

## Mobile Communication and Women Empowerment with Special Reference to Health Seeking Behavior

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### Abstract

Empowerment of women is a major factor in the global scenario. Women empowerment is a process in which women are made independent and self-reliant, it involves upgrading the status of women in a society with involvement of decision making and right to make their own choices. Women empowerment boosts the status of women in a society through education, literacy and awareness. It creates awareness among women about the basic rights to live a life of well-being. Health is one such basic fundamental right entitled to every human being and empowerment of women helps in creating awareness about the importance of health among women. Health is also one of the important parameters that contribute to the measurement of overall development index of any nation. The aspect of health is ignored in most societies due to various reasons, and in such context women who are considered more vulnerable to health issues suffer the most. In this context the paper applies the method of focus group discussion to understand the need and importance of women empowerment in the area of health literacy. Apart from that the paper reflects on the role of mobile communication in empowering women about health and creating awareness about mental health issues, which is one of the most neglected health issues prevalent among women.

**Keywords:** women empowerment, health literacy, mental health, mobile communication

### Introduction

Gender discrimination has been a major factor that has kept women subordinate to men in various aspects like, education, politics, social status, health and also at workplace. Various gaps existed between men and women in receiving basic human rights. Social upliftment and progress have been stagnant in many societies due to gender discrimination. Hazarika, (2011) states opines that even the central and state Governments have come up with various schemes at present day to empower women and end gender-based discrimination, but in India there still exists discrimination among women in various fields like social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education and healthcare. In spite of many steps undertaken by the government, women in India relatively disempowered and enjoys lower status than men (Nayak and Mahanta, 2012).

Mandal, (2013) states that, historically women have suffered the most among all the deprived groups. He further states that women are victims of social, political, economic and religious subordination and faces various discrimination in Indian society. Apart from facing various discrimination and oppression, women have faced inequalities in the area of healthcare to a great extent. According to Rueda et.al. (2008) women have poorer health status than men.

“Although women as a gender do live longer than men, they have more mental health problems. The individual risk of encountering health problems is influenced by biological, political, economic, social and psychological adversities. In women the biological basis of mental health problems is concentrated mainly around the menses, childbirth and the menopause.” (Kohen, 1999 pp.1)

The awareness among women in the context of health issues especially mental health is very low. Women lacks empowerment when it comes to mental health. Health is a prime indicator of development in any society. Any country with a population irrespective of gender, socio economic background with a sound mental and physical

health is considered to be developed. It is one of the fundamental human rights under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Promoting health is one of the 17 goals to be achieved by Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by the year 2030. SDG 3 aims at ensuring health and well-being for all.

In the context of health information and care seeking, women face various discrimination compared to men. The importance of availability of health information, health care and empowerment in terms of health is often ignored in many societies due to factors like social constraints, religious taboos, economic conditions and education among women.

Nasrabadi et.al (2015) is of the opinion that at the present-day context women empowerment is an important issue. Several methods are used to empower women. Health information seeking is one important activity in this regard. Promotion of women health information is a fundamental strategy in women empowerment. The study further states that, seeking health information empowered women and gave them confidence to be strong to fight various health issues and also helped them seek more health-related information. According to MacKian (2003), health seeking behaviour as part and parcel of a person's family or community rather than an individual matter. He further mentioned that health seeking behaviour is a result of social, cultural, personal, and experimental factors, when beliefs, attitudes and awareness levels are measured of an individual or a group of people. Empowering women is essential for overall development of families, communities and countries. To empower women in terms of health is important as when women lives a healthier life, they are able to reach their full potential. According to Yogendrarajah, (2014) "women empowerment is giving legitimate power or authority to perform the tasks. If women were empowered they would be able to participate in the planning and decision-making task and contribute to the development programmes and activities individually." in context of seeking health information and health care women empowerment plays a vital role. According to Mainuddin et.al, (2015), women empowerment increases the health seeking behaviour among women, which should be recognized as an important norm in health system designs.

In the similar context, the present study focuses on the role of mobile communication in empowering women about health. The study discusses the potential of mobile communication as an effective health communication tool among women. Health communication is an important branch of communication studies that communicates information about health to the masses. Ishikawa, Kiuchi, 2010 states that, health communication focuses on improving health of individuals and populations. In similar context Schiavo, 2007 defines the key objective of health communication as to influence individuals and communities with the primary aim to improve health conditions by sharing health related information. The process of health communication aims to improve health outcomes with different communication strategies which encourage behavior and social change. Effective health communication can help in adapting healthy lifestyle choices. With the advancement in technology, Information and technology (ICT) has been an important aspect in health communication. One of the effective strategies in communicating health related information is the use of modern technologies in the field of health communication. Timely access of health-related information with the help of smart phones can reduce the amount of health hazards and risks of diseases to a great extent.

According to Firth et.al,(2021) "Smartphone technology presents an opportunity to transform mobile phones into devices which could provide global, cost effective and evidence based mental health services on demand and in real time."

The study attempts to analyse how mobile communication is an effective medium of health communication among women, the study further focuses on the role of mobile communication in creating awareness among

women. In this context Malhotra and Shah, (2015) states that “Analysis of mental health indices and data reveals that the patterns of psychiatric disorder and psychological distress among women are different from those seen among men. Symptoms of depression, anxiety, and unspecified psychological distress are 2–3 times more common among women than among men.”

According to Kohen,(1999 pp.1)“Although women as a gender do live longer than men, they have more mental health problems. The individual’s risk of encountering health problems is influenced by biological, political, economic, social and psychological adversities. In women the biological basis of mental health problems is concentrated mainly around the menses, childbirth and the menopause.”

Mobile communication is an effective medium that offers a comfortable platform for women who can seek mental health information. Women are hesitant in seeking help in regard for mental health due to various social taboos and conditionings. In most cases a majority of women specifically in the rural areas lack awareness about mental health issues. Under these circumstances smart phones are effective communication tools that can help create awareness about various issues related to mental health and also seek treatment.

Bidmon and Terlutter, (2015) in their study states that women use the internet more often for health related information searches. They used the information received on health issues more than men. In the exploratory study conducted by Pandey et.al, (2003) it is stated that “women who face significant demands on their time on a day-to-day basis due to a variety of obligations such as child care, elder care, personal health, are more likely to use the internet to search for health information.”

At the present-day context where every individual has access to internet through their smart phones, the study will provide a clear understanding about how technology plays a vital role in empowering women about mental health. It will unfold how the penetration of smart phones and development in ICT have changed the ways of health information seeking among women.

## **Objectives**

The study aims at fulfilling the following objectives:

- To assess the importance of health communication in empowering women.
- To analyse the role of smart phones in health seeking behaviour among the women of Kamrup District
- To identify the common mental health issue women mostly seek information through their smart phones.

## **Research Questions**

The proposed research will answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the role of health communication in empowering women?

RQ2. What is the role of smart phones in health seeking behaviour among women of Kamrup district?

RQ3. What is the most common mental health issue women seek information through smart phones?

## Theoretical Framework

To fulfil the stated objectives of the study and to conceptualize the research problem a theoretical framework is provided. The study applies the following theories to establish connection between adapting new technology and changing behavioural patterns in health information seeking among women of Kamrup district of Assam.

- 1. Diffusion of Innovation Theory:** The diffusion of Innovation theory, developed by E.M.Rogers in 1962 states that masses adapts to new technology and it affects their behavioural changes and results in change in attitude and change in the process of acquiring knowledge. According to this theory, over time innovation, idea or products become diffused among the population until a saturation point is achieved. While promoting any new ideas, technologies or an innovation there are 5 stages, (i) innovators (ii) early adopters (iii) early majority (iv) late majority and (v) laggards.

According to Kaminski, (2015) "The Diffusion of Innovation theory is often regarded as a valuable change model for guiding technological innovation where the innovation itself is modified and presented in ways that meet the needs across all levels of adopters. It also stresses the importance of communication and peer networking within the adoption process."

In reference to the Diffusion Of Innovation theory the study will explore the role of smart phones and emerging technologies in ICT in behavioural changes among women of Kamrup district.

- 2. Health Belief Model:** The health belief model was developed by Hochabaum and Rosesnstock in 1950s. It attempts to explain the situations under which an individual adapts to certain health behaviors to prevent or to seek information about health issues. It is theoretical model that is used to explain and predict individual changes in health behaviours. According to this model an individual's decision to engage in a health behaviour is based on their perception. Therefore, by changing their perception they can adapt to new health behaviours. The study adopts this model to analyse the factors that result in change in health seeking behaviour among women of Kamrup district of Assam.

## Research Methods

The study employs the qualitative method of focus group discussion. According to Hennink 2014, focus group discussion are flexible research method, they result of focus group discussions are widely applied to health, social science and behavioural research; strategic planning; health promotion; policy development; program evaluation and other areas of social science research. To analyse the awareness level about mental health and to assess the role of mobile communication in empowering women of Kamrup district focus group discussion is carried out among four groups of women, consisting ten participants in each group.

- Area and Population of the Study:** The study is conducted in the Kamrup district of Assam. The district is further divided into two divisions namely Kamrup district and Kamrup metropolitan district. The study is conducted among women belonging to the Assamese community of the district who forms the majority population.

The Kamrup metropolitan district is divided into six sub districts namely, Azara, Chandrapur, Dispur, Guwahati, North Guwahati and Sonapur. For the purpose of the study the sample of the study is choosen from Dispur and Guwahati sub districts. From these sub districts, the area of Downtown is chosen as an area of study from the Dispur Sub district and Lachit Nagar is taken as an area of study from the Guwahati Sub district.

The Kamrup district which lies in the rural areas has twelve sub divisions namely Boko, Chamaria, Chaygaon, Goreswar, Goroimari, Hajo, Kamalpur, Koya, Nagarbera, North Guwahati, Palasbari and

Rangia. For the study two villages are taken, Barpulla village from Koya Sub division and Kulhati from Hajo Sub Division.

- **Sample Size:** The total women participants for the focus group discussion is 40, belonging to the group of 30 to 50 years of age. The 40 participants are further divided to four groups each group consisting of ten members. Out of the four groups two groups comprises of women from Kamrup District and the other two groups consists of participants from the Kamrup Metropolitan District.
- **Sampling Techniques:** The respondents of the study are selected by applying the cluster sampling technique, where two out of six sub districts from the Kamrup metropolitan district and two villages from twelve sub divisions from the Kamrup District are chosen for the area of the study. The respondents of the study are chosen by applying the purposive sampling technique where only women respondents with smart phones are belonging to the age group of 30-50 are taken as samples.
- **Tools for data Collection:** For the primary data, focus group discussion is conducted by asking open ended questions to the participants by the researcher who is also the moderator. For the collection of the secondary data, existing literature such as books, research journals, articles are referred.

## Results and Discussions

- Out of the total population of 40 women samples chosen for the study, a total of 28 women are married. Among which the samples were divided into 20 rural participants and 20 urban participants.
  - Among the 20 rural participants 15 were married and 5 were unmarried. Among the 20 urban participants 13 were married and 7 were unmarried.
  - Out of the 10 participants from the Barpulla village of Koya sub division, 8 women were homemakers and two were high school teachers. Among the Kulhati village from Hajo sub division, 3 women were entrepreneurs, and 7 were homemakers.
  - The participants from the Downtown locality of Dispur sub district of Kamrup Metropolitan District, 7 women were working under both government and private sectors and 3 were homemakers. From the Lachit Nagar Area of Guwahati sub district of Kamrup Metropolitan district, 5 women were homemakers, 1 was entrepreneur and 4 were homemakers.
- Internet Connectivity:** in the Kamrup district, 7 women of Barpulla village has regular internet access in their smart phones and 3 women occasionally subscribed to internet services. In the Kulahati village, 9 women has regular internet services in their smart phones, whereas 1 woman occasionally subscribed to internet services. In both the localities of Dispur sub district and Guwahati Sub district of Kamrup metropolitan, all 20 women participants had access to regular internet services in their smartphones.
  - Smart Phone Uses:** Each participant from both the rural and urban areas owned smart phones since last five to ten years. Smart phones are their most preferred medium at present.

Among the rural participants of Barpulla Village under Koya Sub division, women participants mostly use the smartphones for entertainment purpose along with using it to stay connected. The women of Kulahaiti village under Hajo sub division, mostly use smartphones to stay connected and also for business purpose.

“I use smartphone to stay connected with my friends and family through social networking sites and also through phone calls” said a participant of Barpulla village.

The women from the downtown locality of Kamrup metropolitan use the smart phone for information seeking, entertainment purpose and also for e-commerce like online banking, and also online shopping from various sites. Similarly, the women from Lachit Nagar locality of Kmarup Metropolitan district uses smart phones for information access, commercial activities, entertainment and business purpose. According to a participant of Lachit Nagar “smart phones are such effective communication medium, people can watch television, seek any information, do shopping, banking and also use it to promote their business, it can do it all, all in just a click.”



- III. **Mental Health Awareness:** from the focus group discussions conducted among the women of rural and urban areas of Kamrup district, it was found that there was gap in awareness about various mental health issues and lack of information was prevalent among rural women compared to the women of urban areas of Kamrup district. There was a significant lack of empowerment between women of rural and urban Kamrup district in terms of mental health specifically among the women belonging to the age group of 30-50 years. A participant from Kulahati village said, “somedays I feel like crying and I cannot find a reason, many a times I think I might have gone mad, until few months back I saw a motivational speaker in Facebook saying that it can be symptom of mental health issue, I was enlightened about mental health as we hardly talk about it in our society. In our society it is believed that there is nothing called mental health.”

Another participant of Downtown locality said “we women, will do everything for the family but will always ignore ourselves, and most women only seek health information or treatment if it is related to their physical health, we always ignore our mental well-being because we were never made aware about it, there was no communication be it mass or interpersonal about mental health until maybe the last few years when we came across social media contents about it.”

- IV. **Lack of Empowerment in Mental Health:** societal taboos, pre-existing superstitious beliefs, absence of communication on mental health issues from both personal and public level and ignorance were prime reasons for lack of empowerment on mental health issues among women of rural Kamrup district. Whereas according to the women participants of Kamrup metropolitan district, women’s ignorance about various health issues in the society is a major factor behind lack of empowerment on mental health.

A participant from kulahati village said “in our rural areas people never speak or are concerned with mental well-being of each other, we fail to recognize the symptoms, we ignore due to various factors. If one is depressed or goes for social withdrawal, they are termed as crazy.”

Another participant from lachit nagar said “only reason we are not empowered in terms of mental health is nothing else than ignorance, we ignore mental health to a great deal.”

- V. **Most Searched Mental Health issues on Smart Phone:** The most searched mental health issue among women of both rural and urban areas of Kamrup district is symptoms of depression. According to the participants of Barpulla village, “we have heard about this term but never realized or been aware of its symptoms or cure unless we saw many social media contents on depression.”

Another participant of downtown locality in kamrup metro said “I always thought I cannot have depression, but when I was exposed to awareness videos on mental health in youtube I could analyse that there are times I have gone through depression.

Apart from depression the other searched mental health issues are:

- How to identify if one is having poor mental health?
- Mood swings
- Difficulty in sleeping
- Irritability
- Anger issues
- Anxiety

- Constant fear of losing a loved one
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal tendencies
- Lack of energy or motivation to do any work

VI. **Proffered Mediums to Seek Information on Mental health:** Smart phones are preferred to be the most effective medium for seeking mental health information among women of both rural and urban areas.

VII. **Role of Smart Phone in Health Seeking Behaviour among Women:** According to the women of rural and urban Kamrup district smart phone is an effective tool for health communication. when it comes to seeking information about mental health by women through smart phones it plays the following roles:

- The information reaches the users irrespective of social, economic, religious, political or geographical area.
- It is an effective tool of interactive health communication.
- It helps to gain information from across the globe on various mental health issues.
- It is an effective tool for personalized health information.
- Smart phones are cost effective tools for seeking health information.
- It helps seek and share health related information faster.
- Various websites and social media sites disseminating health related information can reach the target audience at any time of the day.
- It is a potent tool to empower women about mental health through various contents which are both sources of information and entertainment.

**Need and Importance of Health Communication in Empowering Women:** According to the participants of both rural and urban Kamrup district, women empowerment is an important aspect for overall development and overall development in any society is possible only if women are made aware of every aspect and specifically about health. Without a sound mental health, women cannot be empowered. The lack of information and ignorance about mental health are most common issues that has been acting as a barrier in health communication in rural and urban Kamrup district. According to the participants effective health communication strategies, and interactive health communication can help achieve total women empowerment to live a life of equality. A participant from the Barpulla village said “we all come across the term women empowerment, the government always speaks about it but we cannot ignore our mental health and walk towards empowerment, it is impossible.”

**Scope of Future Research:** Awareness about health is crucial to every individual. Timely information and knowledge about health issues can help prevent vulnerability to various health issues. In this context the use of smart phones in health communication plays a vital role.

Health communication focuses on identifying health related issues and also in problem solving through use of communication tools. It empowers women about various mental health issues, its cure and also to make healthier choices. The availability of internet access through smart phones has proved to be an effective tool in communicating health issues among women. The emergence of smart phones has resulted to interactive health communication.

With the availability of information in just a click, there arises issues like information overload and hence the need and importance of media literacy can be regarded as an importance aspect of research for further studies. As there are many social networking sites, websites and applications disseminating health information, it is necessary the users recognize authentic information sources rather than receiving anything that is available over

the various internet platforms. In this context the need and importance of media literacy must be highlighted in health communication and women empowerment.

### Conclusion

women empowerment is an important aspect. It can be simply defined as proving equality to women in areas of education, awareness, literacy, and training ending gender biases. To improve the social, political, economic and health status of women are important areas of women empowerment. Empowering women gives them the ability to equal participation in all walks of life and the right to make their own life decisions.

Health is an important parameter in development and empowerment of women. Without awareness about health, empowerment of women is not possible. Complete mental and physical well-being refers to good health. As per the definition by the world Health Organization (WHO)

“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” A country with a population irrespective of gender, socio economic background with a sound mental and physical health is considered to be developed. Ignorance towards mental health can act as a barrier in development of a society as a whole. In this context effective health communication plays a vital role in women empowerment. Schiavo (2007), states health communication as an evolving practice and asking people to adapt to new healthy habits, introducing to new policies and practicing ways to develop healthy behaviors is not easy. “One of the key objectives of health communication is to influence individuals and communities. The goal is admirable since health communication aims to improve health outcomes by sharing health-related information.” Advancing technologies in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) have changed the scenario of health communication. Yifeng Hu (2015) analyses the role of technology in both ways, how it has changed the health care system and how people have changed the way of information seeking related to health.

Cassell, (2010) opines that the use of internet in the process of health communication is effective in persuading people to adapt to positive behavioral changes. “The notion that the Internet features many of the persuasive qualities of interpersonal communication makes it a prime candidate for the application of key behavioral science theories and principles to promote healthier behaviors”

The use of mobile communication, smart phones for instance is effective in seeking health information. “Mobile communication technologies provide novel opportunities to support clinic-based health initiatives. Opportunities include sending appointment reminders, 6-8 distributing laboratory reports or medical alerts, reminding parents about vaccination and medication use. Mobile technologies and social media offer advantages of efficiencies of access, personalization, real-time communication and scaled-up dissemination. Text messaging is the primary modality being assessed for communicating with adolescents about self-management of chronic health conditions such as diabetes and asthma” (Smaldone et.al.,2015).

Women are more likely to use the web to access health information. “A comparison of female Web users and non-Web users who seek health information revealed that Web users sought health information at a higher rate than non-Web users. Web users were more likely to communicate with medical professionals about the health information found and claimed that their decisions about health treatments were influenced by the health information. In most cases. Web users expressed a higher awareness of resources, regardless of format. (Warner and Procaccino, 2007).

From the present study conducted, it was found that among both rural and urban women participants the most commonly searched mental health issue over the internet platforms is depression. According to findings of the present study, it is found that women of both rural and urban areas of Kamrup district prefer the smart phone as



an effective medium for health information seeking. Smart phones are easier to access and are faster and cost-effective medium that supports interactive health communication. The samples preferred the medium of mobile communication to seek mental health information as it gives them one to one communication space plus personalized health information. They are of the view that without effective health communication it is impossible to reach overall development of any society. As health is one of the most important parameters of national development, without effective health communication among women, women empowerment is not possible. As Women are prone to more psychological distress than men and when it comes to mental health. The vulnerability of women towards mental health is an issue of concern in our society. It is very important to diagnose the symptoms in right time and seek treatment or cure to mental illness. In this context health communication plays a very crucial role. When information regarding various mental health issues, its cure, counselling and behavioural changes reaches the women population in right time, it becomes easier to heal from mental health issues. The field of Health communication has experienced new wave after the new technologies in ICT. Women with internet access through smart phones can seek information about various mental illness in a faster and more affordable way. Interactive health communication helps people open up as it provides a personal space to interact on any mental health problems they are going through. There is prevalence of mental health issues in both rural and urban societies, yet ignorance about it and lack of effective health communication has made the issue of mental health silent. Thus, smart phones can be an effective tool for health communication about mental health issues among women.

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