

## Colloquium

### Impact of HiWEL learning stations on women living in shelter homes

Ritu Dangwal and Krati Sharma

Address for correspondence: Dr Ritu Dangwal, Hole-in-the-Wall Education Ltd, NIIT Ltd, 8 Balaji Estate, Sudarshan Munjal Marg, Kalkaji, New Delhi 110019, India. Email: ritud@niit.com

#### Background

India, despite growing tangentially in global economic stature, has a population of over 78 million homeless people. While the phenomenon of homelessness violates the most basic of human rights for all populations, it influences every facet of women's life affecting their physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioural growth. The prevalent attitude and stereotypes in Indian society towards vulnerable categories such as abandoned women, single women, widows, women who have been sexually exploited, abused victims of rape and intimate partner violence lead to deep rooted sociocultural and psychological impact on them. Most of these women are constantly at risk to several forms of traumatic reminders such as physical and sexual assault, abrupt separation from their children and partners which further impede the recovery from trauma. Bhat *et al*, 2007, have stated that, "1 in 3 women aged 15–49 years has experienced physical violence; and 1 in 10 has experienced sexual violence."

The previous figures clearly highlight the plight of women in India and draws attention towards the alarming need to address issue of gender-based violence and thus design interventions to safeguard women's right to secure life and access of rights. In spite of various international and national laws and treaties, women continue to be subjugated to the most subtle forms of violations in the course of life and in many cases, it becomes one of the contributing factors leading to homelessness and vicious circle of abuse. Sustainable programmes and intended implementation of policies towards empowering vulnerable groups and ensuring their safety has always been a challenge.

#### Mahila Mandirams and Hole-in-the-Wall Education

In a pioneering experiment conducted by Prof Sugata Mitra in 1999, known as Hole-in-the-Wall Education Limited (HiWEL) experiments, a computer was placed in a kiosk created within a wall in a slum at Kalkaji, Delhi, and children were allowed to use it freely. The experiment aimed at proving that kids could be taught by computers very easily without any formal training. Prof Mitra termed this as minimally invasive education (Mitra *et al*, 2001). These experiments were replicated at many places, and the work demonstrated that groups of children, irrespective of their background can learn to use computers and the Internet on their own using public computers in open spaces such as roads and playgrounds, even without knowing English. The guiding philosophy of HiWEL is to bridge the "Digital Divide" by offering learning experiences through minimal invasion into the learning realm.

Interestingly, the nature and motivation of a teacher seems to affect the quality of education and almost 69% of the teachers wanted to migrate to their nearest urban centres (Mitra *et al*, 2008), and thus it was important to look into educational technologies, particularly those that enable learners to achieve educational objectives without teachers (Inamdar, 2004). HiWEL learning station (LS) emerged as an intervention to cater to the children living in rural areas with a premise that quality teachers would not go/serve in remote/rural areas. In a similar manner,



Figure 1: Mahila Mandiram, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala



Figure 2: Inmate using HiWEL learning station

*Mahila Mandiram* also runs vocational courses like knitting, jewellery making, etc, but retaining the facilitators has been an area of concern for these institutions. In the given scenario, a parallel observation can be drawn to find out if it resonates the same thinking as mentioned previously, and if yes, then it becomes equally critical to have a robust mechanism in place for women living in *Mahila Mandirams*. Figure 1 shows the way to Mahila Mandiram located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Figure 2 shows an inmate using the HiWEL Learning Station.

### Objective

In an endeavour to empower women by engaging them into a similar self-learning model, the HiWEL stations were set up at *Mahila Mandirams* in eight districts of Kerala. Department of Social Welfare, Government of Kerala, India, collaborated with HiWEL in an attempt to provide informal education by occupying women through exposure to life skills-related games, educational games and curriculum-related content and interesting audiovisuals regenerating their desire to continue learning and to build their self-confidence. It is a unique partnership, the first attempt of its

kind in the residential institutions in Kerala trying to examine how adolescents and elderly women will take the HiWEL LS.

### **Research methodology**

In an attempt to understand the receptivity and impact of HiWEL LS on women staying in shelter homes, qualitative research was undertaken in the form of interviews and observations. It was conducted across eight *Mahila Mandirams* in Kerala. The case studies were derived from women living in the *Mahila Mandirams* and their opinion towards the HiWEL LS.

### **Findings**

The results are reported in the form of case studies. In the present study, only a few have been selected for reporting purpose. Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

### **Profile of women staying in Mahila Mandirams, Kerala**

Women staying in *Mahila Mandirams* constitute a homogenous group in the age group of 16–60 years including the following group of women:

- 60% women are illiterate and therefore can not read nor write;
- out of remaining 40%, 20% can read and write, but do not understand Malayalam (regional language of Kerala); about 5–7% women in the remaining section belong to the differently able group, most of whom are facing challenges in the mental and cognitive domain; and in the remaining 13–15%, women can read and write and have passed their matriculation and hence willing to participate in the present study.

### **Mahila Mandirams—interaction with the superintendent**

The Department of Social Welfare, Government of Kerala, appoints superintendents in each of the *Mahila Mandiram* who heads the institution and looks after all administrative and logistic affairs. Each *Mahila Mandiram* has a capacity of about 20–25 inmates, and superintendents interact with them on a day-to-day basis. This section highlights their view point and role of HiWEL LS in *Mahila Mandirams*.

Shreelekha, one of the matrons from *Mahila Mandiram*, Trikannapuram, shared the view that women in need for care and protection seek shelter in the homes. While some women aimlessly wandering on streets find their way to the shelter homes on their own, others come through referrals by local bodies and area police. Women living in shelter homes are not confined within four walls and have the liberty of going out and earn a living for self. Most of them take up jobs such household work, working in *anaganwadis*, etc. to support their expenses. A formal letter seeking approval for leaving home is to be submitted by the woman to be repatriated.

Giving an account of daily activities, she shared how women spend their day in the shelter home.

They assign the work among themselves on rotational basis taking care of all household chores such as cleaning, dish washing, cooking etc. Most of them have also enrolled for vocational trainings like knitting, tailoring, carpet making, jewellery making etc. In leisure time, they watch television preferably T.V. soaps and Malayalam movies. These women carry a lot of baggage and though the shelter homes provides from protection from the outside world, the emotional needs are often left unaddressed and remains one of the most sensitive groups to be dealt with.

The setting up of HiWEL LS has also been able to engage some of them. The LS are opened every day and witness usage timing approximately for an hour or so. Many women accompanied by their children are often seen using the LS. As far as adult women are concerned, 3 out of 11 women are presently using the applications learning alphabets and watching Akshaya programmes (videos in *Malayalam*), while other women use simple programmes in HiWEL LS. There are some women who stand in front of the screen and enjoy watching others play.

Ms Praseeda has stayed as the Superintendent in one of the *Mahila Mandiram* for over a year now and speaks fondly of the HiWEL LS. She says,

Irrespective of the time during a day, anyone who is free and who wishes to use the computer comes and uses it. I am glad it keeps the women busy and occupied instead of staying idle and doing nothing. I have seen the women playing educational games on it and sometimes, they access the life skills videos that are in the system. Most of them come here to play games but in my opinion, if they access the videos and curriculum that teaches you computer applications, it will be more useful for them.

She strongly feels that if the women use it properly, the LS may even help them in getting a job. For instance, she states,

Anyone who comes here spends very less time. They do not have the patience to use it for longer duration so as to learn something concrete out of it. I on the other hand believe that if they do, they may even get a job in private firms as DTP.

### **Glimpse at women's reaction towards HiWEL LS**

*HiWEL, a ray of hope for livelihood for single mothers*

Suhara is a 26-year-old inmate living with an infant in the *Mahila Mandiram* for over a year now. She also has two elder children staying in children's home and she tries to meet them at regular interval. After years of troubled marriage against the wishes of their family, she was later abandoned by her husband. The conversation also revealed she was suicidal and had also attempted to kill herself on being opposed at the time of marriage. She is hopeful of her husband taking her home at some point in life.

She seeks opportunities to serve her children in every possible way and sees HiWEL LS as a ray of hope. She wants to polish her basic skills on typing and basic of computers to be able to work and earn a decent living for her children. She has studied up to 10th grade and has also done a basic course in computers. Having done a computer course, she finds the HiWEL LS all the more interesting and sharing her views about HiWEL LS, she says,

I use it quite frequently in my free time; I enjoy typing, watching Akshaya videos (Malayalam content) and using DTP. Other women use it randomly and can be often seen using the Malayalam content.

HiWEL learning stations carries a lot of potential, provided, inmates are properly oriented towards its usage and the content is made available in Malayalam (regional language). There are many issues that women want to learn and in a set up like this, I see HiWEL learning station as a prospective medium to cater women like me living inside the homes.

*HiWEL as a medium to supplement education and leisure activity*

Another inmate, Asoodhi is a 17-year-old minor girl rescued by the police after being repeatedly abused by her family for not letting her continue her studies. She has been living in the shelter home for over 4 months now and has also enrolled into a nearby regular school.

Presently studying in 12th grade, she foresees herself serving the police department:

I am fond of using HiWEL learning station and have been using it for few months now. Some of my favourite applications are quizzes, games like snake and paint etc. Another application that helps me in my course curriculum is "Wikipedia." I spend almost half an hour every day on the learning station.

Similarly, two adolescent girls namely Naseera and Ashiday staying in the *Mahila Mandiram* for over 9 months now recalls the good time spent with family. They were sent to shelter homes because of financial crisis and because of their family not being able to take care of them. Although their parents come and visit them regularly, they miss being with them. Both of them have studied till 10th grade and regularly use HiWEL LS from its inception.

With the frequency usage of over 3 times a week, we enjoy playing games, watching cartoons. We have also tried their hand on using MS word and PowerPoint applications in the last six months. Though, we haven't thought of future goals, but if given an opportunity, we would like to pursue higher education.

Within 6 months from inception, HiWEL LS seems to have definitely added value to keen learners yearning for opportunity to grow even in a setup like that of a shelter home.

### *Age is no bar for learning*

Shanti in her mid-40s, learnt how to use the LS on her own, and now, she even helps out other inmates with what they do not know at the LS. When asked who taught her how to use the HiWEL LS, she quips, "I saw other women using it and by observing them, I explored it on my own."

She uses the LS every evening after her daily chores. She adds,

For a very long time, I had just keenly watched others using it. Since I was using it for the first time, I had to be sure of myself before I start using. Then I slowly started exploring the games. I know how to play some of the games here but due to my weak eye sight, I try not to play most of the times. I however help other women when they open the games since I know the rules.

She further states,

I believe that all the younger generations should learn to use computers since in today's world, no job functions without the use of computers. For me, it is not particularly learning a vocational skill at the LS but a feel good factor that even at this age; I am learning and discovering something new.

As she speaks, one can not help notice the gleam in her eyes of having access to a thing like a computer, which was quite far-fetched before the HiWEL LS came to her *Mahila Mandiram*.

### *HiWEL LS for new inmates*

Renuka is a 15-year-old minor who shared her story of being rescued by the police from the shackles of hopelessness into the shelter home. She was found working as a domestic helper and was then brought to *Mahila Mandiram*.

She has been living in the home for over 3 weeks now, she finds the place friendly. She is well aware of the fact that, being a minor, she would need the committee's approval to be repatriated and surety of being properly taken care of by the family. Among the vocational courses, she prefers to learn tailoring. As of now, she is not accustomed to using HiWEL LS and looks at it as a great opportunity and wants to make maximum use of it in the future.

## **Summary**

Understanding the nature of the group, an integrated scheme of programmes needs to be designed towards holistic care and development of these survivors of violence at not just individual level but also at group level. The previous case studies reflects that access to HiWEL LS within a span of 6 months is beginning to shape the interest of the women towards computer usage as not just a recreational activity but also as an opportunity to learn and grow beyond the restricted environment of the shelter home.

## **Acknowledgement**

We would like to acknowledge the Department of Social Welfare, Kerala, Government of India, for helping us install LS at their shelter homes.

## **References**

- Bhat, P., Arnold, E., Gupta, K., Kishor, S., Parasuran, S., Arokiasamy, S., *et al* (2007). National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) India. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and Macro International. Volume 1. URL: <http://www.measuredhs.com/pubs/pdf/FRIND3/15Chapter15.pdf>.
- Inamdar, P. (2004). Computer skills development by children using "hole in the wall" facilities in rural India. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 20, 3, 337–350. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet20/inamdar.ht>.
- Mitra, S. & Rana, V. (2001). Children and the internet: experiments with minimally invasive education in India. *The British Journal of Educational Technology*, 32, 2, 221–232.
- Mitra, S., Dangwal, R. Thadani (2008). Effects of remoteness on the quality of education: a case study from North Indian schools. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 24, 2, 168–180.
- Homelessness in India, wikipedia.org. Retrieved May 8, 2012, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness\\_in\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_India)