

Online earning, a promising source impacting poverty and women empowerment: A case study from high mountainous nexus of Himalaya-Karakoram-Hindukush, Pakistan

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Abstract: Background and aim of the study: Gender discriminatory patriarchic mindsets are a prime factor behind women empowerment and poverty leaving women folk susceptible towards socio-economic shocks. Communities in the northern Pakistan have remain in marginalization for centuries and women have been its victim. Study was aimed at evaluation of women focused an 'online earning' initiative by KADO. **Methods:** Study followed a Rapid Appraisal tool and techniques including interviews from the trainees, management, master trainers, focus group discussion, secondary data collection and direct observations. Organization conducted 3 months long online earning training at four districts. A total of 128 unemployed educated women were trained. **Results:** More than 100 youth have started their first online earning ranging from \$3 to \$1000 per month each with an ever increasing trend. Women started their earning feel confident and hopeful for future towards contributing into socio-economic development of their families and to impact their respective societies. **Conclusion:** With little wise investments in online earning trainings for women governments and nongovernmental organizations can impact women empowerment and poverty while bridging the digitally divided world. ICT offers a promising factor for poor communities across rural settings of Asia and beyond. Elance and tech entrepreneurship are on a steady rise around the globe and hold great prospective for future. Developing countries having weaker GDP growth and poor governance suffer from bulging populations and high ratios of unemployment can benefit from such experiences and models.

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Introduction

Karakoram-Hindukush-Himalaya (KHKH) is the home of a series of world towering mountains including the highest and the second highest and famous peaks, Mount Everest and the K2 (AHKH, 2015). In short it is called Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region. It stretches across political boundaries of eight countries, i.e. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. It covers an area of total 3,441,719 sq.km (ICIMOD, 2015). Region is rich for natural resources (Rasul, 2014). It directly provides essential ecosystem goods and services to more than 210 million people and indirectly supports around 1.3 billion (Kark et. al., 1992). Similarly it is most unfortunate landscape to nurture almost half of the world's poor (HKH – HYCOS, 2002).

Most of the region area is under ice sheet and people hold small agricultural land pockets (Tulachan and Jabbar, 2015). Majority of the population rely on agriculture and pastoral practices for their sustenance which is on decline (Ning, 2013; Karki et. al., 1992). Communities need alternative sources to sustain their livelihood in the region (ICIMOD, 2013; Karki et. al.,

1992). Several traditional practices have changed over time and it continues to adopt ever changing environment and its needs (Karki, 2012).

Karakoram mountainous region is an integral part of HKH region of Pakistan. Almost 51% of total area of Pakistan is covered by HKH (ICIMOD, 2015). This part of the world is not an exceptional to rest of HKH region. Similarly, harsh terrain and lack of enabling institutional frameworks and policies have constrained and pose serious challenges to sustainable development of this important mountain system (Karki, 2012). Area exhibits faces of 'extreme' vulnerability and risks due to climate and global changes fueled by unemployment (SAN, 2015; Karki, 2012; Panhwar, 2010).

Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has played a prominent role in addressing the critical issues of poverty, education, health, infrastructure, gender and institutional development faced by the local communities of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral (Ebrahim, 2005; Task Force on Health Systems Research, 2004; Shaffer, 2002). Engaging women and men in education and socio-economic uplift has helped people to create alternative resources for their

livelihood (Jaffer, & Gul, 2013; Marshall, 2010). Over a period of more than three decades engagement AKDN encouraged civil society growth and helped communities to institutionalize their efforts to create impact across all walks of life (Kaiser, 1996; Clark, 1993). Karakoram Area Development Organization (KADO) is also a brain child of such efforts.

The emergence of an information society has created new social exclusions and aggravated old ones by creating digital exclusion (Wong et al., 2009). However, KADO attempted to bridge-up the digitally deprived farmer communities to the market well beyond its remoteness and geographical isolation of Gilgit-Baltistan (Dawn, 2015). It has executed several 'Information and Technology' (IT) related projects for the last several years, however, online and offline vocational trainings have more potential to expand in the years to come. Such an activity will help youth, particularly educated girls to keep away from increasing frustration of unemployment.

According a survey, freelancing is on rising in developed countries like USA where 53 million freelancing Americans already contribute more than \$700 billion to national economy. For many, this is just the start of an era of living in a liberating the

workforce (Elance, 2015). Fifty seven percent (57%) of freelancers report increase in 2012 income; future looks bright with 67 percent predicting further increases in 2013 (Elance, 2015). Survey respondents also predicted the freelance jobs that would experience the most growth in 2013 which include;

1. Web Programming
2. Mobile Apps
3. Graphic & Web Design
4. Online Marketing
5. Content Writing

Moreover, this survey revealed that freelance workforce is happier (70%) than the full-time employees (79%). Similarly, majority of freelancers (62%) work on 2-6 projects at any given time. The survey also discovered that independent professionals prefer this new way of working (Elance, 2015). According to Fabio Rosati, CEO of Elance-oDesk, besides many good things there are some difficulties faced by the freelancing professionals i.e. finding jobs, collaborating with the clients and getting paid on time (Upwork, 2014).

Material and Methods

Study area



Fig. 2: KADO operation area, Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral.

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is one of the least connected provinces in Pakistan. Flight services and the Karakoram Highway are the only means for linkage with rest of the world. In addition, poor road conditions and long distance makes travelling difficult. As a result, it is difficult for products produced in GB to access the market in an effective and efficient manner. To further complicate matters, the remoteness of GB as well as constant security issues lead to limited possibilities for internet access, which even more isolates the inhabitants from the outside world. Due to this lack of opportunities and market access, people in GB continue to be marginalized (Fig. 1).

Methods:

Study followed a Rapid Appraisal tool and techniques including interviews from the trainees, management, master trainers, focus group discussion, secondary data collection and direct observations. Organization conducted 3 months long online earning training at four districts. A total of 128 unemployed educated women were trained.

Admission criteria

For the said trainings, candidates carrying qualifications higher than high school certificate (10th grade, O level) were invited. Preference was given to those who had basic know-how about computer operations.

IT Training Centres

Seven IT Centres were established in four administrative districts i.e.

1. Gilgit (Danyor and Gilgit),
2. Skardu (Skardu town),
3. Ghizir (Ghakuch village) and
4. Hunza (Aliabad, Karimabad and Gulmit).

Skill Set Module

Across all seven iT centres, different market oriented free skills are imparted with hands on experience. These skill heads are

1. Graphics/Web Designing
2. E-Marketing (SEO/SMM, Data Entry/Digitization/E-marketing)
3. Online Resource Mobilization / Content Writing
4. Programming
5. Online Accounting and Finance
6. Forex Trading
7. Call Center
8. IT for Entrepreneurs
9. Solar Energy Solutions

Results and Discussion

Almost every one participated in the training remained enthusiastic to start making their income through online earning. Moreover, this helped girls living under socio-cultural limitations more to access

global labour market and try to explore new ways of making their income boost which is otherwise not even imaginable. Several participants already started working online, Rozina Aziz and Rizwana A are just few examples who have relected earnings on their profiles online (Fig. 2). This opportunity can be expanded to a wider scope to enable women and girls who cannot go out for jobs outside their villages or even sometimes their home. In certain situation freelancing seems the best potential facility to test their skills and wisdom while contributing into their family income.

Online profiles of some of the trainees and their earnings:

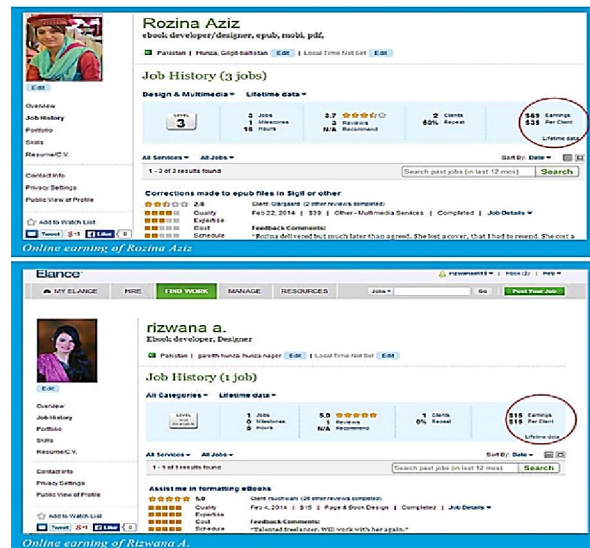


Fig. 2: Screen shots of two online profiles with history

Right now KADO has extended internet and space facility to these trainees except few who have established internet connectivity at their homes or visit internet café which scarcely exist in the area except towns and cities.

Trainee Voices

Here below are included some views expressed by some trainees after their graduation from these i-Tech centres;



Ms. Saneeta, a KADO-IT Centre graduate says: "I am the eldest daughter in my family. Entire family is dependent on income from a small carpentry shop run by my father. I got admission for e-publishing course and earned skill of designing e-books and now I am on-board with an international team working on an e-publishing project. Since then I

have worked over ten French projects earning up to \$1000”.



Ms. Saima Abbas, a graduate of e-marketing from Skardu Centre says: “I was tangled up in patriarchal restrictions but with the help from the prestigious institution KADO, I was able to free and educate myself. Before joining this training program I had perceived internet to be just for the sake of entertainment. But after the training I realized the potential of internet as I learned skills of data entry, web research and search engine optimization to earn online. I instantly applied my knowledge to seek increase my income and scored a job at O-Desk

within two weeks of my graduation and earned up to \$160 a week”.



“I had some prior knowledge of internet marketing but the training provided me practical exposure to the tools of online earning and began writing news posts for AllVoices soon after completing my training. This was the beginning of my success. I write blogs and news posts for Mountain TV, www.mountaintv.net along with writing business proposals for the corporates of Gojal Hunza. recently I won a fellowship of \$5500 to conduct anthropological research from Firebird Foundation USA” says **Mr. Didar Ali** from KADO i-Tech centre Gulmit Gojal, Hunza.

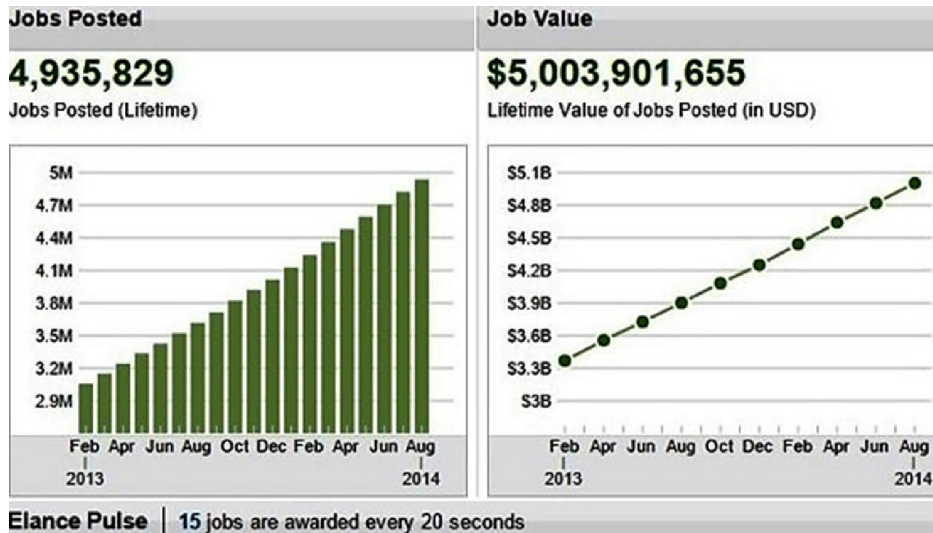


Fig. 3: Elance jobs posted and their corresponding worth in USD

Freelancing is increasing every day and expanding more opportunities (Fig. 3) for poor countries and societies suffering from poverty and low socio-economic income. Similarly across different developed countries it is reflected in their GDP. Although there are many limitations in the way starting from geographical remoteness, lack of infrastructure and socio-cultural barriers however even then the time is changing and these issues can be met using effective planning and enthusiastic implementation. World Bank is taking keen interest in fostering and promoting such activities. Many international NGOs like GIZ have already started funding to learn out of field experiences.

KADO model can be replicated in several other areas of Asia and beyond where poor economies are

suffering from lack of investments and job opportunities.

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