Empowering Communities Through Grassroots and Digital Strategies

How SEWA Bharat is working at scale through grassroots and digital strategies

SEWA believes that a woman with access to the right resources and independence can redefine the social and economic environment in her community. SEWA also believes that empowered and mobilized communities can overcome chronic and widespread gaps that perpetuate poverty and inequality.

Since the 1970’s SEWA has provided individuals and communities with information, resources, and platforms to create long-lasting change and remove systemic and institutional barriers to economic, social, and gender parity. SEWA has led grassroots and localized approaches to creating united, informed, and confident changemakers and communities.

Potential of Digital Solutions in Grassroots Efforts

Today the cellphone and other digital tools have become important catalysts to economic, civic, and social change. Cell phones and social media have changed the way we communicate, transact, govern, and learn. Marketers information have become centralized and opportunities and social circles of expanded. While the Internet has literally changed the fabric of the global economy, politics, and social interactions, it is also causing to a growing gap between the digitally literate and the digitally illiterate.

SEWA’s Digital Approach

By integrating digital solutions through its programs, SEWA is decreasing the digital literacy gaps while also providing services that solve systemic and specific issues that communities face.

SEWA offers its members programs that span across health, financial inclusion, skills, advocacy, and social enterprise development. SEWA uses digital technology to augment these services and provide solutions to women across India.
SEWA Uttarakhand and the Conditions of the Digital Environment

Uttarakhand remains one of India’s most isolated states. With difficult mountainous terrain, limited physical infrastructure, and an economy almost entirely built on agriculture and tourism, many communities remain isolated and limited in their economic and social opportunities. Despite these conditions, digital and social media platforms have not only been adopted, but play an important role to connecting communities beyond their locality.

By integrating digital solutions through its programs, SEWA is decreasing the digital literacy gaps while also providing services and addressing gaps that women and communities face, such as poor connectivity and infrastructure.

Digital Solutions Reaching India’s Remotest Populations

SEWA Uttarakhand’s team was in a small community nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas in Almora. The team was holding various community meetings to learn the needs of community members while they were sowing paddies in the fields. Several members in the meeting were using Whatsapp to provide their neighbors with the information that SEWA was providing them at the time.

SEWA’s main comparative advantage has been its ability to communicate a diverse range of topics across the country. SEWA communicates ideas of health, public schemes, market opportunities, leadership, and financial literacy training to communities across India. SEWA will leverage existing digital resources to create change in communities across India. Like many young people across the globe, cellphones and social media are becoming an essential part of daily life. Internet and social media play an important role across many aspects of life. Women in Uttarakhand have noted that they use social media and internet for a wide range of things from learning about fashion trends to learning about higher education opportunities to keeping up with relatives and friends through Whatsapp and Messenger.
Main Barriers to Internet and Phone Use
We asked our members what impedes them from using phones and Internet

- Language Barriers
- Electricity
- Internet and Phone Connectivity
- Phone Quality
- Money for data and phone repairs

How does Uttarakhand's Communities Use Internet

Type of Phone Ownership

- Smartphone (63.49%)
- Function Phone (26.57%)
- No Phone (7.94%)

Over 90% of participants have regular access to a phone, either through self-ownership or family ownership

Access to Internet

- Internet (71.43%)
- No Internet (26.57%)

The majority of respondents said that they have used the Internet, mainly through mobile phones

Phone Use Frequency

- Never (2.94%)
- A few times a week (11.76%)
- A few times a day (19.12%)
- Very frequently (66.18%)

Nearly 85% of participants use a phone regularly each day

Phone Functions Used

- Calls
- Social Media
- Search Engine
- Video Streaming

95% of phone users make phone calls, 49% use social media, and 17% use search engines for news and information
“I use my smartphone for many things. It’s become an important and easy way for me to keep in touch with my friends. I actually prefer messaging on WhatsApp than taking a call. I also use my phone for school. I’m studying chemistry at Kumaun University and this helps me study and learn the material on my own since my family doesn’t own a computer. I also think it’s convenient. I can socialize online or study, whenever I want to or have the time.”

Kakrighat has few roads outside of the village and has no connection to a main water supply. Women walk miles to fetch water and going to the stores is a difficult, daylong task. However, several women use social media, particularly Facebook, to connect outside of their locality.

One girl, name Pushpa from Kakrighat said that “Hum to wase bhi ladkiyan hain aur hamen ghar se bahut kam nikalane diya jaata hai, isliye bahar kya ho raha hai hame pata nahi chal pata but internet ki madad hame bahar ki sari kahbren mil jaati hain” (Being a girl we are not allowed to be outside for late, so we are almost cut off from the outside work and do not know what’s happening in our surroundings. Thanks to the internet, through which we get to know latest news and happenings from the outside world.

Internet has provided remote communities with information that is tangibly transforming the opportunities that women have. The majority of girls and children follow the footsteps and employment opportunities as their parents. Social media is changing this pattern by exposing young women to economic opportunities outside of their traditional areas of employment.

SEWA will actively leverage the existing use of social media and Internet to lead changes in the economic, civic, and social opportunities that communities and women have. There has already been shifts in the information that communities use. SEWA will channel that information towards creating leadership at the local levels, removing barriers and information gaps, and also create collaboration and unity amongst women in the informal sector across India.