had to shut down business. However, the women persisted, enlisted the help of local leaders and eventually the harassment stopped and the women resumed activity.

Mobility and movement of the mobile ladies continues to pose a problem. In harsh climate, with the sun beating down or in pouring rain, the women find it difficult to ride bicycles. D.Net is hoping for some innovative answers to this too.

The Impact

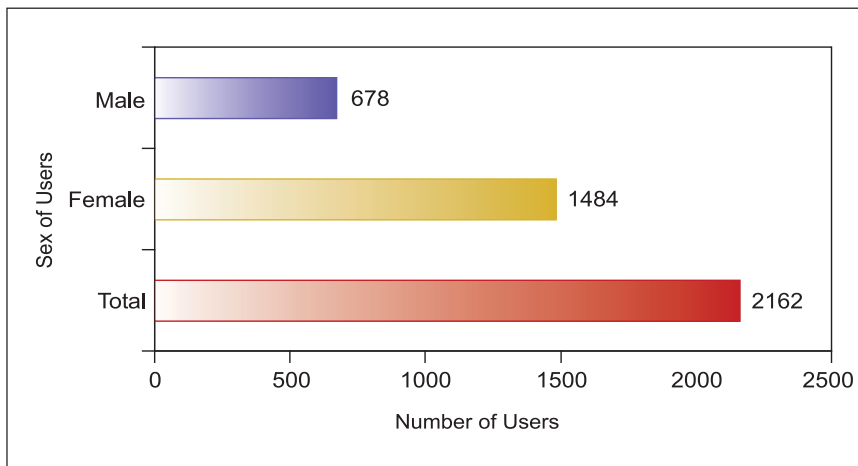
One clear impact is the increased self-esteem and the positive changes in the lives of the phone ladies like "Moni". They have a new socially respected and accepted identity. Simultaneously, while bringing positive changes in the lives of marginalized and poor rural women they also expand their own knowledge base and are motivated to do better for themselves. A case in point is Ibika from Bagerhat, who is now pursuing her graduate studies and plans on starting her business some day. Salma, another mobile lady from Nilphamari feels proud that she gets invited to meet the village elites and can hold her own.

The helpline is now a regular phenomenon in a number of villages of Bangladesh. Statistics show that, 68.64% of Helpline users are women, though 90% of this group are housewives. Analysis shows that majority of the questions (60%) relate to health problems and 30% questions were income generation related.

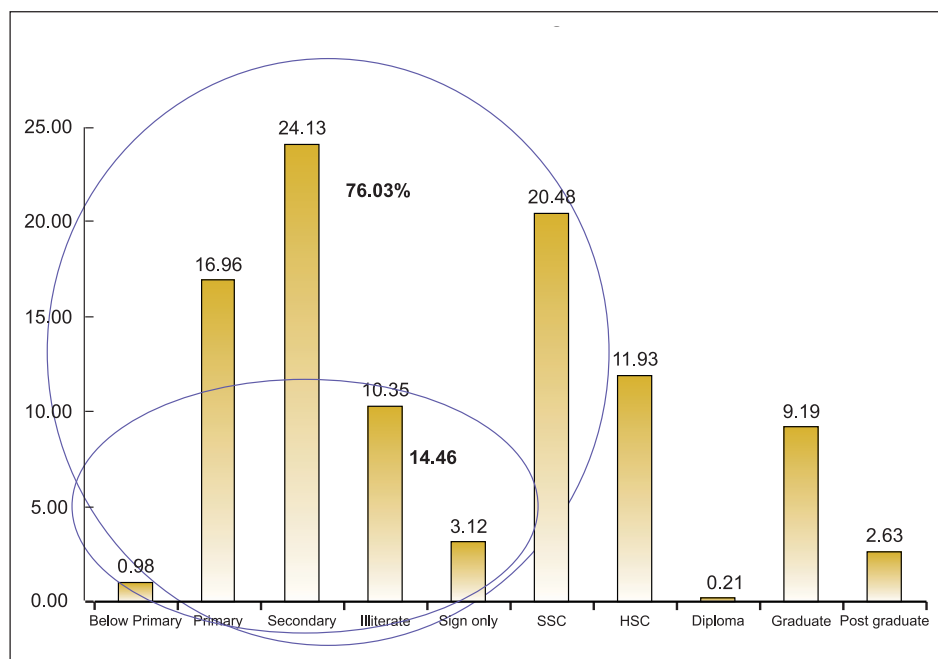
It is important to note that the majority of the service recipients are from the disadvantaged class of the rural society.

Apart from employing women directly, the information provided by the Helpline directly addressed women's needs which were mostly related to economic empowerment. Women who availed of the Helpline service professed a higher self-assessment and realization of their potential and worth in society, realized

Users of Teletathya Help Line



Maximum Users are Marginalised



increased incomes, and increased authority over spending decisions.

The Helpline shows that ICTs can really play a tangible role in poverty alleviation and the empowerment of underprivileged, particularly women. The income generating potential of the Helpline and demand for the Helpline service make it an economically viable operation. D.Net is currently working to expand the scope and reach by starting People's Call Centres, in more villages and will eventually extend the service across the country. The Help Line service improves ac-

cess to livelihood information, facilitates empowerment of underprivileged groups in the society and has huge employment generation potential for the village women with some education. An estimate shows that countrywide replication of the Helpline can generate employment to around 100,000 women in Bangladesh. **ECA**

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