

STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE

Kim Hancock, India, Information and Communication Technology

Assessing the barriers to access for Women Information Entrepreneurs in rural India

Between 2001 and 2012, the number of phone subscribers in India grew from just 45 million to over 900 million. Since then, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has grown rapidly, with initiatives such as Digital India helping internet access and smartphones become widespread. Still, large disparities continue to exist, particularly along the axes of geography and gender. With a Fulbright grant, I will work with the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and address how technology is used as a tool to empower rural communities in Rajasthan. Ultimately, I seek to gain insight on the gender gap in digital literacy that will be useful to DEF and other government initiatives/NGOs in addressing these disparities.

I became interested in ICTs for development through my mutual interests in international relations and computer science. This interest grew while I studied political science in New Delhi through the Middlebury in India program. During the program, I reached out to DEF to learn more about grassroots initiatives to address information inequality. Since then, I have been able to work with a team at DEF analyzing social media posts by writing a computer program to conduct a social network analysis.

Now, I plan on working with DEF to collect data on the progress of their Soochnapreneur (information entrepreneur) program. The program was established in 2017 to strengthen the information ecosystem in rural communities by building information centers and training young entrepreneurs in digital literacy. The program targets “backward” districts where many people rely on government entitlement programs, such as food schemes and retirement programs. Through information resource centers, Soochnapreneurs help community members use technology to access critical online information—such as applying to receive monthly cooking supplies or obtain a loan—in exchange for a small fee.

Over the last few months, I have been in contact with Anulekha Nandi from DEF. While speaking with her about my interest in a longer-term research project, she spoke about a need to assess the progress made through the Soochnapreneur program as it has expanded rapidly in the last three years. The Soochnapreneur program has so far trained 3 groups of people--100 people in 2017, 100 women in 2018, and 100 differently-abled people in 2019. She mentioned the need to analyze existing data which is scattered across different locations as well as collect new data over a longer time period. I spent a number of weeks doing a literature review of existing work surrounding digital empowerment, and found that many studies expressed a need for gender-aggregated data in particular. In further conversations with Anulekha, we discussed how this topic fit an articulated need by DEF that I could fulfill. She then introduced me to Arpana Sharma, who leads the Soochnapreneur team at DEF and who will be my community mentor.

My proposed project is a comparative study between men and women’s cell phone use through the lens of the Soochnapreneur model. I will conduct quantitative research to study the differences in the use of digital information between women and men in information-dark regions of Rajasthan, specifically Alwar and Barmer. This location is perfect due to the large number of Soochnapreneurs there as well as its proximity to Delhi, where Arpana resides. The methodology will be based on existing case studies and training reports conducted by DEF fellows. These focus on teaching and assessing skills such as using “MeraApp,” an android app developed by DEF to help facilitate the spread of useful information. During phase 1 of my project, I plan on creating a descriptive survey to give to Soochnapreneurs (ages 18-25) to assess

their digital and entrepreneurial skills. I will create this in collaboration with the current team at DEF to ensure that the questions are relevant and quantitative. I will also create a similar survey to give to those who have worked with Soochnapreneurs that includes questions about their experience with the program. Through both survey groups, I seek to collect data on women's and men's current levels of internet literacy skills specific to the Soochnapreneur model which can then be compared on the basis of gender. Existing field reports on the program point to a need for better documentation of services as well as a lack of dependability and availability of the MeraApp. These are issues that I will ensure are addressed in the survey, for example, by asking specific questions about which features of the app people use regularly. Depending on the local context, I also hope to conduct quantitative interviews where I ask Soochnapreneurs and other community members about their technical skills relevant to the program.

I will be in continued communication with Arpana and the rest of the team throughout the next 8 months to continue planning the details of this project proposal. Given the current context of COVID-19 desperately affecting rural communities, right now there is a heightened need for community members to obtain government entitlements they are eligible for. These next months will be hard to predict in terms of how rural communities will continue to be adversely impacted, and Arpana is willing to help me build my methodology as the program progresses into 2021.

I expect phase 1 to occur over roughly the first 6 months, and then spend the last 3 months on phase 2. In the second phase of the project, I will write a report on the key differences between men and women's ability to utilize the Soochnapreneur model to find and use critical information online, as well as barriers to access for women to become Soochnapreneurs. Such a report will be useful for DEF so they can adapt the Soochnapreneur training sessions to better support women Soochnapreneurs and the people they serve. In addition, I will make the report available to local agencies and government organizations. Since the Soochnapreneur model exists entirely within the local community, these reports are crucial in ensuring that the change happening at the grassroots level is heard by higher authorities such as the government, who can then better support programs like DEF. I would also be able to help improve the user-interface and capabilities of the MeraApp, such as including better data logging capabilities for users of the app. Lastly, my experience with ethnographic research as well as my cross cultural skills make me confident that I will build meaningful connections in the community.

Outside of the project, I plan on volunteering to help teach students about digital literacy, which I have done at Bowdoin through a club I lead mentoring students living in a subsidized housing community in Portland. In addition, I am planning on applying for the critical language scholarship through AIIS to improve my Hindi prior to the start of the project. I took over 120 hours of Hindi with the Zabaan language learning institution in Delhi and am excited to continue learning in India. Still, I understand the language barrier will be challenging; Arpana has assured me that DEF will provide the support necessary to ensure that I have an interpreter when needed.

Through a Fulbright scholarship, I will be able to pursue my interest in understanding digital empowerment and information inequality. Digital technology is a tool that is becoming increasingly available in India; the important question now is how it can be effectively used to empower everyone, notably including women and rural communities. I am excited to carry out my research project as well as get involved in the local community to continue learning how to engage in another culture in an open-minded and unbiased way.