



Google

Google's Internet Saathi program

Globally, 48 percent of women use the internet, compared with 58 percent of men.¹ Increasing digital literacy and building a more inclusive internet are necessary to ensure women can access the opportunities of the future.

In India, Google's Internet Saathi program provides women in rural communities with a two-day training on digital literacy to become Internet Saathis—a term meaning “friend” in Hindi. These Saathis then provide training on the basics of internet access to other women in their communities and surrounding areas.

The impetus for the Internet Saathi program is closely linked with Google's core mission: “to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.” However, as India was growing to become the second largest internet base in the world, with more than 400 million internet users,² there was an entire section of the population that was being left out—women.

SOCIAL NORMS OFTEN EXACERBATE DIGITAL DIVIDES IN INDIA

In 2014, fewer than 30 percent of internet users in India were women, with widening gaps in rural India where women accounted for 10 percent of users and represented one of the largest online gender gaps globally.³ Google realized that while access and knowledge were prevalent barriers preventing women from using the internet, social norms were an even bigger barrier; in many parts of India, women are not permitted to own their own smartphone devices because of the belief that they may be negatively influenced by the internet.⁴ For many South Asian women, access to devices is predicated on sharing, which, even in the most well-meaning instances, opens them up to monitoring and additional scrutiny of online activities. A study of 199 South Asian women, including 103 from India, found high levels of sharing for mobile devices that limited women's full use of technologies even in emergency situations.⁵

GOOGLE'S INTERNET SAATHIS

The Internet Saathi program seeks to encourage rural women in India to develop and pass on digital literacy skills in their communities. It builds on previous Google initiatives such as Helping Women Get Online and Internet Moms that focused primarily on women based in urban areas. By extending the focus to rural India, Google viewed the Internet Saathi program as an opportunity for greater influence in areas where restrictive social norms combine with infrastructure limitations to make it even more difficult for women to benefit

Quick facts about Google

Google is a multinational corporation that specializes in internet-related services and products.

Founding year: 1998

Footprint: Global

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from the expanded access to jobs, learning, and assets that platforms can provide.

To launch the program, Google partnered with Tata Trusts, one of India's oldest and largest philanthropic organizations. Tata Trusts provided a network of local nongovernmental organizations through which potential Saathis could be identified. Both Google and Tata Trusts recognized the need for Internet Saathi to draw on local customs and practices and modeled the initiative on India's traditional information distribution system. As such, Internet Saathis are akin to a village postal carrier—the single point contact for the village with the outside world.

Following hands-on training provided by Google, Internet Saathis are sent out into their villages with two smartphones or tablets for 20 days a month for over six months. During this time, they create awareness about the benefits of the internet, including how to use it to source critical information such as weather updates and relief measures. Once an Internet Saathi completes the training in her own village, she moves to adjoining villages where she trains additional women to get online. With the physical and literacy tools provided through the program, Internet Saathis are able to develop and grow their own businesses, improving livelihoods for themselves and their families.

THE IMPACT OF INTERNET SAATHIS

There are currently more than 81,500 Internet Saathis who have helped more than 30 million women learn about the internet in over 290,000 villages across 20 states in India. Third-party impact studies (by marketing research agencies Kantar TNS and IPSOS) reveal the following:

- About 70 percent of Saathis think they are seen as a source of information in their village; people are coming to them consistently for answers on how (a) to help children with schoolwork, (b) to learn new cooking recipes, (c) to search for jobs, and (d) to run a business.
- Eight in 10 Saathis and their beneficiaries believe people in their village respect them more.
- Nine in 10 women beneficiaries believe in a woman's right to express herself and earn a living for her family.
- Seven in 10 women who attended the trainings with the Saathis have seen an improvement in their children's education.

More important, the voices of Internet Saathis themselves have become a huge reflection of the program's influence.

Internet Saathi Rohini Shirke

Rohini Shirke has been running a small honeybee-keeping unit since 2015. In 2016 she was introduced to the Internet Saathi program. After her association with the program, she realized the power of the internet and started promoting her product and now accepts orders online.

She used the internet to learn best practices for healthy beekeeping and honey collection, as well as building a brand identity to design and market her product. Rohini is now creating a website to further boost her business. Her visits to neighboring villages while training women on the internet helped her create a strong network and are further helping her generate more business. She now engages with people and convinces them about the quality and purity of her product. She has trained more than 1,000 women on internet literacy.



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The positive economic impact driven by access to information and resources is helping Google take the Internet Saathi program to the next level, creating income-generating opportunities for the network of Internet Saathis and the women trained by them. Three in 10 Saathis and 2 in 10 beneficiaries have set up some form of business, often earning between Rs 3,000 and Rs 5,000 every month. In 2019, the Internet Saathi program was expanded to Punjab and Odisha—a state that boasts the second highest growth in new internet user addition in India.⁶ In Punjab, the program will cover around 5,000 villages. In Odisha, the program was launched in Sindhia in Baleshwar and will cover over 16,000 villages.

- 1 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database, December 2019, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/wtid.aspx>.
- 2 Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International, "Internet in India 2015," report, IAMAI, Mumbai, 2015, <https://cms.iamai.in/Content/ResearchPapers/a58218be-d7d9-4268-84e6-6c58aa4322ce.pdf>.
- 3 Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International, "Internet in India 2015."
- 4 Google, "Toward Gender Equality Online: Research with the Next Billion Users," April 2019, http://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/toward_gender_equality_online.pdf.
- 5 Nithya Sambasivan, Garen Checkley, Amna Batool, Nova Ahmet, et al., "'Privacy Is Not for Me, It's for Those Rich Women': Performative Privacy Practices on Mobile Phones by Women in South Asia," Proceedings of the Fourteenth Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security, Baltimore, MD, August 12–14, 2018, <https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/soups2018/soups2018-sambasivan.pdf>.
- 6 Kantar IMRB, "21st Edition ICUBE: Digital Adoption and Usage Trends," December 2018, https://imrbint.com/images/common/ICUBE%E2%84%A2_2019_Highlights.pdf.