



EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH RIGHT TO INFORMATION

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Abstract

Information which embodies power and responsibility is the backbone of any democracy. The Right to information (RTI) act 2005, is a social welfare legislation which is the key to keeping pace with progressive trends in the modern world. RTI is an effective tool for battling social and economic issues, especially those concerning women.

India, though having gained independence over 60 years ago, still holds to norms that are patriarchal in nature. It continues to relegate women to secondary status. Women are burdened by various issues in their day to day life including stringent domestic and financial responsibilities. It is in this context that the RTI act can play a vital role in coming to the aid of such affected women in providing them the much needed information to empower them.

This paper highlights several cases across the country concerning women who have taken recourse to the RTI act to seek and obtain critical information which has helped them to highlight and seek justice for their cause. The paper is based on RTI awareness campaigns that have been carried out at Coimbatore among a cross section of women ranging from teachers, students, professionals to home makers. It statistically demonstrates the change in the level of awareness and attitude before and after these orientation workshops. It also suggests the relevance of awareness campaigns that serve as catalysts for change. The role played by opinion leaders in propagating the RTI act among women in Coimbatore and the positive outcome these interventions have had on the participants has been demonstrated through an empirical study. This paper concludes with recommendations and suggestions for a well informed society that recognizes the vital role that women can play in societal transformation.

INTRODUCTION

“Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and the touchstone of all freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.”¹

Right To Information (RTI) is harnessed as a tool for promoting participatory development, strengthening democratic governance and facilitating effective delivery of socio economic services.

Every individual or section of the society, whether working in farm, industrial or services sectors requires a wide range of information to be able to effectively function in the knowledge and technology driven economy. The act becomes more crucial for the vulnerable sections of our society as they battle social and economic norms which are derogatory on humanitarian grounds which is particularly true for women issues.

This paper deals with various sections such as review of literature, methodology, analysis, discussion and inferences and conclusion.

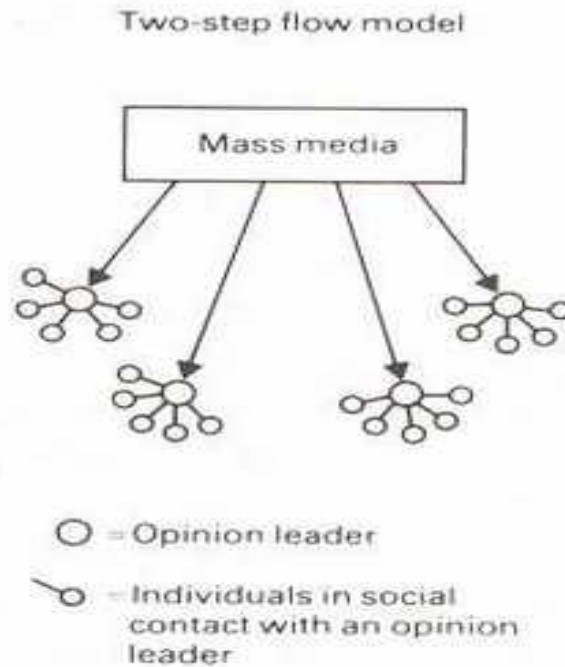
Theoretical model :

The study is based on the theory of two step flow which asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. First, individuals (opinion leaders) who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages receive the information. Opinion leaders pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content. The term ‘personal influence’ was coined to refer to the process intervening between the media’s direct message and the audience’s ultimate reaction to that message. Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviors and are quite similar to those they influence. The two-step flow theory has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making.

¹ UN General assembly, (1946) Resolution 59(1), 65 th plenary meeting, December 14



Conceptual Model



Source: Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The need for RTI

Amartya Sen has said that there has never been a famine in a country with a free press and open government. The relationship between information and power is profound.²

Until 2005, an ordinary citizen had no access to information held by a public authority. Without access to relevant information it was not possible for a common man to participate in a meaningful debate on political and economic option.

Though the Constitution of India has guaranteed the freedom of expression and speech, the citizen had no legal right to know about the details of public policies and expenditures. This brought about a lack of understanding of the outcome of public activities and providing feedback to rectify the deficiencies in policy planning.

In order to rectify the deficiencies in the mechanisms for ensuring the reach of entitlements, particularly the basic human needs, people demanded for a greater access to information held by public bodies. This was acceded to by the government in 2005.

In this backdrop, the RTI act 2005, was passed by the National Parliament to dismantle the culture of secrecy and change the mindsets of the bureaucrats and political leaders and to create conditions for asking informed decisions.

Empowerment of women

Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which those without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. It involves power to, power

² Sen, *amartya.development as freedom, new york knoft 1999, p.178*



with and power within. Empowerment can also be regarded as a process of awareness, of capacity building leading to greater participation, effective decision making power and control leading to transformative action. The questions surrounding women's empowerment, the condition and position of women have now become critical to the human rights based approaches to development. The Cairo conference in 1994 organised by the UN on Population and Development called attention to women's empowerment as a central focus and UNDP developed the gender empowerment measure which focuses on the three variables that reflect women's participation in society-political power or decision – making, education and health.

Women's political participation has been considered to be a major measure of women's empowerment. Champions of liberalism like John Stuart Mill had advocated women's participation in governance. The indicators of women empowerment in the Beijing conference 1995 highlight increased access to and ability to gather information amongst several others. It is in this context that RTI can play a major role.

This paper looks at RTI case studies and tries to find out how it has worked for women. Women have been at the centre of the movement as sixty percent of the members of Mazdoor Kishan Shakti Sanghathan (MKSS) are women. It is these women and men who provide the breadth of vision that characterizes MKSS. It is necessary to explore how successful Right to Information Act is in the context of woman issues.

Cases related to women issues solved through RTI- RTI for legitimate rights

-Individual women have received help as Khetramani Smantra recovering her right to land because of RTI. She had been constantly visiting the district office for the last one and a half years for her original land deed but the clerk concerned did not hand over the documents to them. She had bought a small piece of land near Dhauli, Bhubaneswar. She went to the RTI camp held in Bhubaneswar, seeking guidance as to how she could redress her grievances using RTI. At the camp, Khetramani was assisted by volunteers in filling up the application for information. A few volunteers accompanied her to the DSO and approached the head clerk to know the cause of the delay in providing the original documents. The response from the clerk was not very convincing.

The case was discussed with the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the DSO. When the officials were asked to look into the case and produce the land deed papers immediately, the head clerk then produced the document in 15 minutes and officially handed it over to Khetramani who finally got justice after resorting to the RTI tool. While this case may happen irrespective of gender, women have also been able to fight such distinctions through RTI.

-Teju and Dakhu Bai are both widows living in Narayanji ka Bida village in Vijayapura.. They were over 70 years old, bent over with wrinkles on their faces that spoke of lives full of struggle. They had received a widow's pension just once, and then it stopped coming. When they made an application under the RTI Act, their pensions magically resumed. Today, they proudly display their documents, which are carefully preserved in files.

-Vinita Kamte, wife of IPS Officer Ashok Kamte who died fighting attackers during 26/11 Mumbai attack, in her book "To The Last Bullet" brought to light the various lapses on part of the Indian security system that lead to the killing of many including Ashok Kamte. The expose' was based on the information gathered with the provision of Right to Information Act in place. In an interview to a news portal Vinita Kamte clearly stated that the post mortem report of the deceased police officer was also obtained through a request made under RTI Act.

The usage of RTI act by women in Coimbatore

Of particular mention is of the usage of RTI by women of Vinobaji Nagar of Vilankurichi, a small village in Coimbatore. These women who are daily laborers, with domestic and financial responsibilities have used RTI act for fulfilling their basic needs. They have used the act for getting their ration cards, for the pension due etc. They now want to use it for a cause of getting electricity connections etc. In the urban scenario, the Ladies Circle of Saibaba colony which has 105 members has got together to file an RTI application regarding the storm water drainage system. There have also been many applications filed on property rights, gender rights etc.



Awareness by gender

In a study conducted by the conducted by the RaaG and Samya centre for equity studies, it has been found that 67% of the men and 54% of the women interviewed stated that they had heard of the RTI Act. The least disparity between men and women, in terms of awareness of the RTI act, was witnessed in Delhi where 67% men and 64% women who were interviewed, had heard of the RTI act. Patna and Jaipur were the low performers with almost a 20% difference between men and women.

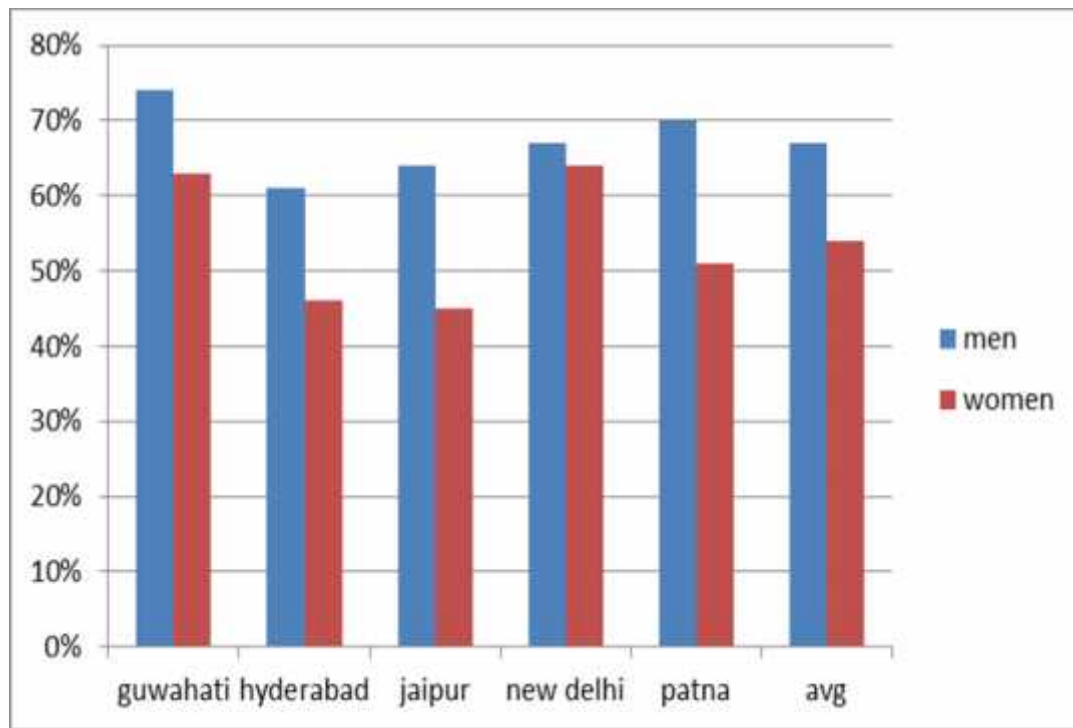


Fig 1. Level of awareness of RTI act

METHODOLOGY

Right to awareness campaign in Coimbatore

On the basis of the review collected a pilot study was undertaken to understand the awareness level of RTI amongst women. The study was conducted in Coimbatore city. The respondents were teachers, students and professionals. The study was conducted in two levels, pre and post test, i.e before and after the power point presentation. Interviews and observation were used to collect data. Hence a triangulation methodology was adopted.

Sampling

The first part of the questionnaire was designed to collect the demographic details of the respondents. Majority of the students were doing their under graduate program in different streams. They were under 25years of age. The teachers and professionals were between the age group of 25years to 55years. All of them had completed their post graduation. Responses were taken from 100 respondents.

Analysis (Pre Study)

93% of the respondents were aware of the injustice, delay in taking decisions, corruption etc were questionable by the public in a democracy. 81% of the respondents have the belief that transparency will put an end to the malpractices in the governmental administration.

Majority of the respondents i.e 82% of them have not tried or planned to question the government authorities about a particular decision. 18% have never tried or planned.



Some of the responses that were given for an open ended question as to the context in which they wanted to question the authorities were about the Lokpal bill, Inflation , Power shortage, 2G spectrum and in the activity of a municipal decision.

About 42% of the respondents had heard about RTI through the television, which ranked first, 41% through word of mouth, 27% through the newspapers, and 7% through the radio. Majority of the respondents i.e 84% were aware that RTI is a fundamental right.

68% of the respondents wanted to be socially aware and hence wanted to know about RTI, 28% of them wanted to increase their knowledge and 24% of them wanted to use it for a cause.

The level of awareness according to 71% of the respondents was medium in Coimbatore and 34% agreed that it was low. 86% of the respondents knew that the provisions of the act were not meant for lawyers alone.

Post study analysis

The post study analysis was the second part of the analysis which was carried out after the powerpoint presentation was completed. The questionnaire was designed so as to test the effectiveness of the campaign to see if there was any change in the responses of the respondents after the facts and application of the act was explained.

The responses showed an increase in the percentage level of the respondents for the query that injustice, delay in taking decisions and corruption is questionable by the public in a democracy.

98% of the respondents said yes. 93% of the respondents agreed that transparency would put an end to malpractices which was a marginal increase from the pre test results. Almost 100% agreed to question the government authorities on a particular decision. 75% of the respondents were aware that RTI was a right enshrined in the article 19(1)a of the constitution.

The awareness lecture triggered as many as 95% of the respondents to use the RTI act with the purpose of being a responsible citizen. The RTI application is to be addressed to the PIO and this was clearly understood by the respondents as 96% had marked the right option.

The answer that the fee to be collected is Rs.10 was also marked correctly by the respondents. The required information can also be acquired in the form of CD's, photo copies or certified samples was also understood by the respondents.

After the presentation about the procedures for filing an application, 89% strongly agree that RTI is a tool for securing information from a government organization. 79% strongly agree that RTI can be used to fight corruption. Around 70% agree that certain departments are excluded from the ambit of the RTI act.

The statement that the third party information and private bodies being included in the RTI act was disagreed by 80% of the respondents. Almost 92% of the respondents expressed confidence to file the RTI application by themselves. 96% were of the opinion that awareness campaigns would encourage the citizens to use the RTI act independently and agreed to recommend the program to friends and relatives.

Gender comparison

From the data collected, a comparative study on the level of awareness amongst men and women was undertaken. This aspect has been studied to find if there is a difference in the level of awareness amongst genders .The sampling size has been taken to be 255 between men and women.t- test was applied to the data .

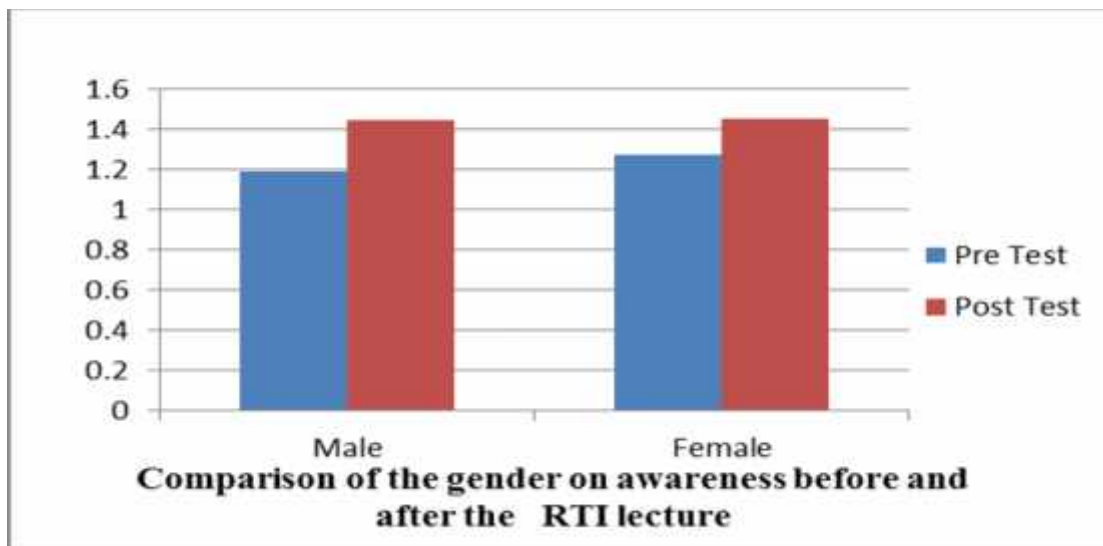


Table 1. Comparison of the gender on awareness before and after the RTI lecture

Awareness Test	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre Test	Female	97	1.2731	.23395	.02375
	Male	159	1.1938	.24682	.01957
Post Test	Female	97	1.4489	.20398	.02071
	Male	159	1.4466	.17182	.01363

Table 2. t-test for Equality of gender-wise Pre and Post test Means on awareness

Awareness test	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Pre Test between genders	2.544	254	.012	.07932	.03118
Post Test between genders	.095	254	.924	.00226	.02379



From Table 1 and 2 it can be inferred that while there is a significant difference between genders on awareness before RTI lecture (pre test p-value < 0.02), there is no significant difference between genders on awareness after the RTI the lecture (post test p-value >0.9). This means that both female and male participants gained equal level of awareness after the RTI lecture.

Tarde (1903), a French sociologist was the first to point out the important role of opinion leaders or change agents in the diffusion models. Over a period of time researchers have shifted their focus from interpersonal influence on individual decision making to a broader understanding of interpersonal networks of communication through which influence and innovations disseminated through society (Melkote & Steeves, 2004). In the present study, the willingness to use the act after the awareness lecture by the respondents highlights the important role played by the change agent.



DISCUSSION

The awareness talk which was in the form of a power point presentation with the basic procedures for filing an RTI application was well received by the respondents. The awareness talk can be considered as one of the methodologies to make the citizens use the RTI act.

By making the citizens understand the procedures of the RTI act, which would encourage them to use the act, it would make them more participatory. Over a period of time see the public authorities become accountable by maintaining the records, log books in order and hence be transparent in governance. This would be the overall indicator for progress and development.

The study also reveals the important role played by opinion leaders as mentioned in the two step flow model who disseminate information about the act that can help in creating awareness .

Women can be empowered by the usage of the act for getting information which could help solve many issues and should be encouraged to make avail of their right. They can be made opinion leaders who could reach out to a wider audience and influence the others to be benefitted. The Samya centre for equity studies and the RaaG group, have recommended the Self-help groups be mandated to spread awareness about the RTI act and facilitate the filing of applications and appeals. The fifth national synthesis report reports that official perception has changed as SHG's are being used to achieve RTI awareness. The realization of entitlements has been primarily through RTI, NREGS and the women further train communities. These have been seen in places like Madhyapradesh, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Bihar.

CONCLUSION

RTI is boon to women if it is implemented properly. From the cases it is evident that RTI is not just a tool for the right to information, but one that links together all the natural rights of citizenship - to wages, to dignity against gender bias, to be able to claim their rightful share to property and to a better quality of life in general. As Aruna Roy the protagonist of RTI points out that the presence of women is essential as they instinctively understand what it is to be marginalized and over time, men in the movement have begun to understand the importance of involving women .Women on the other hand should understand and avail of their right. It can strengthen women in difficult circumstances and can empower them to be a part of a well informed society.

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