Digital Empowerment of Women

An analysis on how Information Access and Public Libraries can empower girls and women in rural India

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Thesis - Master CCG

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Characters (with spaces): 175.596

Abstract

Information is crucial to all human beings, especially marginalized groups such as rural women. The library has taken a new role upon itself; bringing information to women and thereby empower them.

This thesis takes its departure from the notion of equal access to information for all citizens in India. Within this notion data has been collected through fieldwork in India, and two contexts have been analysed: The Right to Information Act and Indian public libraries.

In 2005 the Indian Government implemented the Right to Information Act. The Act provides the setting for securing access to information for all citizens, in order to promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority. An informed citizenry is more likely to make better decisions, and are more equipped to make the government more accountable to the governed.

The two NGOs READ Global and Digital Empowerment Foundation have in the previous years developed libraries in rural India, each with a focus to empower women and to uphold the Right to Information Act. The women are invited to participate in the many activities at the libraries, as well as take an active role in further development of the libraries and their functions.

In this study theories by Jürgen Habermas (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1992) have been used as a framework to analyse the evidence from my fieldwork. Evidence from the fieldwork has been transformed into four concepts that function as the premises for the empowerment of women. The concepts; interests, access, ability and opportunity are all considered when analysing qualitative data with a backdrop to the idea of the public sphere.

The public sphere can create a deliberative democracy by allowing all citizens to access and participate in a debate. Citizens can take an active role in political processes by working to a common goal or need, and by making public authorities accountable for upholding Acts such as the RTI Act. Fraser argues (1992) that the public sphere is excluding by not allowing women to participate, this will be investigated in the light of the RTI Act.

This thesis is an analysis of digital empowerment of women through public libraries in rural India, in the context of existing democracy in India.

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List of Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
DEF	Digital Empowerment Foundation
FIA	Freedom of Information Act, India 2002
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IFLA	The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
ITU	International Telecom Union
READ	Rural Education and Development
RTI Act	Right to Information Act, India 2005
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NBP	National Broadband Plan
NKC	The National Knowledge Commission in India
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	The United Nations
UNBBC	The Broadband Commission for Digital Development
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council

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1.a. Introduction and Problem formulation

"The great democratising power of information has given us all the chance to effect change and alleviate poverty in ways we cannot even imagine today. Our task, your task…is to make that change real for those in need, wherever they may be. With information on our side, with knowledge a potential for all, the path to poverty can be reversed." (Former UN secretary general Kofi Annan)

Numerous of international and regional instruments have drawn attention to gender-related dimensions of human rights issues, the most important being the United Nation (hereafter UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (hereafter CEDAW) (UNPFA 2006). The Convention was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such. CEDAW is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Among the international human rights treaties, the Convention takes an important place in bringing the female half of humanity into the focus of human rights concerns (CEDAW, 1979). In situations of poverty, women have the least access to food, health, education, training and opportunities for employment and other needs. In the Convention women's right to equal education and access to educational information are highlighted.

Access to education, information and other inputs are important for improving women's welfare and position in the surrounding society. At the Millennium Summit in September 2000 the states of the UN reaffirmed their commitment to working toward a common goal of sustaining development and eliminating poverty. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) grew out of this agreement and resolutions of world conferences organised by the UN in the past decade. The goals have been commonly accepted as a framework for measuring development progress (OECD SDG, 2016).

Empowering women through education is one of the most crucial concerns on gender equality in the SDGs, and the UN and its agencies encourage the global community to discourage gender stereotypes and strengthen the status of women. One way of doing so is supporting the equal right to education and to provide equal access to information. The CEDAW Convention provides the basis for realising equality between genders and ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, the political- and public life.

The advancement through new technologies has had an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behavior, especially for children and young adults (IFLA, 2015). This advancement as well as the SDGs have given libraries worldwide a new focus: Empowerment of women through digital information.

Information technology makes a great contribution to the advancement of women, as information is crucial to all human endeavors, and therefore it is required, information is provided to all. Hence, it has been argued by IFLA the importance of this:

"Women play a crucial role in realising basic human rights for all and in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Meeting the information needs of women is a major contribution of the library field to global development." (IFLA, 2015)

In developing countries and rural areas, girls and women are often restricted to traditional roles and do not have equal access to technologies and technology training. Library stakeholders have emerged as strong advocates for comprehensive library and information services for women, and library systems around the world have already demonstrated their commitment to bridging gender gaps in ICT usage.

In a world that is more connected than ever, international institutions and missions, such as the UN and IFLA, are some of many elements included within the notion of globalisation. Globalisation and international relations play a significant role for individuals, institutions and nations. In 1997 Bill and Melinda Gates created the 'Gates Library Foundation' to bring computers and digital information to public libraries in the United States. In 2000 the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation began working with 'Global Libraries' in order to assist transitioning and developing countries. The foundation has collaborated with over 13,000 public libraries in almost 20 countries (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). Online access has become so important, to both individuals and for community development, that a 2011 report to the UN Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression declared Internet access to be a fundamental enabler of human rights (UN HRC, 2011).

International NGOs such as READ Global and Digital Empowerment Foundation (hereafter DEF) have committed themselves to support the SDGs and the UNHRC in key areas such as Internet access and women empowerment. Two of READ's main goals are: *Increased Access to Information* and *Increased Women's Empowerment* (READ India, 2013: 14) while DEF's focus is to work with the Indian Government to develop public libraries in rural India. The aspect of globalisation is particularly interesting in the case of READ Global and DEF. The

NGOs are both international organisations with country offices in New Delhi, India and are both financially funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in their work to empower women and marginalised groups and create educational and economic opportunities in rural areas.

International actor can influence states in many ways. India was reviewed by CEDAW in July 2014, in the light of the recent international attention coursed of incidences of violence against women. The Committee noted the gender gap in education and that the number of female dropouts are much higher than among male (CEDAW Review, 2014: 6). The Indian delegation responded with an argument of improvement related to adopted actions in the past few years. Rights-based approaches have been adopted in action and policies in India: The Right to Information Act (RTI Act), The Right to Public Services Act, and The Right to Education Act (CEDAW Review 2014: 2). In India, where around 67% of the population lives in villages and rural parts of the country (READ India, 2016), it becomes more necessary to utilise such tools for the social, economic, administrative and governance regeneration. Access to digital information and other inputs are important for improving women's welfare. The National Knowledge Commission in India (hereafter NKC) recognises libraries as an important element of the foundation of knowledge economy. But despite NKC's recognition of libraries, ITU's latest data claim that there are still big gaps in access to information:

"43% of the world's population is now online with some form of regular access to the Internet. This leaves 57% or some 4.2 billion of the world's people who still do not enjoy regular access to the Internet. In the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), only one out of every ten people is online. The gender digital divide is also proving incredibly difficult to overcome, reflecting broader social gender inequalities" (ITU, 2015: 8-9).

READ India has established community centers that are providing women access to digital tools and information, the chance to learn to read, knowledge about their rights, and the opportunity to learn a skill to earn a living. The READ centers purpose is to catalyse the development of a community, and the goal is for these centers to sustain themselves through the community's success (READ Global, 2016).

DEF has in cooperation with the Indian Government created the 'District Public Library Programme' to improve access to critical information and knowledge resources for the library community, including the disadvantaged groups, towards social and economic empowerment. For this thesis, in the light of the RTI Act, I will be studying the work of both READ and DEF, while considering the information access and digital empowerment of women.

This thesis takes its departure from the notion of equal access to information for rural women in India. The study has two premises. First, in the context of existing democracy in India, libraries are no longer a closed space where information and knowledge is only for a closed group of citizens. With digital libraries and open information access the libraries can have a sustainable impact on the individual and the public sphere. Second, within this context, intensifying globalisation processes influence nations and international and national organisations, and international relations can add value to the libraries with actions such as empowerment of women through open access. These two premises function as starting points for my path of inquiry.

On the basis of the initial context, I will consider the following problem statement:

How can information access and public libraries empower women and girls in rural India?

In order to examine this I seek to answer to following research questions:

- How can information change the lives of rural women in India?
- How can international relations add value to the empowerment?
- Can libraries in rural India innovate through internationalisation?
- How can the RTI Act influence the democratic notion in India?

To analyse these questions and the problem statement I will begin by explaining the concepts of globalisation and women empowerment.

I will in the following chapter present my research design and the method applied. My method of choice is the method of policy analysis by Carol Bacchi: *What's the Problem Represented to be* (Bacchi 2009). I hope to get an understanding of how the problem is represented in the RTI Act, and furthermore get a deeper understanding of why information access is considered so important in India.

Theory by Jürgen Habermas (1989) and Nancy Fraser (1992) on the public sphere will be presented in the following chapter. Hereafter, I will analyse the evidence from my fieldwork in India in the light of the theory on the public sphere. I have during my fieldwork conducted interviews with female users of the libraries as well as with representants from READ Global and DEF. Analysing this evidence from my fieldwork and by understanding the background of India and the reason to have open access, will open up for a discussion of the findings and end with a conclusion to my problem statement.

Through this thesis, I hope to contribute to the existing understanding of the information access and empowerment of rural women in India. Ideally, this could then be used to analyse the opportunities and challenges related to the work of NGOs in rural India. While my aim is not to make generalised conclusions about the actions and roles of the libraries, I believe I can from my part enrich the body of research in the field, as well as identify openings for additional research.

1.b Discussing the Concept of Globalisation and Empowerment

As a starting point, it is necessary to specify my definition of globalisation and empowerment of women. These two concepts are used throughout this thesis. They should not be seen as standing alone, but should be understood as concepts influencing each other.

Defining Globalisation
Globalisation is one of today's biggest buzzwords. In the academic world, the concept has been defined and discussed extensively. Globalisation as a concept is used broadly and by some scholars understood as a development process, to others as a phenomenon.

Globalisation is a process of interaction and integration among people, organisations, and nations, it is a process driven by international trade and investment, and aided by information technology. Globalisation affects both the environment, culture, political systems and economic developments, as well as citizens' physical well being in societies.

Anthony Giddens (1990) argues that globalisation is a process that can be identified in every dimension in contemporary life. For non-academic commentators globalisation is foremost understood as a development on a global-scale; activities across borders (Jones 2006: 2).
Zygmunt Bauman discusses in his book *Globalization - The Human Consequences* (2000) the rapid change of the world, and how globalisation has changed our perspectives on mobility. He explains how travelling is not just a human physical movement; travelling from one place to another, but is also the movement of information. Giddens (1990) debates on the transformation of time and space, as a part of globalisation. With modernity a shift in space has occurred, and space cannot be defined only as a physical location (Giddens 1990: 18). Because of growth and change, the meaning of time has changed as well. New technologies make it possible to "travel" without spending much time, and the dimensions of time are understood differently than before (Giddens 1990). The technological innovation has changed the societies. The Internet has been one of the biggest developments in the time

of globalisation. With one click you can be anywhere receiving any information. There are not any "natural borders" anymore (Bauman 2000: 77).

In this thesis, globalisation is defined as the interaction between nations and organisations, and with this used to understand how the global factors and actors can influence the empowerment of women in India. International mechanisms play a significant role in gender equality, and new technologies make it possible for the women to take an active role in their own empowerment. Globalisation has also influenced the development of libraries, bringing the internet into the institution, changing the access to information and opening up to more of the world.

<u>What does it mean to empower women?</u>
The international feminist movement can be traced back to the period 1890s-1910s, but a second wave did not began to gain momentum before the 1970s (UN Women, 2016). In 1975 declared the General Assembly of UN the year 1975 to be the International Women's Year and organised the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City. As an development to the conference, the Assembly subsequently declared the years 1975-1985 as the UN Decade for Women (UN Women, 2016).
UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) started a progress on 'mainstreaming' gender equality into development (Chant & Sweetman 2012: 518). In 1995 Hillary Clinton held her famous speech in Beijing for UN's Fourth World Conference on Women. In her speech she presented women's rights as human rights (UN, 1995).

One practical example of how to empower women can be by learning women a craft. By this, she can contribute to the house holding finances with her income from the craft. This will often give her a voice and higher her status in society. Empowering women can also be done by giving them access to information and teaching them about their rights. Gender equality aims to broader social and economic impact for women (Sweet & Chantman 2012: 518). A gender and development approach recognises gender inequality as a relations issue, and as a matter of structural inequality which needs addressing directly and not only by women, but by development institutions, governments and the wider society (ibid).

As the development of empowering women became mainstream, big international actors, such as the World Bank, also changed their view on the issue. World Bank professed that:

"Investing in women is critical for poverty reduction. It speeds economic development by raising productivity and promoting the more efficient use of resources; it produces

*significant social returns, improving child survival and reducing fertility, and it has considerable intergenerational pay-offs" (*in Sweet & Chantman 2012: 519*)*

The Director of World Bank (in Sweet & Chantman 2012: 520) claims that: "Investing in girls is the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing to do." This raises the question if investing in women is primarily to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, or to promote further economic liberalisation and growth. The development of women's empowerment has been recognised by nations, international organizations and others and has been implemented into acts, goals and laws.

In this thesis, I do not take a stand on the critique of smart economic using women and girls to fix the world. I use the term women empowerment as to how the individual can have power in her own society. I will throughout this thesis focus on the empowerment of women in India, how the nation and the international actors has affected the women's position in the society and how information access might has helped or changed this.

2. Methodology

In this chapter I will present the methodology for this study. I will start by presenting the philosophy of science followed with my research design. My research design will function as the framework of this thesis. After presenting my research design, I will go through my method of data collection by explaining which data is collected, how it is collected and for which reasons it is collected. I will as well present my data from my fieldwork in India. I will sum this up with ethical considerations and limitations of my research, and I will reflect on my data and the challenges and obstacles posed to my methodology.

Lastly, in a conclusory evaluation, I will present my method of choice; Carol Bacchi's method: *"What's the problem represented to be"* (2009). This will be my method to analyse the Right to Information Act, which was implemented by the Indian Government in 2005. The findings from the analysis will be discussed in the light of the theory on the public sphere in chapter 5.

2.a. Philosophy of Science

I will in this thesis work from a constructivist point of view, taking an ontological position. Working from that perspective means that I understand the social world as being continuously constructed and shaped by the social actors within it (Bryman 2012: 33). Moreover, I follow Flick's (2007) notion of constructivism not being a unified approach but a combination of elements from different disciplines with the common view that "people, institutions and interactions are involved in producing the realities in which they live or occur and that these productive efforts are based on processes of meaning-making" (Flick 2007: 12). The social environment is therefore pressured by the surroundings, which are in constant process and development. I consider the constructivist perspective most feasible for this paper, as it helps to analyse how information access can empower women in rural India as well as to understand the developments of it in the global context.

For a more effective research and for the scope of the issue to be clearer, I wish to carry out qualitative research. Qualitative research differs from quantitative research as to be concerned with words rather than numbers (Bryman 2012: 380). Taking an ontological position as a constructionist, I imply that social properties are outcomes of the interaction between individuals and their social environment. To support this understanding I will employ observations and interviews as my qualitative research.

The methodology employed to help understand the social world has an influence on what is researched and how the findings or research are interpreted (Bryman 2012: 5). The assumptions about the nature of social phenomena also influence the research process. Bryman (2012) explains how it is sometimes suggested, that the social world should be viewed as something external to social actors and over which they have no control. My philosophical study of nature is ontological, as I study the nature of being, becoming, existence and reality of the issue of women empowerment and the relation to the issue between the government and the women. It invites me to consider the nature of social phenomena; are they relatively inert and beyond our influence or are they a product of social interaction (Bryman 2012: 6)?

My method of choice; *'What's the Problem Represented to Be?'* by Carol Bacchi (2009) helps me understand the world from a social constructivist perspective. I use this to analyse the RTI Act and to understand the silences within the Act. Other international mechanisms such as the UN does not take a constructivist perspective to the social world, as it is argued that forces such as financial markets, command the global economy as a result of which nations and political decision-making have lost almost all autonomy and freedom of choice. It has therefore been argued that nations and other political decision-makers can only adapt and conform to the forces of the neoliberal world economy.

By taking a constructivist perspective I claim that aspects of globalisation in the context of information access and women's empowerment in India, are historically and socially constructed. I wish to understand how READ and DEF empower women through their community centers and libraries and how this influences and changes the culture through daily practices, keeping the analysis of the RTI Act as a backdrop to my findings.

2.b. Research Method

It is important to pay attention to both the framework for the collection of data, as well as the research of data. To analyse my problem formulation I need to consider my method of research.

Research methods can be and are associated with different kinds of research designs (Bryman 2012: 45). Research design represents a structure that guides the executions of a research method and the analysis of the subsequent data, it relates to the criteria that are employed when evaluating social research (ibid: 45). The research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of the data (ibid: 46).

<u>The Case of India and the Women</u>

In this thesis I take use of a case study design. The most common use of the term 'case' associates the case study with a location, such as a community or organisation (Bryman 2012: 67). In this thesis the case, which will be examined, is the case of rural women in India, or - more specifically - female users of READ's community centers and DEF's libraries. Case study research is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question (ibid: 66). India is particularly interesting for my research, as it has been ranked as one of the countries with the biggest gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2015). Women are particular discriminated in education and at the labor market. There is a strong cultural disadvantage for women in India, and despite a bigger focus on women's empowerment, women are still struggling for gender equality. Though India has not developed much on gender equality in the previous years and ranks low in the World Economic Forum's 'Global Gender Gap Report' (2015), it has recently become a major global player in the field of technology. The Indian Government has launched the 'The Digital India Programme' as a flagship programme with a vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy (Digital India Programme, 2015). The Government of India has not alone implemented programs for digital literacy and digital empowerment of citizens, but has also implemented the RTI Act. The Act is supposed to promote transparency and as well empower citizens of India through access to information.

I have chosen the case of Indian women because of two very different parameters; one being the lack of gender equality compared to many other nations, the other being India's high position in the global market of ICT.

With a case study, "the case is an object of interest of its own right, and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth elucidation of it" (Bryman 2012: 69). What distinguishes a case study from other studies is that the researcher is concerned to elucidate the unique framework of the case (ibid: 69). This is known as an idiographic approach. Wilhelm Windelband (1958), a Kantian philosopher of science, first made the distinction in 1894. He describes how idiographic accounts for the facts in a single case. It is a tendency to specify, and is typical for the humanities. Idiographic describes the effort to understand the meaning of contingent, unique and often subjective phenomena.

With a case study design, the predominant research strategy is qualitative, and the typical orientation to the relationship between theory and research is a an inductive approach. If the predominantly strategy is quantitative, it tends to be deductive. But research can have both elements to it. In this thesis I will take use of qualitative research, this will be treated in much greater detail later in this chapter.

2.c. Method of Data Collection

Bryman argues that: "research questions should give an indication of what units need to be sampled" (Bryman 2012: 416) as the questions should be able to provide guidelines for what categories need to be in focus (ibid: 416).

In this thesis I will work from the approach of grounded theory. This systematic methodology involves the construction of theory through the analysis of data. Using grounded theory I begin my study with the collection of qualitative data.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is defined as "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (Bryman 2012: 387). It is not possible here to describe grounded theory in all its facets, whereas I will only outline its main features.

The originators of grounded theory; Glaser and Strauss, developed the theory from different paths as Glaser felt that Strauss was promoting the theory too prescriptive and emphasized too much the development of concepts rather than of theories (ibid: 567). This means that scholars using grounded theory often use a version that follows either the Glaserian or the Straussian approach (ibid: 567).

Bryman describes grounded theory as a set of procedures. These procedures are to referred as (ibid: 568):

- *Theoretical sampling,*
- *Coding,*
- *Theoretical saturation,* and
- *Constant comparison.*

According to Glaser and Strauss (In Bryman 2012: 568) the first process of grounded theory is ***theoretical sampling,*** which is:

"*the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by emerging theory, whether substantive or formal*" (Bryman 2012: 419).

This definition conveys the characteristic of theoretical sampling as an ongoing process (Bryman 2012: 419).

The second process of grounded theory is the process of **coding.** Coding is a key process in grounded theory, as this is the process of breaking down data into component parts, these parts can be known as concepts or categories (ibid: 568). Charmaz (in Bryman 2012: 568) describes the process of coding: "We grounded theorists code our emerging data as we collect it… Unlike quantitative research that requires data to fit into preconceived standardized codes".

Data is treated as indicators of concepts and are constantly compared, to understand which concept fits the best (ibid: 568). Different levels of coding are recognized in order to label, separate or organise data. Strauss and Corbin (in Bryman 2012: 569) distinguish between three types of coding practice:

1) Open coding
2) Axial coding
3) Selective coding

The three types of coding relate to a different point in elaboration of categories in grounded theory (ibid: 569). Charmaz (in Bryman 2012: 569) prefers to distinguish between two forms of coding: *initial coding* and *selective or focused coding*.

In this study an open coding are used to conceptualise data from my empirical research. Open coding is the process of breaking down data, which are latter to be grouped and turned into concepts. The essential relationship between data and theory is a conceptual code, this will be further elaborated in chapter 5 where an analytic framework based on theory by Habermas and inspiration partly from Pristed Nielsen (2005) has been developed considering the concepts from coding my empirical data.

The third process of grounded theory is **theoretical saturation**, which is the process that relates to two phases:

"The coding of the data (implying that you reached a point where there is no further point in reviewing your data to see how well they fit with your concepts) and the collection of data (implying that, once a concept has been developed, you may wish to continue collecting data to determine its nature and operation but then reach a point where new data are no longer illuminating the concept)" (Bryman 2012: 568).

The last process **constant comparison** refers to the process of maintaining a close connection between data and concepts, so that "the correspondence between concept with their indicators is not lost" (ibid: 568).

Collecting Data

In the following section, I will outline the considerations to my fieldwork in India. I will briefly elaborate with evidence of empirical data from my research with READ and DEF. Evidence from fieldwork will be analysed later in chapter 5.b.

I have conducted data through observations and semi-structured interviews with female users, staff and management of READ and DEF. Firstly, I wished to observe with a view to gain appreciation of the culture and of the women in rural India, and their behavior within the context of that culture (Bryman 2012: 432). For my observations it was important to conduct clear field notes on time, place, activities, users etc. Secondly, I furthermore complemented my observations with semi-structured interviews with some of the female users. These were conducted after the observations were completed. With the interviews I wanted to gain knowledge on the women's motivation for internet usage and for what purpose they use their access to information. When interviewing across cultures I was aware of the cultural factors that can affect the relationship between me and the interviewee (Kvale 2011: 68). By firstly observing the women, I established a familiarity with the culture, and misunderstandings during the interview did not occur as easy.

Lastly, I interviewed the personnel and management of READ and DEF. Bryman (2012) defines in-depth interviews as being both unstructured and semi-structured interviews. I wished to conduct interviews of a semi-structured nature, based on a dialogue between me as the researcher and the organisations, in order to identify practice on ground. Some questions were prepared in advance in relation to the topic, but allowed for spontaneity and for questions to develop during the course of the interview.

The qualitative data is my primary data, which will let me understand not only if the users of the READ community centers and the DEF libraries feel empowered by having more access to information, but also the constructions to the issue and the reasons behind it.

The secondary data for this thesis is studies on the RTI Act carried out by the Indian Government. The Indian Government implemented the RTI Act in 2005 with the main goal to empower citizens of India giving them access to information.

The statistics indicates whether the citizens of India are taking use of the Act. This study takes into account the feedback of over 2000 information seekers and over 200 information providers across public authority at Centre, State, and local levels in five states. It also

includes feedback of 5000 citizens with respect to their awareness of the RTI Act (Indian Govern 2009: 4). The feedback from information seekers and information providers are retrieved from a survey sent to both groups. The secondary data will function as an indicator to whether the RTI Act is successful in reaching Indian citizens. Measuring whether the goals of the Act has been achieved though, can only be done by combining the two sets of data and understanding the issue, the culture and usage of the Act.

I will in the following section, present my qualitative research. During my fieldwork it became clear that interviews planned in advance of the trip, were not all possible to conduct. The biggest struggle was to get people to talk, as well as to being allowed to record the interviews. This will be further elaborated as limitations in chapter 2.e.

Below table shows an overview of the qualitative research compiled in India.

	READ Global	DEF India
Users	2 interviews Observations	-
Staff	1 interview	2 interviews Observations
Management	1 interview	2 interviews

Figure 1.

Research on READ India

My research with READ India consists of one day observation at the community center in Dwarka, New Delhi, interviews with two female users of the center and a meeting with the country director of READ India; Geeta Malhotra, at the READ country office in New Delhi. This was arranged from Denmark, where I contacted READ regarding my research and fieldwork in India. As an agreement between READ HQ and me, I promised to send all recordings and notes I conducted through my visit to the community center.

Firstly, before conducting the data, considerations in regards to observations and interviews were made. I used a non-participant and unstructured observation as a method for observing the behavior of the female users at the READ community center. Using non-participant observation means, I did not participate in what was going on in the social setting and I did not entail the use of an observation schedule by having an unstructured approach to the observation. The aim was to record in as much detail as possible of the behavior of participants with the aim of developing a narrative account of that behavior (Bryman 2012:

273). My goal to the observation was to firstly become familiar with the women and their behavior and for them to feel safe around me before conducting my interviews. Secondly, another goal was to get an understanding of the culture and how access to information might empower the female users of the READ center. I wanted to know how the women use the digital tools to retrieve information and how they use these tools to empower themselves. One of the advantages of doing non-participant and unstructured observation is that it allows behavior to be observed directly by studying the participants in their natural environment. It also allows me to generate new ideas, as it gives me the opportunity to study the total situation and behavior, which can suggest new forms of ideas to the subject that I had not thought about before. I observed the women and girls during computer training at the center. They were introduced to me and my study, but we had no further interaction with each other. My contact person at the center, was present during my observations, it would have been preferable to make observations without her presence, as I was looked over the shoulder, and the natural environment among the users were intervened by too many observers in the room. During my observation I took detailed notes of the users, their training, their interaction with each other as well as their behavior (Appendix 1).

In addition to the observation I was allowed to interview two of the female users of the community center. This was arranged by the center coordinator, who reached out to the women to know whether they would be interested in participating in my research. The interviews were semi-structured. Using a semi-structured interview method, I had prepared a list of questions ahead of the interview to cover my topic, this is referred to as the interview guide. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, which means questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined in the guide. Semi-structured interview is much less specific that the notion of a structured interview schedule (Bryman 2012: 472). For a semi-structured interview it requires for the interviewer to be, a good listener, which entails being active and alert in the interviews (ibid: 473). Questions not included in the guide can be added during the interview, as picking up on things said by the participants. The advantage of this interview method is its capacity to provide insights into how the women view the world. During my interview with the woman, the center coordinator and the teacher of computer training were presence as well. As the participants did not speak English, the center coordinator functioned as interpreter for the interview. The atmosphere was friendly and open, and the interaction between me and the participants was pleasant. I was allowed to record the interview (Appendix 2).

To compliment my findings from the observations and my interview with the women at the community center, I proposed a interview with the country director of READ India. I wished

for this to be a semi-structured interview with a character of being a dialogue, to discuss the topic as well as my findings from the observation and interviews. I was prior to the interview asked to send all my questions to the country director. This was not my intention, as I wished for the interview to create an open dialogue with the possibility to add questions outside the interview guide. During the interview the country director sticked to the received questions, for which she had prepared her answers, this meant the interview took character of being a structured interview without possibility to discuss the answers to the questions. I was furthermore not allowed to record the interview or take notes, whereas all my notes for the interview were created afterwards (Appendix 3 & 4).

The limitations and evaluation criteria to my research with READ will be elaborated further in chapter 2.e, whereas the evidence of the fieldwork will be analysed in chapter 5. Recordings, field notes and interview guide from observation and interviews enclosed as appendix.

Research on DEF

I established contact with DEF before arriving to India. A meeting at DEF headquarter was arranged for me to learn about the different programmes and in particular the programme of 'District Public Libraries'.

I was first greeted by the head of the research team, Ritu Srivastava, who provided me with information on the different programmes and the work of DEF. This meeting had much a 'conversational' style without an interview guide. The main goal of this interview was to learn about DEF's work on Indian public libraries. After talking with the head of research, I was presented to the head of the 'District Public Library Programme'; Syed Kazi. During this meeting, it became clear that the work of DEF was very interesting and could provide relevant knowledge to my research. It was therefore arranged for me to visit two of the public libraries DEF was transforming in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

My first visit was to Kanpur Public Library. It was beforehand arranged that the library coordinator was to give me an introduction to the library and its activities, assist me to the Unnao District Library, as well as function as interpreter during my visits to the two libraries. At Kanpur Public Library I was firstly introduced to the library and its many activities, hereafter I was taking to the librarian for any further questions. This meeting did not have character of an interview, as it was not prepared beforehand, and all questions were related to what I had just been shown, the meeting was based on a dialogue, and the librarian was just as interested in getting to know more about me and my research, as I was in learning about Kanpur Public Library.

After my visit to Kanpur Public Library, the library coordinator assisted me to my visit at Unnao District Library. The library was not prepared for my visit and did not know I was coming, but they welcomed me and the library assistant took time show me the library and explain to me about the different activities. After the tour around the library, the librarian sat down with me for some follow-up questions. My contact person, the library coordinator, functioned as my interpreter. I took detailed notes during the tours at both Kanpur Public Library and Unnao District Library. It was not possible for me to interview female users, but I did gain knowledge on public library programmes in India as well as learning about the culture and environment in the public libraries.

Elaborations on the two libraries, the activities and other evidence of the fieldwork will be analysed in chapter 5. I will in the following chapter treat the limitations and reliability to the qualitative research as conducted in India.

2.e. Evaluation Criteria, Ethical Considerations and Limitations

I have in above chapters touched upon the philosophy of science and methodology to this thesis. I have described my method of research and data collected. I will in the following explain my evaluation criteria, ethical considerations and limitations to my research.

"Validity in the social sciences pertains to the issue of whether a method investigates what is purports to investigate" (Kvale 2007: 122). I engage in documenting my research process thoroughly to ensure reliability and validity.

One question of case study research on which a great deal of discussion has centered, concerns *external validity* or *generalisability* (Bryman 2012: 69). Generalisability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study can be generalised beyond the specific research context (ibid: 47). A researcher usually wants to be able to say that his or her research can be generalised beyond the confines of the particular context in which the research was conducted (ibid: 176). It is rarely feasible to conduct results from an entire population (such as all members in a community or in an organisation), therefore, the researcher wants the results from the research to be able to be applied to individuals other than those who responded in the study (ibid: 176). In this study, limits to the generalisation must be considered. Time and cost involved in securing probability data are too great relative to the level of resource available (ibid: 181). I bear in mind the generalisability to my study while conducting data.

With regards to validity, thus the "integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research" (Bryman 2012, p.47), I have to consider how to make sure that my

conclusions are carefully based on my findings of the data. I want the data conducted to be as representative as possible, in order to be able to say that the results are not unique to the particular group upon whom the research was conducted (Bryman 2012: 176). In my case the data will be representative of the population from which it was selected (ibid: 176) and can help give an understanding of the situation of women in India and how libraries and information access can influence empowerment.

According to Flick (2007: 106), the researcher should show how his or her interpretations are credible and plausible by rooting them in the materials and the analysis. I am aware of the possible assumptions that I might entail, considering the historical background of gender equality in India. The force of an interview is therefor, "its privileged access to the interviewee's world, and the use of the interviewee's perspectives can provide a distinctive and sensitive understanding of the everyday life world" (Kvale 2011: 87).

I consider the aspects of validity and ethics ever more central. The ethical considerations are important to me, particularly as the issue of my interest is related to a sensitive topic; vulnerable women and democracy (Rapley 2007: 23-24). Rapley outlines (2007) two main ethical aspects to consider. First, the "research should not cause any harm or distress, either psychological or physical, to anyone taking part in it" (Rapley 2007: 24). Secondly, all parties taking part in the research should be aware of it and of what the research is about, as well as to be consent in taking part (Rapley 2007: 24). Bryman (2012) emphasizes that the lack of informed consent is both centrally debated and challenging in social research, while it is difficult to provide participants with all the potentially important information. Bryman represents the ethical principles in four main areas (Bryman 2012: 138-139):

1. Whether there is harm to participants;
2. whether there is a lack of informed consent;
3. whether there is an invasion of privacy;
4. whether deception is involved.

At the READ community center I interviewed two female users, these women were chosen and contacted by the READ personnel. The interview began with a presentation of the subject of my thesis, and the women were briefly explained about the purpose of the interview (Kvale 2007: 55). It was important for me not to bring harm to participants of observations and interviews. The female users of READ community centers were aware of my topic as well as the purpose of my interview; I did not wish to invade their privacy, but to get an objective understanding of their usage of the libraries and the digital tools provided in the libraries without deception occurring.

As the main language in India is Hindi, it is necessary for me team up with an interpreter who is culturally acceptable as well as proficient in the language. Choosing an interpreter should therefore be done wisely and with much thought, and choosing an interpreter comes with limitations and ethical considerations. As previously stated, financial resources are limited, I was therefore restricted to take an interpreter provided by READ and by DEF. This may cause a risk of the interpreter to take over the role of the interviewer or the interviewee (Kvale 2011: 68). Additionally there is a risk when interviewing across gender, especially for men to interview vulnerable women. Preferable the interpreter would be female and objective to the issue. Questions should be clear and combined with observations, I should be able to grasp a clear understanding of the culture and the issue.

Observation- and interview notes enclosed as appendix.

2.f Method of Analysis: "What's the Problem Represented to be?"

I will in the following explain my methodological approach. I will for my analysis of the RTI Act (2005) make use of the scholar Carol Bacchi's methodological approach '*What's the problem represented to be?*' (2009) (hereafter the WPR approach). The aim of this kind of analytical approach is "to dig deeper than usual into the meaning of policies and into the meaning making that is part of policy formulation" (Bacchi 2009: VI). The thinking behind Bacchi's approach is that policies have a cultural dimension as they are created within specific historical, national or international contexts and could therefore be argued to be cultural products.

'Policy' is generally associated with a program, a course of action (ibid: 1). Policy makers create the policies as they believe that there is a an issue that needs to be handled, implicitly stating that there is some kind of perceived problem in all policies (ibid: ix). The 'problem' solved by public policies is understood in a certain way, to be a particular kind of 'problem'. Policies can consequently be seen to be constitutive of these problems (ibid: 1). Furthermore, a policy proposal will reflect those who have made it, how they have perceived the 'problem' and how they have made sense of the problem (ibid: xiv). As Bacchi states: "there is a level of commonsense to the proposition that rules or laws presuppose particular understandings of a 'problem'. After all, how you feel about something determines what you think should be done about it" (ibid: xiii). Moreover, the way a problem is represented will have a range of implications for the way the people involved will be treated, how they are made to think about themselves and how the issue in general is thought about (ibid: 1).

Studying the rationale behind the RTI Act and explaining the differences in outcome and how women of India can benefit from it, Bacchi's analytical approach will be helpful because, as she states: "any policy proposal put forward may well reflect deep-seated cultural assumptions" (2009: x). Thus, when applied to the RTI Act it might reveal the reasoning behind it and thereby explain why the Government of India has come up with the chosen "solutions" to the "problem".

Bacchi's method *"What's the problem represented to be?"* offers six easily accessible questions that can be used for application on any policy directive. The role of the government can be explored by applying the WPR approach, and by asking the questions about the policy's sources and how it operates, I can get an understanding of how governing takes place, and with what implications for those so governed (ibid: 1).

The six questions of Bacchi posed below can be applied to any problem representation (ibid: xii):

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

I will for my analysis mainly make use of three of Bacchi's questions being the first: *"What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?"* the second: *"What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?"* and her fourth: *"What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?"* (Bacchi 2009: xii).

Firstly, the first question chosen will help me clarify the underlying views and understandings that the Government of India has to the issue of information access. This will be the starting point for my analysis, and it might reveal what the government perceives the problem to be and what they propose to do; what they are hoping to change (Bacchi 2009: 3). Secondly, the second question refers to background 'knowledge' that is taken for granted (ibid: 5). This can include both epistemological and ontological assumptions. I have chosen to apply this question, to understand "how this 'problem' has come to happen" (ibid: 5). Lastly, applying Bacchi's fourth question, I aim at showing what is not problematised in the

RTI Act and what limitations there are to the given understanding (ibid: 12). In this I will consider the issue of women empowerment and gender equality in India.

I have deselected Bacchi's other three questions of the WPR approach. I have chosen to deselect the questions, as the RTI Act was not implemented as a tool to gender equality, but as a way to give all citizens access to information. I do not find it necessary to "identify specific points in time when the key decisions were made, taking the issue in a particular direction" (question 3), if the problem representation creates difficulties for members (question 5) or directs attention to practices and processes that allow certain problem representations to dominate (question 6) (ibid: 10). The questions deselected are not relevant for my analysis of my problem formulation on how information access and digital libraries can empower women in rural India.

Working on this thesis, I bear in mind, that there might be different reasons to present information access as a "problem" to be solved. I thus presuppose that the benefit of the Act for the Government might solve the problem for the women of India.

I will elaborate the WPR approach with my analysis of the RTI Act, this will treated in much greater detail in later chapter 5.

3. Background and Context

To analyse if and how information access can empower women in rural India, it is important to understand the rationales to the issue. I will in the following point out, in relation to this study, some of the most important historical and cultural reasonings for why empowerment of women in rural India is so important, as well as elaborate with the history and development of libraries both national and global. Without some attention to historical context, it is not possible to develop a clear view of the present nature and direction of change in the political reasoning to information access. Furthermore I will present the international organisations READ Global and DEF and the international mechanisms that have an impact on information access in India.

<u>3.a The Republic of India</u>

Figure 1.

The history of India can be traced back to as far as 30,000 years ago from the earliest authenticated human remains found in South Asia (Petraglia & Allchin 2007: 6). Ancient India flourished from its surrounding neighbors; Pakistan, China, Nepal and Myanmar. It has a diverse and complex culture, being home to many historic trade routes and vast empires. These trade routes identified India with a commercial and cultural wealth for much of its history (About Education, 2016).

Four religions; Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism originated in India. During the period 2000–500 BCE the caste system arose, creating a hierarchy of priests, warriors, free peasants and traders, and lastly the indigenous peoples who were regarded as impure; and small tribal units gradually coalesced into monarchical, state-level polities (Ancient History, 2012).

The caste system is a system of social stratification in India. It consists of two different concepts; varna and jāti. Varna can be translated to 'class' and refers to the four social classes which exists in the Vedic society (a society arising c.1500 – c.500 BCE); Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Jāti may be translated to 'caste', and refers to birth (Ancient History, 2012).
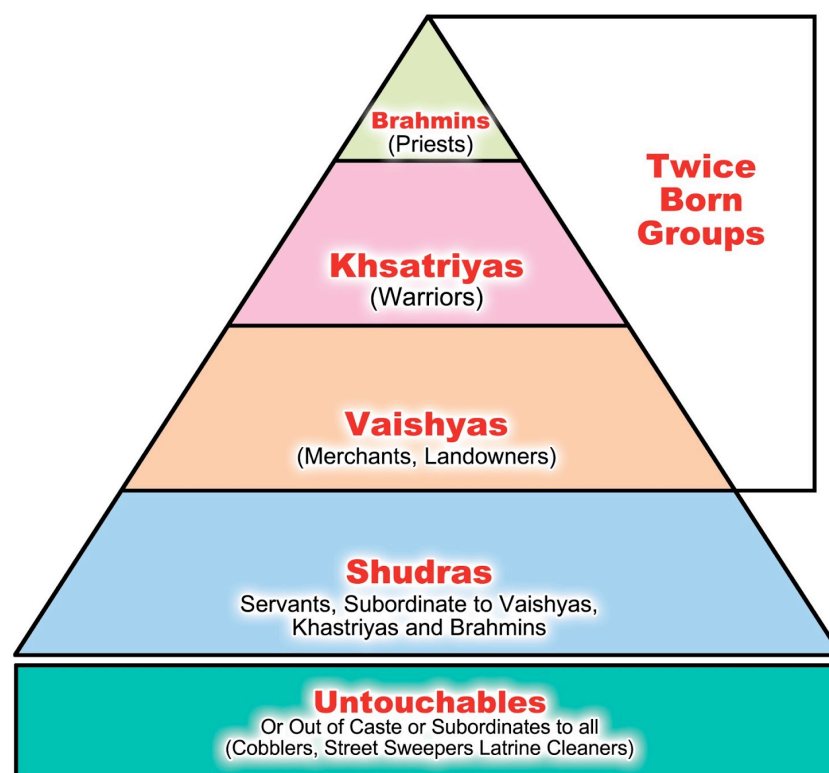

Figure 2.

Membership to a cast in the hierarchical system is defined by birth, and segregation consists between the different casts. The British Raj transformed the cast system making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration. Between 1860 and 1920, India was colonized by Britain, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper casts (Ancient History, 2012).

New developments of the caste system took place after the independence of India in 1950. New laws have been enacted, and social initiatives have been put in place to protect and improve the socioeconomic conditions of the lower caste population. Discrimination against lower castes is illegal in India under Article 15 in the constitution. Still today though, the caste system is often referred to as "India's hidden apartheid" (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

The Constitution of India was adopted in November 1949 and came into effect January 1950 and made India officially independent as the Republic of India (Austin, 1966: xiv). As most post-colonial nations, Indian law and government were modeled after its colonial master, but unlike many other cases India has formed its original form of government and constitution (Mendelsohn 2014: 168). The Indian Constitution declares India a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, assuring its citizens of justice, equality, and liberty, and endeavors to promote fraternity among them (The Indian Constitution, Preamble, 2016).

The most progressive parts of the Constitution are the Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. The Fundamental Rights are of a universal kind - for example equality before the law, freedom of speech and religious practice (Mendelsohn 2014: 169). Others, like abolition of untouchability, have only point in the Indian context (ibid). The Directive Principles are:

"[...] *not judicially enforceable, but constitute a blueprint for the creation of a fair and progressive society, thus all citizens of India are declared to have a right to education, and the state is adjured to promote the interests of disadvantaged sections of the Indian society*" (ibid: 169).

Despite the implementation of the Constitution, post-Independence India has been struggling with corruption for years. New figures from the watchdog 'Transparency International' shows that India is not making much progress in stamping out corruption (Transparency International, 2015). The country's score was unchanged from 2014 to 2015, being number 76 out of 167 countries, with a score of 38 on a scale of 100. Zero on the corruption scale means "highly corrupt" while 100 means "very clean", a number below 50

means a country has serious corruption problems. Denmark is ranked as number 1, being the least corrupt country in the world (ibid).

Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi has made anti-corruption a focus of his tenure, which began in May 2014. While his administration has had few scandals and has introduced measures to increase transparency, its efforts have so far failed to change how the country is viewed (The Wall Street Journal, 2016).

Many anti-corruption campaigns have been launched in the previous years, and anti-corruption has become a major enterprise in India (The Guardian, 2015.a). The social reformer and activist Anna Hazare, has initiated several anti-corruption movement across the country. Hazare has been referred to as India's pioneering social activist, and is especially popular among India's middle classes, for expressing their anger against corruption scandals (BBC, 2011). His work has been recognised nationally and internationally, and he has received awards on his engagement in the fight against corruption (ibid). In 1997 Hazare called on the Indian government to introduce a lokpal[1] with legal power to investigate government corruption (The Guardian, 2015.a). This was done to push the government of the district of Maharashtra to enact a RTI law. In 2003 the state government bought in the law (BBC, 2011). The campaign was a precursor to a national campaign that culminated in the RTI Act passed by the Parliament in 2005 (ibid).

Though the anti-corruption movement is strong, the corruption is still as big an issue as ever before (Transparency International, 2014). According to some estimates, the opportunity costs of corruption in terms of lost investment growth and jobs are $50bn in India every year (The Guardian, 2015.a). Bribery at the ground level is a daily ritual for many Indians (The Guardian, 2015.a). Government bureaucrats demand payment for providing services that should be free. They embezzle money that is earmarked for development projects, and police officers routinely demand "tips" (The Guardian 2015.a). A portion of the money collected on the ground level, is passed up through state hierarchies and given to politicians, who use this to finance their elections (The Guardian, 2015.a). Craig Jeffrey, professor of development geography at the University of Oxford, has researched in the region Uttar Pradesh in India for many years. He claims that: "The rising inequality has increased frustration, especially among low-ranking government officials. People are more pragmatic now than they were in the 1990s. 'It is alright to be corrupt,' they sometimes say. 'As long as you avoid fraud'" (The Guardian.a, 2015). In this matter "corruption" refers to the ordinary system of bribes; "fraud" is where an official takes a bribe and still does not act (The Guardian.a, 2015).

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[1] A lokpal is a type of public ombudsman committee

Maternal health care is free by law to women in government hospitals in the Sonitpur district. Even though, several cases where doctors have denied giving healthcare or medicine without a fee have been reported (The Guardian.b 2015). The women in the region were unaware of their rights, but with the help from local NGOs who combine technology and legal intervention, the women were informed on their legal rights (ISSUU, 2015).

In late 2012 the violent incident of rape and murder on a 23 year old Indian girl took place in New Delhi. This incident created international headlines and opened a debate on women's right in India. Movements around India took place to hold the government accountable and enforce the rule of law (UN Women, 2013: iii).

Women in India are being marginalised socially, economically and geographically. Anne F. Stenhammer, representative from the UN Women Office for India states: "Development agendas and frameworks have been prepared without truly consulting or giving voice to those whose lives they aim to improve the most." (UN Women, 2013: iv).

Though India has taken positive steps by strengthen laws to protect women and children, the corruption of authorities still occur when women claim their rights (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Indian police officers are poorly paid, and that make them easily susceptible to corruption. India has around 1,500,000 officers to protect 1.2 billion people, or about 130 officers per 100,000 people, the second lowest among 50 countries ranked by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UN OCD, 2010). But of all the problems affecting the police, many women's advocates point to cultural tradition as the most intractable (The New York Times, 2013). Changing the mind-set of the officers, many coming from rural areas, is a difficult process. Women in India face myriad cultural challenges that impede social advancement. A few examples are discriminatory family codes, lack of education, and cultural stigmas (Council on Foreign Relations, 2013). Heightened media attention given to such inequities has raised pressure on the government to not just reform the institutional treatment of women, but also raise the level of dialogue on the larger issue of women's rights in a rapidly modernising society (Council on Foreign Relations, 2013).

Though the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, the positions of women still remain unequal. According to the OECD Development report (2014) women are still considered less worthy and valuable to the society than men. Daughters are often seen as an economic burden to families and more often drop out of school than boys, to enter marriage or to start work to financially help the family (OECD, 2014).

The many high-profile cases in the previous years have called attention on the issue of women's rights. Students highlights the need to educate women about their rights (The

Times of India, 2014), because even though India has had more than six decades of independence, women are still trapped in the glut of corruption, oppression, poverty, unemployment and illiteracy.

With 1.2 billion people India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world (World Bank, 2015). The population increases every year, which also makes India one of the most populated countries. India's recent growth has transformed the nation from dependence on grain imports into a global agricultural powerhouse that is now a net exporter of food (ibid). India is home to globally recognised companies in pharmaceuticals and steel and information and space technologies, and a growing voice on the international stage (ibid). But as the country is developing, the women's roles in society seem to be standing still. Throughout this study and for my analysis in particular, I will take the culture, history and social norms of India into consideration.

3.b The History of the Library in India

To understand if and how information access and digital libraries can empower women in rural India, it is not enough to know about the cultural and historical background of the country. I will elaborate the background part with the development of libraries in national and international context, and give an introduction to READ Global India and Digital Empowerment foundation (DEF).

The Development of the Library

UNESCO defines the library as the local gateway to knowledge, which provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development and social group (IFLA/UNESCO, 2005).

The library is not a new concept in India. Libraries have been exciting since ancient India (Bhatt 1995: 16). During the British control of India, the development of higher education and its libraries slowed down, but the public libraries started to appear across the country. These libraries were only meant for British residents though, and were not free to enter (ibid: 37). Though India has a long tradition of learning, it took a long time for the library to take its form as an institution of free information and knowledge (ibid: 46).

With the renaissance came new material and intellectual world order, and an entirely new library order arose. With the art of printing, the volume of books grew and the possibilities and access of reading them became easier. This trend continued and today is the idea of open access the critical vision of the modern library (Baggrund, 2014). With this development, the

libraries gained a big impact on the public and the public sphere. Gabriel Naudé was a French librarian and scholar, he had a vision of creating a library with an universal access to knowledge and an open meeting place (ibid). These visions still stand today, as the library has developed to an open and diverse institution.

The right to information is becoming an international standard, and more and more countries practice this law (RTI Ranking, 2015). This has brought a new role to today's libraries.

"*Decision-making is being transferred from national to supranational bodies, and a consequence citizens' access to current issues and documents pertaining to them may become more restricted. Information technology supports a trend to contrary this. Therefore, libraries must take responsibility for ensuring citizens' access to information*" (Kangas, Kuronen & Pekkarinen 1995: 123).

The extensive use of the internet and its distribution of information have made it a new tool to the libraries. Developments in information and communication technologies have enabled larger amounts of information to circulate through networks and be stored in much higher speed too much lower cost (Ghosh 2007: 1). Today information cannot only be found in books, but with ICT as well.

Access to information must be recognised as a critical element in supporting the Indian government to achieve their development goals, and enabling citizens to make informed decisions to improve their own lives. The International Federation of Library Association (hereafter IFLA) believes that library and information services can help guarantee that access (IFLA, 2015). Libraries are transparent and accountable institutions that provide a service to help citizens access needed information. Libraries allow its users to choose more or less freely the kind of knowledge they need. This observation is described by Dike (in Scholastica & Ezii 2013: 8) as:

"*A central role for the library is inextricably tied to certain ideas of educational reform [...] if learning takes place through interaction with variety of resources, with individuals or groups carrying out inquiries or projects under the guidance of the teacher, then the role of the library will be central.*"

The library today should serve not only as a place of information, but also as community center, where users, in this case rural women, can see themselves as active agents. IFLA

argues that today's library must support citizens to make informed decisions. The libraries provide access to information and guidance to effectively use the world's knowledge. This can contribute to the reduction of poverty, exclusion and inequality by helping the citizens develop skills to effectively seek, access and use information in all forms (IFLA, 2015).

In this thesis libraries are not to be understood it its traditional form; being an institution with books. The libraries presented in this thesis works as community centers in rural areas, where the users, being rural women, must take an active role in their own development. Though this is a modern way to understand the library, the essence of the library still stands the same; from information one can gain knowledge.

READ Global, India

READ Global was inspired by a wish from a Nepalese trekking guide; to have a library in his village. Teacher and education researcher Dr. Antonia Neubauer embraced this opportunity while travelling in Asia, and founded Rural Education and Development Global in 1991 in Nepal (READ Global, 2016).

Today READ has its headquarter in San Francisco and local country offices in Bhutan, India and Nepal giving more than 2 million people access to READ Centers and their trainings.

In 2006, READ Nepal won the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Access to Learning Award (ATLA), which is given annually to one organisation in recognition of the innovative efforts to connect people to information. In 2007 READ received a Replication Grant from the Foundation, to expand and bring the sustainable model to Bhutan and India (READ Global, 2016).

READ was launched in India in 2007 to empower women and marginalised groups and create educational and economic opportunities in rural areas. The READ Centers are giving women the chance to learn to read, teaching citizens about their rights, and giving rural villagers skills to earn a living (READ India, 2016). READ believes that: "Community empowerment becomes possible when a space is created for ongoing discourse, when management skills are build and community ownership fostered" (READ India, 2016).

Today there has been established 14 READ centres all over India focusing on, among others: Information communications technology, literacy and women's empowerment. READ has a clear philosophy:

"READ believes empowering rural communities is critical to alleviating global poverty. We envision a world where individuals, families and entire communities have access to the

knowledge, resources and opportunities necessary to build more prosperous futures."
(READ, 2016)

READ India spent 2014 focusing on empowering rural women and adolescent girls by not only building their self-confidence and helping them to realise the leadership role they can play in their communities, but also providing them with skills that enable them to increase their family's income, focus on their education, and more (READ India, 2016). Some of the programs READ offers rural women are:

- Distance learning
- Early Childhood Development
- Information Communications Technology
- Literacy
- Empowerment

In 2014 READ partnered with the Ministry of Women and Child Development under National Mission for Empowerment of Women (READ, 2016). In cooperation they serve more than one million women and girls, and provide them with access to safe spaces to gather, learn and advocate.

As it will not be possible to visit all centres of READ India, I have chosen to focus on one centre in the state of Delhi; Read Center For Education And Women Empowerment, as this centre focuses on women empowerment and bridging the digital divide by providing free access to computer training and internet.

Digital Empowerment Foundation

Digital Empowerment Foundation (hereafter DEF) was established in New Delhi 2002 out of the understanding that: "marginalised communities living in socio-economic backwardness and information poverty can be empowered to improve their lives on their own, simply by providing them access to information and knowledge on using digital tools" (DEF, 2016). DEF's mission is to empower people digitally and today it is one of the world's leading practitioners in the field of ICT for development (DEF, 2016). Through many different activities DEF seeks to help citizens overcome the information barrier by learning how to use digital tools and the internet. DEF believes that this will help to achieve a greater socioeconomic equality by letting citizens empower themselves by using the power of digital devices to access information and knowledge (DEF, 206)

DEF has launched an initiative, that will integrate digital interventions with India's over 650 public libraries, and develop them into vibrant public spaces for knowledge, information, learning and engagement (DEF District Public Library, 2016). The 'District Library Programme' is a collaboration of DEF and the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation to improve: "Access to critical information and knowledge resources for the library community including the disadvantaged groups towards social and economic empowerment" (DEF District Public Library, 2016). The project is managed by Syed Kazi and facilitates and strengthens the capacities of the district public libraries as access and resource centres with the support of ICT to benefit library users (DEF District Public Library, 2016).

During my fieldwork I visited the District Public Library in Kanpur and the Public Library in Unnao in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

3.c International Mechanisms

I will in the following present the international mechanisms that have an impact on information access and women empowerment in India. In a world that is more connected than ever, international institutions and missions such as the UN is one of many elements included within the notion of globalisation. Globalisation and international relations play a significant role for individuals, institutions and nations.
I will consider the international mechanisms throughout my thesis to understand whether this can impact the political reasoning for empowering women through information access in India.

CEDAW
The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979. It is often described as an international bill of rights for women, and defines what constitutes discrimination against women, and set up an agenda for national action to end such (UN Women CEDAW, 2016):

"[…] any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

For my research and analysis on women empowerment through information access, I will mainly consider Article 10 and 14 in the CEDAW Convention.

The Convention states that state parties must take all measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights. In Article 10:

"The same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women (Article 10e)*;*

Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning" (Article 10h).

Whereas Article 14 focus on empowerment of rural women:

"To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency" (Article 14d).

Article 1 in the CEDAW proclaims that one of the purposes of the UN is to achieve international cooperation in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to, inter alia, sex (UN Women CEDAW History, 2016).

In India, the Constitution states in Article 51 that the State shall endeavor to foster respect for international law and treaty obligations (The Constitution of India, 1950); however, because of India's special 'dualist' regime, any provisions or international laws ratified by the central government are not directly binding unless there is an explicit measure, through enactment of a statute, to internalise these obligations. In India international conventions and laws are not very effective unless they have been translated into domestic laws (Hameed, Hlatshwayo, Tanner, Turker & Yang, 2010).

India was last examined by CEDAW in year 2000. Presenting the report, Kiran Aggarwal, Secretary to the Department of Women and Child Development in India's Ministry of Human Resource Development, stated that: "The personal laws of minority communities had remained untouched on the basis of a policy of non-interference in the personal laws of any community, unless the demand for change came from within those communities." (UN Women, 2000). Ethnic and religious groups tend to be responsible for patriarchal traditions that discriminates women. India has obliged to enact legislation to counteract those values, and take measures to induce alternative non-discriminatory practices (ibid). The practices

and laws of the ethnic and religious groups violate women's rights and are a breach of the Convention.

Sustainable Development Goals

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter SDGs) of the 2030 'Agenda for Sustainable Development' came officially into force January 2016, after being adopted by world leaders in September 2015 (OECD SDG, 2016). The SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals (hereafter MDGs) and aim to go further and end all poverty. The SDGs will be a compass for aligning countries' plans with their global communities, though the goals are not legally binding, member states are expected to take ownership and establish a national framework for achieving the 17 goals.

The fifth goal of the SDG is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Though the world has achieved progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment under the MDGs (including equal access to primary education between girls and boys), women and girls still continue to experience discrimination (OECD SDG, 2016). UN argues with their goals, that gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, it is also a necessity for a prosperous and sustainable world. When providing women and girls with equal access to information and education, you higher their chances for representation in political and economic decision-making processes. This will benefit societies at large (OECD SDG, 2016). Goal five targets to, among others: "Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women".

Considering the SDGs, I seek to understand how information access and ICT can empower women, and whether these goals influence the development of Indian libraries and political processes.

Right to Information Act, 2005

The twenty first century is an era of globalisation; it means free trade, commerce and free flow of information. The Indian RTI Act, passed in 2005, was characterised as "a great and revolutionary law," (Lord Meghnad Desai, in World Bank, 2013) one with the potential of "fundamentally altering the balance of power between the government and citizens" (World Bank, 2013: 1).

The RTI Act (2005) provides: "setting the practical regime of right to information for citizens to secure access to information under the control of public authorities, in order to promote transparency and accountability in the working of every public authority" (RTI 2005: 1). The

Act replaces the erstwhile Freedom of Information Act, 2002 (hereafter FIA), which by international actors were criticised for not being implemented well in India and for not defining terms such as information and public authorities broad enough (CHRI, 2004).

The RTI Act contains of six different chapters, dealing with the right to information and obligations of public authorities, the central- and state commission, powers and functions of the information commissions, appeal and penalties and miscellaneous. Under the provisions of the RTI Act, any citizen (in- or outside India) may request information from a public authority; a body of Government, which is required to reply expeditiously or within thirty days.

It is stated in the Act that democracy requires an informed citizenry, and that transparency of information can hold Government accountable to the governed, therefore it is expedient to provide access to information to citizens who desire to have it (RTI Act 2005: 1). When citizens have access to information they naturally tend to "make more meaningful decisions, raise informed opinions, influence policies affecting their society and even help shape a more assured future for the next generation" (CUTS 2010: 1).

RTI was first recognised in Sweden over 200 years ago (ibid: 1). Importantly, however, over the last ten years it has gained widespread recognition in all regions of the world and in 2015 around 103 countries had implemented a RTI Act (RTI Rating, 2015). Both international and local dynamics have contributed to this trend. Internationally, the combination of a growing global emphasis on transparency as critical to good governance, the recognition of the right to information in international conventions, and pressure from development aid agencies and intergovernmental bodies created a global momentum for reform. The influence of international networks that links global experts and NGOs with local policy makers has also been an important element in the convergence of legislative standards across countries (World Bank, 2013: 1).

The RTI Act (2005) was established to bring the FIA Act into line with international best practice. RTI is a powerful tool that can deliver significant social benefits for a country. It can provide a strong support to democracy and advocate good governance by empowerment through inclusive local citizenship, and promoting the ability to participate effectively and hold government officials accountable (PRIA, 2007). By applying various national and international laws effectively for the benefit of the underprivileged citizens, this will empower them to become well-informed, self dependent, and respectable citizens.

In the RTI Act information is defined to be any material in any form, including records, documents, e-mails, opinions, advices, contracts, reports etc. and can be material produced

by a computer or any other device (RTI 2005: 2). Right to information should be understood as the right to access and obtain any official information by the public.

Though this project focus on digital and public libraries, the RTI Act is important to understand why information is so important, and how it can empower the citizens in India. By applying the method of Carol Bacchi (WPR), will I focus on the language, concepts and categories employed to frame the issue in the RTI Act (see chapter 5). Every policy proposal contains within it an explicit or implicit diagnosis of the 'problem' and related a need to identify and asses these representations.

Since the RTI Act was implemented in 2005, the number of Indian citizens that have requiring information has increased (PRIA, 2007). This proves the Act to be somehow successful, but there are still challenges to overcome. The Act is not widely known in rural communities and many citizens do not receive the information they try to retrieve from the public authority:

"The effective implementation of the Act also requires shift in behaviour of both the citizens and the government; while citizens need to develop the habit of asking for information and owing up the responsibility of asking clear and precise question and the government officials need to develop the habit of providing the information voluntarily" (PRIA, 2007: 2).

This might show a two-folded analysis of the RTI Act, as one side being the importance of access to information to empower citizens, the other being the silences not presented in the Act.

4. Theoretical Framework

I will in following chapter present the theoretical framework, which will function as a backdrop for my analysis. I will firstly present theory by Jürgen Habermas on the transformation- and political functions of the public sphere followed up by theory by Nancy Fraser.

The aspects of Habermas' work on the public sphere and political functions that are relevant for this study, will work in dialogue with points raised by Nancy Fraser (1992), who has contributed with important critique of Habermas' work. I will present Nancy Fraser's essay on rethinking the public sphere. She offers a feminist revision of Habermas' historical description of the public sphere and claims that the bourgeois public sphere historically discriminated against women and other marginalized groups.

Lastly I will discuss why I have chosen the above two theories, and why I find these relevant for my study.

4.a. The 'Public Sphere' by Jürgen Habermas

For this study I will mainly use Habermas' (1989) work on the public sphere. When debating public libraries and how the institution can influence the empowerment of women, it seems inevitable to mention Jürgen Habermas and his theory on the public sphere. While drawing on his thoughts and ideas, I do not align myself completely with his notions, and will mainly use him as a backdrop for my empirical findings, as to understand empowerment of women through public libraries.

The German scholar Jürgen Habermas' is mostly known for his work on the public sphere. His book on this subject was not translated into English before 1989; 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere - An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society' and is a historical-sociological account of the:

"emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere. It combines materials and methods from sociology and economics, law and political science, and social and cultural history in an effort to grasp the preconditions, structures, functions, and inner tensions of this central domain of modern society." (Habermas 1989: xi).

The Initial Question

Habermas takes his starting point on the structural transformation of the public sphere with the question: "Is democracy possible?" (Habermas 1989: 1). To understand democracy, Habermas debates the understanding of public and private.

Habermas' usage of the term 'public sphere' takes its origins back to various historical phases (ibid: 1). Events and occasions are referred to as 'public' when they are open to all (ibid: 1), whereas places or buildings are spoken about to be public even though not always accessible for all. An example of public buildings can be state institutions; though ministry buildings are referred to as public buildings, not all citizens can access them. The word public as we understand it, is a historically new word (ibid: 2-3). In a historical sense, the understanding of *public* and *private* were of legal matter, this has come to change though.

Habermas describes the *bourgeois* in his theory on the structural transformation of the public sphere. The bourgeois is a sociologically defined class and refers to people with a certain cultural and financial capital whom belong to the middle class.

The bourgeois is defined by Habermas to be two things in one: "a privatized person who is an owner of goods and a human being among others" (ibid: 55). Habermas describes the development of a bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as its subsequent decline. Initially, societies were monarchical and feudal, which made no distinction between state and society or between public and private. The societies had organised themselves politically around symbolic representation and status. Habermas (1989) describes how these feudal societies were transformed into a bourgeois liberal constitutional order, where a distinction between the public and the private spheres developed. Within the private sphere a bourgeois public sphere for rational-critical political debate took form, this new phenomenon was known as *public opinion*.

Habermas uses the term 'public sphere' as a realm of freedom, a space where citizens are interacting as equals and where public opinion matters (ibid: 4).

Political Functions of the Public Sphere

The bourgeois claimed the public sphere to be regulated from public authorities such as the state (Habermas 1989: 27). The bourgeois were private persons who did not as such rule (ibid: 28), their claim against the public authorities were not to divide, but to change the dominance in ruling through the medium: "people's public use of their reason" (ibid: 27). The shift in dominance of ruling, developed a growth of a literary public sphere, in which the bourgeois learned to critically reflect upon themselves and their role in society. "The

bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public" (ibid: 27).

The public sphere took over political functions as public authorities lost their dominance of ruling. Individual interests guided the critical discussion sparked by the products of culture that had become available for the public: in the reading room, in the theater, in museums and at concerts (ibid: 29). The bourgeois middle class became educated and critical towards the society. The "town" became the life of the public sphere in contrast to the court, in early days this were places like coffee houses, the salons and table societies. In these spaces sociable discussions quickly developed into public criticism (ibid: 30) and society engaged in critical public debate. The "town" took over cultural functions, and the public sphere itself was transformed (ibid: 31). The figure below presents a graphical illustration of Habermas' social realms:

Private Sphere	Public Sphere	Public Authority Sphere
Civil society (realm of commodity exchange and social labor)	Public sphere in the world of letters (**media**, press)	**State** (realm of the "police")
Conjugal **family's internal** space (bourgeois intellectuals)	(market of culture products) **"Town"**	**Court** (courtly-noble society)

Figure 3 (Habermas 1989: 30).

"The line between state and society, fundamental in our context, divided the public sphere from the private realm" (Habermas 1989: 30). The public sphere was constituted by private people, within this realm the private sphere existed. The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense; the realm of commodity exchange and social labor, and the family (ibid: 30).

Institutions of the Public Sphere and the Transformation of the Public Sphere

The public sphere includes spaces such as the "town". As mentioned above, this were places where private people interacted with each other in debating social- and political issues, such as in eighteenth century French *salons*, or the British *coffee houses* from between year 1680-1730 (Habermas 1989: 32). In the coffee houses the aristocrats met the bourgeois, and literature had to legitimate itself. Critical debate of the work of literature and art was soon

extended to discussions on economics and politics (ibid: 33). The issues discussed all had character of being 'general' not only in their significance, but also in their accessibility: "everyone had to *be able* to participate" (ibid: 37).

From the process of the institutions of the public sphere, arose the public sphere in the world of letters. This, too, were in relation to the public sphere in the political realm. The salons and coffee houses provided a space that allowed free exchange of information and ideas on issues of public concern, the bourgeois put this on paper to publish. "The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of the society" (ibid: 30-31). Bücher (in Habermas 1989) captures the development of the transformation of the public sphere's political function: "From mere institutions for the publication of news, the papers became also carriers and leaders of public opinion, and the instruments in the arsenal of party politics" (ibid: 182).

Economic developments were crucial for the development of the public sphere (Habermas 1989: 143), and Habermas emphasised the role of capitalist modes of production, and the long-distance trade in news in this development (ibid: 144). Free competition and independent prices gave more power to the private individual and less to the superior rulers. "The more society became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints, the more urgent became the need for a strong state" (ibid: 144).

The public sphere transformed as the mass of private people took ownership of it. With a space to freely debate politics on equal terms and with the growth of a market economy a new sphere of "social" emanated (ibid: 141). This social sphere broke the "fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested in state authority" (ibid: 141). That society was essentially a private sphere became questionable only when powers of "society" themselves assumed functions of public authority (ibid: 142). The social sphere emerged when the distinction between "public" and "private" could not usefully be applied (ibid: 142).

According to Habermas, the structural transformation of the relation between the public and the private sphere changed the political functions (ibid: 142-143) and democracy emanated from this.

Deliberative Democracy

The key feature in Habermas' theory on public sphere, is the public's use of reason in rational-critical debate. Scholar Anne-Katrin Arnold describes the public sphere as a: "constitutive element of democracy. Without it, citizens would not have a space in which to

develop and articulate 'public will,' and no means to influence political decision making" (World Bank, 2008). When the private people create a public space for open dialogue, they create a deliberate democracy; the key element in deliberative democracy is the democratic dialogue. The private interest for democracy is fused from a political interest, Habermas focuses on a free and democratic dialogue for facilitating change in society. He argues that a democratic public life cannot develop where matters of public importance are not discussed by citizens: "Public opinion was supposed to do justice to 'the nature of the case'" (Habermas 1989: 55).

The reasons are meant to come about through an open dialogue between rational partners who engage with each other, in order to reach a common understanding on certain issues. This idea of a common engagement is at the core of Habermas' notion of deliberative democracy. His theory points towards a common goal of reaching for an agreement, rather than letting the majority rule. Democracy is created when you give the people the power of judgment and the space to freely engage with each other. Information is at the core of the public sphere, "the presumption being that within it actors make clear their positions in explicit argument and that their views are also made available to the wider public so that it may have full access to the producer" (Webster 2006: 163). From the premise that public opinion is to be formed in an arena of open debate, it follows that the effectiveness of all this will be profoundly shaped by the quality, availability and communication of information (ibid: 168). Habermas argues that more information leads to a better-informed society (ibid: 163), but he has nothing to say about the historical exclusion of women from the public sphere (Landes, 1995).

I will in following present the feminist revision of Habermas' description of the public sphere by Nancy Fraser (1992).

4.b. 'Rethinking the Public Sphere' by Nancy Fraser

Nancy Fraser is an American critical theorist and feminist. Her essay 'Rethinking the Public Sphere - A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy' was published in 1992 in the collection 'Habermas and the Public Sphere' edited by Craig Calhoun. This collection of essays is a thorough dissection of Habermas' theory about the bourgeois public sphere by scholars from various academic disciplines.

Habermas argues that the structural transformation of the public sphere, leads to a democratic society with better-informed citizens (Habermas 1989). Nancy Fraser (1992)

claims that Habermas fails to approach the discrimination of women in his historical description of the public sphere and therefore she doubts whether there was ever really a public sphere.

In her essay she furthermore explains how feminist scholars use the expression 'public sphere' as a way to refer to everything that is outside the domestic or familial sphere (Fraser 1992: 110). She elaborates this with three analytically distinct things that 'public sphere' conflates: the state, the official economy of paid employment, and the arenas of public discourse (ibid: 110). Fraser explains that this should not only be thought about as a merely theoretical issue, it has practical political consequences as well:

"These consequences appears when for example, agitational campaigns against misogynist cultural representations are confounded with programs for state censorship or when struggles to deprivatize housework and childcare are equated with their commodification" (ibid: 110).

In both cases the question is whether to subject gender issues to "the logic of the market or of the administrative state is to promote the liberation of women" (ibid: 110). Habermas' sense of the public sphere is centered on empowerment through political participation, Fraser describes this as a theater for debating and deliberating (ibid: 111). Fraser takes in her essay a basic premise for Habermas' idea of the public sphere, but does not see it as fully satisfactory (ibid: 111). She undergoes some critical interrogation and reconstruction of Habermas' theory to explain the limits in his approach to democracy. Fraser identifies four assumptions underlying the bourgeois conception of the public sphere as Habermas describes it, only for her to critically discuss an alternative, post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere (ibid: 112). These four assumptions that are called into question are the following:

- "The assumption that it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate *as if* they were social equals; the assumption, therefore, that societal equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy
- The assumption that the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than towards, greater democracy, and that a single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics

- The assumption that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about common good, and that the appearance of private interests and private issues is always undesirable

- The assumption that a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state" (ibid: 117-118).

I will consider each of above assumptions when discussing the public sphere in this thesis. The assumptions are elaborated in the following below.

Open Access, Participatory Parity, and Social Equality

Habermas (1989) claims that the public sphere is open and accessible for all, but history shows that women from all classes and ethnicities were excluded from the political participation only on the basis of their gender: "For less privileged women, access to public life only came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working-class protests activists" (Fraser 1992: 115). Fraser believes that Habermas idealises the liberal public sphere and fails to examine other non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres (Fraser 1992: 115).

One approach to understanding Habermas' ideal of open access, is the mere fact that it was only a matter of time before formal exclusions based on gender, property and race were eliminated (ibid: 118). Formal exclusion still requires though, that we look at the process of discursive interaction within formally inclusive public arenas. Fraser reminds us that the bourgeois conception of public sphere requires "bracketing inequalities of status" (ibid: 118). Differences such as birth and fortune were supposed to be set aside, so all citizens could speak to each other as if they were social and economic peers. Fraser explains that:

"Discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlated and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebeian classes and prevent them from participating as peers" (ibid: 119).

So even though all citizens are formally and legally allowed and licensed to participate, informal impediments to participatory parity can persist. This challenge Habermas' perception of the bourgeois public sphere and within that open access, participatory parity and social equality.

In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles (ibid: 120). A resistance towards gender is rarely overcome by the elimination

of formal exclusion. Fraser argues that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere does not foster participation and that it is inadequate insofar as it supposes that social equality is not a necessary condition for participatory parity (ibid: 121).

Equality, Diversity, and Multiple Publics

Whereas Habermas claims the public sphere to be *the* public arena as a singular (Fraser 1992: 122), Fraser considers, what she refers as 'interpublic relations', the character of interactions among different publics.

Fraser describes the relative merits of a single public versus multiple publics in two kinds of modern societies: *stratified societies* and *egalitarian multicultural societies* (ibid: 122). Firstly, with stratified societies Fraser means "societies whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination" (ibid: 122). She argues that within these societies, full parity of participation in public debate and deliberation is not possible. Deliberative processes in an unequal public sphere will tend to be to the advantage of dominant groups rather than of subordinates, as it is impossible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality (ibid: 122). This is only the case though, when there is one single public sphere, where members of subordinated groups will find no arena for deliberation among themselves. Historical records of the public sphere support this argument, with subordinated social groups such as women having found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics (ibid: 122). Fraser refers to Geoff Eley on how to think of the public sphere in stratified societies: "the structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among variety of publics take place" (ibid: 125). With a multiplicity of public spheres in stratified societies the presence and activity of "a variety of publics" is acknowledged (ibid: 125).

Secondly, with egalitarian multicultural societies Fraser means "nonstratified societies, societies whose basic framework does not generate unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination" (ibid: 125). Egalitarian societies are societies without classes or without gender or racial divisions of labor, it is societies which allow free expression, and which consists of diverse cultural groups (ibid: 125). With this thought Fraser questions whether the single multicultural public would be preferable to multiple publics by looking into the relationship between public discourse and social identities (ibid: 125). From the bourgeois conception, public spheres are not only arenas for a public opinion, they are also spaces for formation of social identities. Participation allows one to speak free from his or her mind, and thereby simultaneously construct and express their cultural identity as well (ibid: 126). "For public life in egalitarian, multicultural societies cannot

consist exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere" (ibid: 126). Fraser argues that one cultural group would always be privileged over another, and that there is no genuinely culturally neutral space, thereby discursive assimilation would be created as a condition for participation in public debate (ibid: 126).

Fraser concludes that "the idea of an egalitarian, multicultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate" (ibid: 126). In her essay Fraser wishes to understand what form of public life comes closest to the ideal of the public sphere (ibid: 122), but she sees no reason to rule out the possibility of a society where social equality and cultural diversity coexist with participatory democracy (ibid: 126-127). "The ideal participatory parity is better achieved by multiplicity of publics that by a single. This is true both for stratified societies and egalitarian, multicultural societies" (ibid: 127).

Public Spheres, Common Concerns, and Private Interests

Fraser has argued that in stratified societies: "subaltern counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics" (Fraser 1992: 128), and it is therefore important to question what counts as public matters, and in contrast what is private.

In the third problematic assumption Fraser investigates the assumption concerning the appropriate scope of publicity in relation to privacy (ibid: 128). As mentioned, both Habermas and Fraser refer to the public sphere as 'open' and 'accessible' to all. Fraser furthermore examines public as the sense of '*concern to everyone*', as one of several senses of private and public she has in play (ibid: 128). In the public sphere issues or concerns of the participants are debated, but only the participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them (ibid: 129). There is no guarantee that all participants agree or see the concern as common; what will count as a matter of common concern: "will be decided precisely through discursive contestation" (ibid: 129). Habermas characterises the debate in the public sphere as '*common good*'. This is often, though, the dominant group's values or needs, and not the values and needs of all citizens in the society according to Fraser (ibid: 129). Fraser highlights a civic-republican model that views politics as people reasoning together to promote a common good that transcends the mere sum of the preferences of the individuals (ibid: 129).

Through a deliberation participants of the public can come to discover or create a common good (ibid: 130). In the process of deliberation, the participants are transformed from a group of self-seeking, private individuals into a public, collectivity acting together in the common interest. According to this view, private interests have no proper place in the

political public sphere, they are the pre-political starting point of deliberation, to be transformed in the course of debate (ibid: 130). According to Fraser, however, this view conflates the ideas of deliberation and the common good by assuming that "deliberation must be deliberation *about* the common good" (ibid: 130). We cannot assume though, that the outcome of deliberative process will be a discovery of a common good and there will be no conflicts of interest. Fraser argues that this is why we should take a more critical approach to the terms 'private' and 'public' (ibid: 131).

Fraser elaborates the sense of 'concern to everyone' with the senses *'pertaining to private property in a market economy'* and *'pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life'* (ibid: 131). These are senses of 'private', which often function as the ideal to delimit the boundaries of the public sphere in ways that disadvantage subordinate social groups (ibid: 131). Fraser explains that: "each of these senses is at the center of a rhetoric of privacy that has historically been used to restrict the universe of legitimate public contestation" (ibid: 131). These privacies exclude some issues and interests from public debate as understood to be of private, domestic or personal matter, this usually works to the advantage to the dominant groups (ibid: 132).

Lifting of formal restrictions on public sphere participation does not suffice to ensure inclusion in practice (ibid: 132). Even though women have been formally allowed to participate, their participation might be influenced by conceptions of economic privacy and domestic privacy that limit the scope of the debate (ibid: 132). Fraser therefore concludes that subordinate groups may continue to operate subtextually and informally, even after formal restrictions have been rescinded (ibid: 132).

Strong Publics, Weak Publics: On Civil Society and the State

Fraser's fourth and last assumption underlying the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, is the assumption that "a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation of civil society and the state" (Fraser 1992: 132).

Recalling Habermas' definition of the liberal public sphere as a "body of private persons assembled to form a public" (Habermas 1989: 30) the emphasis is on private persons who are not state officials, and their participation in the public sphere is not undertaken in any official capacity (Fraser 1992: 133). Fraser argues that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere and its strong need for a sharp separation of civil society and the state promotes *weak publics*. Weak publics are publics: "whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making" (ibid: 134*)*. Fraser

furthermore presents the term '*strong publics*', as publics: "whose discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making" (ibid: 134).

The terms 'weak public' and 'strong public' suggest that the force of public opinion is strengthened, when a group presenting it is empowered to translate such 'opinion' into authoritative decisions (ibid: 134-135). Fraser questions the relationship between the two, considering that the people affected might not participate as agents in the debate, but may have a stake in the decision making (ibid: 135). She does not answer the question whether weak- or strong public are preferable, but draws one conclusion on Habermas' promotion of sharp separation:

"Any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation of between civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-management, interpublic coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society" (ibid: 136).

In her essay Fraser asks for a post-bourgeois conception of the public sphere. As a conclusion of rethinking the public sphere, she states that the bourgeois conception of the public sphere by Habermas, is not adequate for the critique of the limits of actually existing democracy in late-capitalist societies (ibid: 136).

I will with the arguments on the public sphere by both Habermas and Fraser approach my analysis on how information access and digital libraries can empower women in rural India (see chapter 5.b.). In order to do so, I will present my analytical framework to the evidence from my fieldwork below.

4.c. Approach to Analysis

It can be challenging how to operationalise theories so that they provide an analytic framework which can actually be used to dissect empirical evidence with. Neither is it a straightforward exercise to use Habermas' notion of the public sphere when analysing empirical data. Below, I try to operationalize Habermas' model based on inspiration partly from Pristed Nielsen (2005).

Habermas' model on the public sphere is a theoretically derived notion based on ideal assumptions. In chapter 4.a. it is demonstrated that from a normative standpoint, the notion of deliberative democracy is a desirable model to try to accommodate differences within. But

even if the model is normatively desirable, the question still remains whether such a model makes sense in trying to analyse an empirical situation – in this case empowerment of women in digital libraries in rural India. In order to provide an analytic framework that can be directly applicable to my empirical data, it seems necessary to transform Habermas' model of the public sphere. One way of transforming the ideal of the public sphere into a more concrete model could be to see it as a model containing the four premises of the interaction processes between interests in the society (Pristed Nielsen 2005: 59):

- Everybody can participate in discussions
- Everybody can introduce and problematize any claim
- Everybody can freely express his/her attitudes, wishes and needs
- Nobody may be prevented through force from exercising these rights

These premises and the concepts of *interest, access, ability* and *opportunity* extracted from the collected qualitative data and the theory of Habermas (1989) can help me build a model for analysis.

In chapter 4.a. I have presented Habermas' requirements for an ideal public sphere. Firstly, he argues that individual *interest* guides the critical discussion (Habermas 1989: 29). Habermas allege interest of the group as a main prerequisite for forming a public sphere. The private interest for democracy is fused from a political interest, Habermas furthermore explains that as citizens become more informed, their interest in public debate takes form (ibid: 29). With this Habermas indicates that the individual had an interest in empowering themselves in their society and a public sphere is created by this interest. Secondly, another central concept for an ideal public sphere is *access*. The public sphere must be accessible for all, and all should access to participating in the debate. The public sphere is an open space where everybody can engage with each other, participate in the debate and freely express one's values or needs. The third concept is the concept of *ability*: "everyone had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas 1989: 37). Habermas argues that all individuals with an interest in political debates can access the public sphere and must be able to participate on equal terms. The fourth and last concept is *opportunity*. Everybody should have the opportunity to participate in political processes and the opportunity to empower themselves through information and debate.

These four conceptual points can be conceived as theoretical variables and be reformulated into separate analytic questions that can be answered using empirical evidence. Thus the following concrete analytic questions will serve as the model for analysis in chapter 5. The table below (adopted and adjusted from Pristed Nielsen 2005: 88) illustrates the details to this model:

Theoretical variables	**Analytic questions**	**Empirical evidence**
Interest in participating	Do women show interest in participating and gaining information?	Is there a need for participating? Are women interested in gaining information?
Access to participating	How does one access the public sphere or gain information?	Structural and spatial aspects: Institutional structures, RTI Act, physical location and distance etc.
Ability to participate	Which women participate?	Agency aspects: Resource and skills requirements, for example gender or caste issues, educational, and family background, etc.
Opportunity to participate	When do women participate? Do the women have the time it requires to gain information?	Temporal aspects: Time consumption - how much time does it require to gain information, do women have time to participate?

Figure 4.

The model is built on a series of questions based on how and when participation in the public sphere is carried out, as well as who participates and which abilities participation requires.

Interest, access, opportunity, and ability to participate in the public sphere would be an practical translation to Habermas' theory which not only makes it empirically applicable, but also takes account of some of the concerns raised by Nancy Fraser of deliberative democracy that Habermas' theory is too exclusive and places too great normative expectations on discussion participants.

I will in the following chapter apply above framework to my analysis. I will through a discussion of my empirical findings consider the four concepts with a backdrop to the discussion of exclusion in the public sphere by Fraser.

5. Analysis

In the first part of this chapter (section 5.a) I analyse the Right to Information Act (2005) and examine the importance of information access for citizens, moreover the importance for women in India, to understand how this is represented within the Act. This analysis is undertaken through the application of Bacchi's '*What's the Problem Represented to be?*' - approach, presented in chapter 2 above. With the analysis of the RTI Act I hope to understand the underlying political reasoning behind information access in India.

In the second part of this chapter (section 5.b) I analyse the evidence from my fieldwork by applying method and theory discussed in chapter 2 and 4 above. I will apply theory by Jürgen Habermas' while considering the discussion of exclusion in the public sphere by Nancy Fraser. In this part of the analysis, I rely on the theoretical framework where the four concepts; *interest, access, ability and opportunity* are used as a practical translation to my observations, visits, talks and interviews with READ and DEF.

Overall, by applying method and theory discussed in above chapters, I will hopefully get a clearer image whether the RTI Act and the digital libraries can solve problems, and how this contribute to the development of empowering rural girls and women in India.

5.a Analysing the RTI Act

To understand the importance of information access for the citizens of India, how this is represented within the Act, and how this can empower women in rural India, I will firstly begin my analysis by analysing the Right to Information Act (2005).
By applying the method of Carol Bacchi: "*What's the problem represented to be*" (2009) to the RTI Act, I will reveal the political reasoning behind it and thereby explain why India has come up with the chosen "solutions" to the "problem". Before coming to an analysis of the Act though, it is important to first consider the issue of the scope of any Central law on the right to information. As described in chapter 3.c post independent India has a long history of corruption, and though the freedom to speech and expression are seen to be a human right (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) and also interpreted in the Indian Constitution; The Fundamental Rights from 1950, the RTI Act guarantees this right.

The right to information is important for a transparent government and well-informed citizenship. The RTI Act replaces the erstwhile Freedom of Information Act, 2002 (hereafter

FIA). The FIA was not well implemented and the issue of information access was not considered, though the right to information was extensive (Asia Disclosed, 2015: 31).

The World Bank's 2007 Governance and Anticorruption (GAC) strategy highlighted that improving governance in countries is necessary to fight corruption and strengthen development, and The World Bank underlined the importance of transparency as a critical dimension of good governance (World Bank, GAC, 2007). It was pointed out that citizens and media who have access to information on the operation of state institutions are crucial for fostering accountability. Transparency might extend to publication of budget and procurement data, access to state records and reports, and the state's active dissemination of information on its operations and performance (ibid).

"A large body of research shows that in the longer term good governance is associated with robust growth, lower income inequality, child mortality, and illiteracy; improved country competitiveness and investment climate; and greater resilience of the financial sector. Research also indicates that aid projects are more likely to succeed in well-governed environments." (The World Bank, 2007)

According to above statement, improving governance requires effective and sustainable public sector reform efforts. For a law as the RTI Act to be effective, it must provide a robust framework that ensures that citizens can access the information held by public bodies, which includes all branches of the State (executive, legislative and judicial) and other public or governmental authorities, at whatever level – national, regional or local, as well as all bodies exercising public power, performing public functions or operating primarily with public funds. In India, a number of high profile disclosures revealed corruption in various government schemes (Transparency International, 2015). The RTI Act has been considered as a landmark in India's drive towards more openness and accountability (Asia Disclosed, 2015: 32).

As described in the methodology chapter (chapter 2) I will in the policy analysis of the RTI Act mainly make use of two of Bacchi's questions; being the first "*What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?*" and her fourth "*what is left unproblematic in this problem? What are the silences? Can the problem be thought about differently?*" (Bacchi 2009).

The WPR approach builds on the premise that, since all policies are problematising activities, they contain implicit problem representations (Bacchi 2009: 2). The first question: "*What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?*" can be seen as an opening question on what the government propose to change with the Act. The presumption is that

the purpose of policy is to solve 'social problems' (Bacchi 2009: x). The problem initiated in the RTI Act is the lack of access to information: "*Democracy requires an informed citizenry and transparency of information which are vital to its functioning and also to contain corruption and to hold Governments and their instrumentalities accountable to the governed*" (RTI 2005: 1). The Act was therefore passed to provide information to citizens who desire to have it, implicitly saying that citizens were not beforehand granted access to information, though wanting to obtain it.

The policy implies a deeply rooted cultural problem with corruption, whereto the Act might be the solution. The problem of corruption and restricted information access is a matter of not just the government but the country and the society as a whole; the government and the citizens, the authorities and the public. Bacchi takes a social constructivist approach with her method. Applying this to the Act, I am able to reconstruct 'the construction of corruption' from a societal perspective. Corruption in India is a generally tolerated behaviour by many authorities and by government, and according to a Hindustan survey from 2012, at least 42 percent of young Indians have paid a bribe (CRF, 2014). The behaviour is a part of a framework of normative conceptions, these conceptions are often not visible in policies and neither is in the RTI Act. By applying question 2 to the analysis of the RTI Act, I will get to understand not *why* something happens, but *how* something happens (Bacchi 2012: 5), here referring to background knowledge on the cultural and historical background of India.

When having access to official documents and other public information, it is seemed to be believed that this will increase the citizens' awareness about the decisions and actions of the government (Asia Disclosed, 2015: 31). Access to information will lead to a more transparent government, but will also work as a tool for citizens to be informed on their rights to education, right to equality, right to freedom of religion etc.

In the RTI Act the *problem* is represented as being corruption and the *solution* is having access to information. But as Bacchi mentions; problems have a cultural dimension as they are created within specific historical, national or international contexts and could therefore be argued to be cultural products (Bacchi 2012: ix). Corruption in India has been described and analysed by many scholars. Lucia Michelutti has for her book "The Vernacularisation of Indian Democracy" (2008) interviewed several respondents from the Mathura province, regarding what is perceived to be good qualities and skills for an authority who operates in North India. The respondents expressed an admiration for leaders with a 'goonda look': a strong muscular physique, a leather jacket, sunglasses, a powerful motorbike, all used to convey a cool, successful image. Though the goonda look is still associated with corrupt leaders and criminals, it is just as much considered to be the look of what is a "real" leader by the public, implicit meaning corrupt leaders seems to be the norm. Corrupt behaviour is

accepted by the public and government and finding a solution to corruption, the social constructions of corruption must be considered. It must therefore be questioned if the problem or norms can be solved with the Act alone.

In the RTI Act, Article 6 'Request for obtaining information', it is stated: "A person, who desires to obtain any information under this Act, shall make a request in writing or through electronic means in English or Hindi or in the official language of the area" (RTI Act 2005: 5). A symbolic fee must be accompanying the request for information. If the request cannot be made in writing, the public information authority shall "render all reasonable assistance to the person making the request orally to reduce the same in writing" (RTI Act 2005:5). This means that all citizens have the same right to access information, without any discrimination on gender, race, educational background etc.. Bearing this in mind, I will apply question four of the WPR method to my analysis; *"What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?"* Bachhi, 2009)

The problem representation implies corruption and the arbitrary use and misuse of power by the govern authorities. Within this problem, the solution lies in access to information to increase citizens' awareness about the decisions and actions of the government and information on their rights, and to bring justice out. The problem and solution should be explored further, and a more critical approach to the RTI Act should be taken. By considering the limits of the problem representations, I can discover what fails to be problematised (Bacchi 2009: 12).

Granting citizens access to information can prevent corruption with a more transparent government. The success of the RTI Act can be measured by the mere fact that citizens are requiring information and are using the Act (RTI Final Report, 2009). The objective is though, to bring into discussion issues and perspectives that are silenced in the identified problem representation (Bacchi 2009: 13). The WRP approach is to raise for reflection and consideration, this draw attention to tensions and contradictions in the problem representation (ibid).

The right to information is the solution to corruption, but the Act fails to consider, that the need to information can be influenced by various factors. Though the Act have proven to be successful, RTI activists claim that it is often not safe to request for information and there have been an increase in number of attacks against citizens who are using the Act to reveal corruption or other misdeeds in their communities (PRIA, 2007: 32). National and international human rights organisations have pointed out several of cases where citizens

requiring information under the RTI Act, have been harassed and some even murdered (PRIA 2007: 32).

The RTI Act has given the citizens rights to obtain information as a solution to corruption, but policies give shape to 'problems', they do not address them (Bacchi 2009: x) and considering the social constructions to corruption in India, more has to be done to solve the problem.

The problem of a big gender gap in India is silenced in the RTI Act. Though the Act gives equal right to information, the majority of women in India do not have the confident to ask, speak and stand up for themselves due to the social norms of the country. It is common for rural families in India to end their daughter's education early so the girls can work on the farm and in the home, or so they can be married off. If present trends continue, 130 million girls in South Asia will be married as children by 2030, ending their formal education and resulting in early pregnancies (READ, 2015).

Legal awareness for the citizens of India is important, and especially women need to be aware of their rights in order to empower them self. More than half of the women in India are illiterate, uneducated and not represented in leadership of India (ibid). The Act gives the right to information, but does not address the problem of what makes one, especially women, search or want to obtain information. It can therefore be asked: Is the right to information merely enough to empower women in rural India?

This leads me to the analysis of the evidence from my fieldwork in India. Considering the analysis of the RTI Act, I have researched the issues in the field. With the framework to my analysis, I will discuss my empirical data considering the four concepts to participation in the public sphere: *interest, access, ability* and *opportunity* and the model of analysis (see chapter 4.c.).

5.b Analysing evidence from fieldwork

To sum up the process of this study so far, I have through fieldwork in India conducted interviews with female users, staff and management of public libraries in rural India. I have furthermore made observations at the libraries, to understand the behaviour of the female library users. I have suggested that Habermas' notion of the public sphere, while still highly theoretical, could be used to assess the extent to which ideals of deliberative democracy can be accommodated in public libraries through access to information and hence - indirectly - facilitating participation in public debate. The public library is in this study considered to be the public sphere where women can gain information, meet other women and participate in

a dialogue that will be the essence of deliberative democracy and which could potentially help them to be empowered.

The question of how to make use of Habermas' theory in an empirical study was discussed in chapter 4, by developing a model for analysis of empirical data. This model is the basis for chapter 5.b., where the analytic questions from the model will be answered by looking at the empirical evidence suggested in the same table.

The data analysis will unfold according to four theoretical concepts: *interest, access, ability* and *opportunity* in participating in the democratic debate. These four concepts will form the bulk of the analytic development.

In the light of the theoretical framework I will analyse my problem formulation:

How can information access and digital libraries empower women and girls in rural India?

Interest

It is implied that the premises for any deliberation to take place, is that the parties to a debate are interested in participation in a dialogue. If there is an interest for a dialogue, it must be because the issues or interests of the affected parties are thought to be best solved or achieved in a partnership. In other words, a prerequisite for parties to enter into dialogue with each other will be joint *interest* in exchanging information.

When discussing participation in this study, it is referred to as participating in a dialogue in the libraries, as the public sphere, with the result of creating a deliberative democracy and empowerment of the women. Habermas argues that the core notion of deliberative democracy comes from a common engagement for reaching a common agreement (Habermas 1989: 129). Only the participants themselves can decide what is and what is not of common concern to them (ibid), the female users must therefore have a common interest in empowerment as having a common issue of being discriminated in the society.

Historically, women in India have for years faced cultural challenges that impede social advancement. Cultural stigmas have prevented them from participating in education, jobs and decision-making processes, and they experience discrimination on all social- and economic levels (World Economic Forum, 2015).

The government has proved interest in changing the norms for the Indian women, and it is stated in the Indian Constitution (1949) that: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them". It is furthermore stated that no citizen shall be restricted with regard to access to public places or

institutions. By implementing the RTI Act (2005), the Indian Government gave all citizens equal right to information. As mentioned in the above analysis of the RTI Act, the solution to the problem of a non-transparent society is all citizens having equal right to information, and this problem is perceived solved by the implementation of the Act.

Government agencies seem interested in removing obstacles for women to enter the public sphere, gain information and be empowered on equal terms. My data collection process was based on an agenda of speaking to the women and the library staff about participation and empowerment, to get an understanding of whether there is an interest from the women to participate and gain information to be empowered in the society. A few examples of how interest is expressed by the women and staff follows.

From Habermas' conception, the public sphere is not only an arena for a public opinion formation, it is also a space for formation of social identities. Participation allows one to speak free from their mind, and thereby simultaneously construct and express their cultural identity as well (Fraser 1992: 126). The public library is an open institution that invites all citizens to participate and where all citizens can freely express his or her wishes and needs. In the past years, the library has been developed into an institution that does not only focus on books as a main source of information and knowledge, but where other activities such as computer training, discussion groups and career counseling are also present (Appendix 7 & 8). The libraries I visited during my fieldwork all have had a major focus on ITC and offered computer training to whom may be interested. The new digital impact has opened up possibilities to gain information not previously accessible.

By empirical evidence, the analytic questions from the model (figure 4) will be answered, to investigate if there is an interest from the women, the analytical question asked is: "*Do women show interest in participating and gaining information?*".

It is a difficult, if not an impossible, task to measure whether all women in India are interested in participating and gaining information. My fieldwork has been geographically limited, and it does not give a valid image of whether all women in India show *interest*. Though my data can be questioned not to be valid, it is credible. Talking to the female users, the staff and the management of READ's and DEF's libraries in India, one thing has been clear; there is a strong *need* for public spaces, such as the libraries, that allows women to participate and be empowered.

Looking at the numbers, both READ and DEF have expanded their work over the past years, and new libraries have opened and old public libraries been refined (READ Annual Report 2014 & Appendix 6). This development indicates an interest that is being met by the two

NGOs. From the staff at District Public Library Kanpur and Public Library Unnao I learned that the number of members, members mainly being children and women, in the recent years has increased (Appendix 7 & 8). This has meant that the activities carried out by the staff, have had a larger focus on women's empowerment. The activities in both READ and DEF libraries are planned by the staff, with their knowledge of the users' interest and need (Appendix 7 & 8).

Female users of the 'READ Center for Education and Women Empowerment' explained how they learned about the library center through friends in their community. The activities offered in the library caught their attention, and they especially found the computer training interesting: "When she came to the center to learn computer, and she gained… Knowledge. She really didn't know how to take mouse properly and how to train computer and how to start […] and that had a great impact… on her life" (Appendix 2). Discussing the use of the library with the female users, it became clear that the interest in gaining new information and learning new skills, came from a need to feel empowered. It also became clear, that the conception of women's empowerment - or the solution to the problem - is thought about very differently by the women, the staff and the management. As to where some women understand empowerment as a tool to get a voice, and by others it is to know about their rights and how to operationalise these into practice.

The women at the READ and DEF libraries are interested in participating at the library and in the many activities. They are interested in learning new skills, for themselves, but also for the sake of their children, as they can provide them with better knowledge when helping with for example their schoolwork: "The women come to the center to learn basic computer skills for prosperity jobs or for their children, as they will need to learn this in school" (Appendix 1). From visits to DEF's public libraries I learned that particular courses in jewelry making and beauty tips were popular among the female users (Appendix 7 & 8). These courses were as well considered to be women empowering by letting the female users participate and giving them new information and skills.

Habermas' notion of common interest, can therefore be seen in the libraries. The female users at the libraries participate in the many activities with a great interest; "Women and their families say that the Center is like a temple for learning for them" (Appendix 4). The information they gain though, is not of same character, as the information discussed in the analysis of the RTI Act (2005). Geeta explains in her interview that "women can get access to the internet. We train her to use the internet and she has the right to know whatever she wants to know by the use of technology" (Appendix 4). The female users at the public libraries can gain the information they need to empower themselves, this could be information on education, farming or public funding available in their society. Despite this

access, empirical findings show that the women are more interested in activities concerning their appearance, such as 'beauty classes' or 'internet shopping' than to claim their rights in the society (Appendix 7 & 8).

Interest is a precondition for access, opportunity, and ability, and the matter of interest cannot by itself answer the question of how public libraries can empower women in rural India. This leads me to the second concept: *access*.

Access

Interest is one of the premises for deliberative democracy, but this concept cannot stand alone. To investigate participation and empowerment of women in India, it is furthermore important to ask the analytical question of how rural women can *access* the public sphere or gain information.

Habermas (1989) argues that that all citizens must have access to the public sphere. International actors have demanded equal access to information for all citizens; men and women, and the Indian Government has implemented the RTI Act (2005) that states that democracy requires an informed citizenry: "Transparency of information can hold Government accountable to the governed, therefore it is expedient to provide access to information to citizens who desire to have it" (RTI Act 2005: 1). Habermas uses the term 'public sphere' as a realm of freedom, a space where citizens are interacting as equals and where public opinion matters (Habermas 1989: 4). This definition can as well be used to cover the libraries of READ and DEF. The library provides a physical space that allows all citizens to participate and gain information. To enter the public sphere, the women most have both interest and *access*.

Though an open physical space has been created, it can be argued that this is not accessible for all. Investigating whether women in India have *access* to participate, the analytical question on the structural and spatial aspects *"How does one access the public sphere or gain information?"* was considered.

Malhotra (READ) explains that: *"The female users of the Centers are the women and adolescent girls from the rural areas around 10-15 kilometer radius. They can walk and come to the Center on a regular basis"* (Appendix 4). The staff of the public libraries in Unnao and Kanpur furthermore tell how the libraries are not as accessible to as many of the users as they wish it to be, so they have acquired a bus that drives to remote areas with a tablet with internet access as well as books (Appendix 7 & 8). The physical location and the distance between the residence of the women and the libraries limits the access, and though

some users might have interest in participating and gaining information, they cannot access the library.

The public library is a public institution, but it is not accessible for all, as the library is located at a distance that makes it accessible only for the nearby users. Indian women show great interest in coming to the library, but the public library is not restricted only to the use of women, all citizens can participate and gain information. At the READ library center, the staff have experienced that the male population in the community do not feel as if they can access the library:

"As our programme is more of women and adolescent girls oriented, sometimes there are inhibitions that men do not have anything to learn. When we talk about various programmes on education, health, farming, ICTs etc. they start coming at the Center" (Appendix 4).

The institutional structure is important to the degree of openness where the library is accessible for all.

To accommodate deliberative democracy in public libraries all citizens must have access to participate and to gaining information. Ritu Srivastava from DEF explains that there is a need in India for an institution that allows women to participate in order to access the public debate and become activists and change the social norms (Appendix 5). Even though the institution is public and open, some groups still do not have access because of structural and spatial aspects, and even those who have access can experience they do not have the ability to participate.

Ability

In the two sections above the concepts *interest* and *access* have been analysed in the context of participating in public libraries and gaining information. Women in rural India can be limited in participating and gaining information because of structural and spatial aspects, but just as well by agency aspects such as resource- and skills requirements for example education, ethnicity or family background.

To analyse the *ability* to participate in the public sphere and gain information, the analytical question: *"who participates?"* must be considered.

Geeta Malhotra, READ India Country Director, describes the female users of the READ centers as women from rural areas who come to the centers on a regular basis for:

"Learning, reading, writing, skilling, joining the livelihood programme, earning some money, taking care of their children's education, better understanding on various health issues, meeting other women, sharing their learning and visible impact on others" (Appendix 4).

The women are interested in accessing the library, but occasionally they are not *able* to. Malhotra reveals that sometimes the husbands or other male family members, do not allow the women to come to the library: "Sometimes they (men) do not allow women to come to the Center. But with our constant efforts and when they realize the importance of the Center, they do not have any objection" (Appendix 4). Everyday Indian women do household work up to 12 hours, and this work is not recognised by family members. Malhotra explains that in the Indian culture: "The woman never puts herself or her needs first" (Appendix 4).

Habermas (1989) claims that the public sphere is open and accessible for all, but Fraser (1992) argues that women from all classes and ethnicities historically, have been excluded from political participation only on the basis of their gender. "For less privileged women, access to public life only came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working-class protests activists" (Fraser 1992: 115). This argument of Fraser can be seen today at the public libraries in India. Malhotra tells the story of a young Indian woman:

"A young woman was beaten by her husband. Her family did not want to help her and she was forced to stay with her abusive husband. The woman started coming to the library center, learning a skill in order to make some money. As she started to earn her own money, she could pay her own expenses to the family, and eventually gained their respect. As they 'saw' her, they took her away from her abusive husband" (Appendix 3).

Above story points out what is considered valuable in India. Household chores such as taking care of the cattle, cleaning the house, fetching water, cooking, feeding animals, sending the children to school etc. are not treated as work which should be appreciated by other family members, this is simply the life of a woman (Appendix 4). It is not until the woman can financially contribute to the family, that she is considered valuable.

One of the female users of the READ library center tells that her husband was very supportive of her going to the library, but her in-laws did not approve. Her husband convinced them of the benefits of his wife gaining new information and learning computer skills, and she was allowed to come to the library center (Appendix 2). Ritu Srivastava from

DEF also explains, that it can be a problem for the women to participate if the trainers are male, the libraries must accommodate these needs and provide both male and female trainers (Appendix 5).

It can be argued that above examples indicates that even though women are interested and have access, they are not always able to participate and create a deliberative democracy to empower themselves. This finding challenges Habermas' (1989) perception of the public sphere, where open access leads the way to participatory parity. Fraser argues that Habermas' conception of the public sphere does not foster participation, as it supposes that social equality is not a necessary condition for participation (Fraser 1992: 121).

Malhotra explains that in rural India, the caste issue is strong: *"Normally two women from different castes are not comfortable sitting together"*, but READ library center helps the women to understand each other, and the boundaries created by the caste and religion are broken in a phased manner (Appendix 4). Both family background, religion, ethnicity and caste matters in the women's ability to participate.

Habermas argues that "everyone had to *be able* to participate" (Habermas 1989: 37). The ability to participate can be limited though. Fraser argues that one cultural group will always be privileged over another, and that there is no genuinely culturally neutral space (Fraser 1992:126). For women in rural India, requirements need to be met for them to be able to participate; a strong support from their family, the ability to break the boundaries created by caste and religion as they often have to work with women from other groups, and sometimes financial resources to pay for a membership fee. At the DEF Public libraries, a small amount of money is asked for a membership to use the ICT facilities in the library. With the bought membership, the users can access computers and internet. In the RTI Act (2005) it is stated that every citizen have the right to gain information. Women have the right to information and DEF advocates that it is important the women use this right, and they teach them the way to gain information and why it is important to gain information (Appendix 5).

The public library is a public sphere, with open access to all citizens who have interest in participating or gaining information, but the library fails to function as a public sphere when women are not fully able to participate. Fraser (1992) notes the contradiction between liberal public sphere's constitutive catalogue of basic human rights, and the restriction to a certain class of people. The library as an institution is supposed to bring opportunities to women in rural India and give them the access to information for their benefit.

Opportunity

When women can access the public sphere and gain information, they get the opportunity to take a political role and empower themselves with new knowledge. It has been argued above how and when women are able access the public sphere, but it is just as well important to discuss *when* women have the *opportunity* to participate and gain information.

Social norms in India have forced women to be absent from the public sphere and political scene. Their role in society has made them less represented in any decision-making processes and they are often not allowed to participate. Malhotra states that: "Women in rural India never thinks of herself" (Appendix 4), she continues this statement with: "As they (women) belong to the rural villages, they do not get opportunity to explore. READ Centers provide them the opportunity" (Appendix 4). With this Malhotra states that rural women in India do not have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and develop both personally and professionally.

Deliberative democracy is based on a common goal achieved by a dialogue between equals. By entering the public sphere, women in India are given the opportunity to participate in the dialogue and debate. To create a democratic dialogue though, the women need to know both what they want and what they can have. DEF wants to empower rural women and teach them how to gain information, Srivastava expresses this with: "This is your right, you should ask for it!" (Appendix 5). Both READ and DEF provide different women empowering activities at the libraries, these activities are mostly to stimulate the women's curiosity and to higher their self-esteem, hopefully resulting in the women taking a more active role in their own empowerment (Appendix 4 & 7 & 8).

Education and knowledge are today not only gained from books, today information can take many shapes and appear through speakings, training etc.. Activities such as 'beauty tips', 'Bollywood movie nights' and 'Internet shopping' are all activities for the female users of the libraries (Appendix 7 & 8). The information the women gain from these activities is used to higher their self-esteem, to make them understand they have a worth and have an important role in the society (Appendix 4). The libraries provide them with much information, but they do not necessarily provide them with the opportunity to learn about their rights.

This takes me back to the analytical question of *when* women gain information and participate in the debate. Srivastava explains that they teach the women "how to use the computer, and how to access the computer to their own benefit" (Appendix 5), but the women all consider what is beneficial for them differently. Srivastava furthermore explains that: "Rights can be understood different from whom the receiver is" (Appendix 5), meaning that the right to information for some might be knowing their rights to education, and for

others their right to borrow a book at the library (Appendix 5).

Habermas (1989) argues that the premise that public opinion is to be formed in an arena of open debate, follows by the effectiveness of all this will be profoundly shaped by the quality, availability and communication of information (Habermas 1989: 168). DEF and READ provide the information needed to bring the women to the library, with the conclusion that when a safe space is created, at network of women will come together that will develop the women and increase their interest in retrieving more information:

"The women realize their existence; they can talk in front of others about themselves, about their family, about the society issues and share their learning among their peers and even in front of the outsiders. Once they come to the Center and realize their potential and what they can get from the Center, they are eager to learn" (Appendix 4)

When realising their worth, women become more eager to learn. Malhotra explains that: "They can get access to the internet. We train her to use the internet and she has to right to know whatever she wants to know by the use of technology" (Appendix 4).

Women gain information and participate when they feel entitled to. As the status of rural women in India is low, most women do not feel like they have the opportunity to be informed and do not even feel they need to. Most of the women at the READ and DEF libraries who gain information to empower themselves, have in common that they are supported by their family, have some education and enjoy the network of other women from the library. They participate in the debate when they collectively can act together in the common interest of common issues.

Interest, access, ability and opportunity all seem as main criteria for participating in the public sphere and gaining information. I will in the following discuss the evidence from my fieldwork and my analysis of the RTI Act with a view to the theory by Habermas (1989) and Fraser (1992).

5.c. Discussion

I will in the following section discuss my analysis of the evidence from my fieldwork as above. I will discuss this in the light of theory by Habermas (1989) with critical points to the public sphere by Fraser (1992).

A deliberative democracy are based on a dialogue among equals. I will in the following discuss whether the public library has the possibility to operate as a public sphere, that can

empower women and lead them to take an active role in the society, considering the four concepts of interest, access, ability and opportunity.

The Information Society

More data and information are generated with the development in ICT, this has brought new barriers for societies and groups who do not have access to digital tools, and they are being left behind. There have been an increase in countries, which have implemented acts on right to information, securing equal access to information to all citizens (RTI Ranking, 2015). Just as well have numerous of international actors drawn attention to the big gender-gap in dimensions of human rights issues, India being one of the countries most criticised (UN PFA, 2006). Reviewed by the CEDAW committee, India was noticed to have a large gap in education and a high number of female dropouts, India has as well failed to live up to the SDG's; empowering women by strengthen their status in society (CEDAW Review, 2014).

Computers and internet have changed the way citizens access information, and new needs have arisen as those who are not computer literate are excluded. As women are less educated than the male population in India, they often lack the basic skills in operating digital tools such as computers. This makes the women more excluded from gaining information, and by this take an active role in democracy processes for women empowerment. By meeting the information needs of women, the libraries can make a major contribution to global development.

International organisations such as IFLA and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation have committed themselves to support local libraries in India, helping the libraries create actions of women empowerment. With their support READ India and DEF have advanced libraries, offering digital training and helping women access information.

Gaining information can have major impact on the life of Indian women. As it is stated in the RTI Act (2005), access to information can create an transparency in public authorities. This transparency is needed to overcome the many social structures created in rural India, and which lowers the status of women. A transparent government leads to better democratic processes, from which women can hold authorities accountable for their right to, for example education, and thereby produce greater knowledge.

Digital Empowerment

Public libraries of READ and DEF provide the physical space for the public sphere, establish partnerships with both international- and local NGOs and administrations, and offer training on how women can access online information. From empirical findings it can be

discussed that establishing access to information, is not enough to empower women in rural India. The four concepts *interest, access, ability* and *opportunity* must equally be considered for a deliberative democracy. The perception of ability to participate and gain information, is rather important when discussing women's empowerment through libraries and digital tools.

The information that the RTI Act impledge must be accessible, does not seem relevant for the women at the libraries as their role in the society is only considered to be caretakers in their own homes. The female users of the libraries are mainly interested in receiving computer training and retrieving information they are *interested* in, this information have often the character of being entertainment such as Bollywood movies on Youtube (Appendix 7 & 8). The libraries give the women *access* to information; with a safe and open place provided with computers and other digital tools. Many Indian women though, are not *able* to take use of the libraries because of cultural challenges such as pressure from their families. The libraries take an active role in changing the social norms by facilitating training, debates, clubs etc. for both men and women. These concepts of interest, access and ability follows the notion of opportunity which can empower the women when all put in place.

Management of both READ and DEF argue that even though the male population in the communities are often hesitating to allowing their wives to access the libraries, they are more likely to support their participation, when they understand that it is not only the women who can gain from the library, but the families as well.

Transforming Indian Libraries

Habermas' notion to the deliberative democracy offers an insight into the structural transformation of the public sphere in the early modern period, but it can be argued that it does not provide an adequate theoretical framework for understanding the structural transformation of the public sphere in today's societies. From my analysis of empirical data I do believe that Habermas' examination of the public sphere, still has some modern relevance. The public sphere is no longer commissioned by the masses of individuals, but rather organised by people that institutionally apply their influence on the public sphere and debate. I have therefore used Habermas' concept of the public sphere to draw a notion to the thought of change in a information realm.

The public library attracts individuals - women - to participate in the debate set by the library. When discussing how the public sphere is no longer commissioned by the individuals but rather people that institutionally apply their influence, the 'common goal' can be discussed.

Habermas presents the public sphere as a singular (Fraser 1992: 122), whereas Fraser (1992) argues that there are multiple publics. As women are not equal to men in India, the public

sphere will be unequal, and members of subordinated groups, in this case being the women, will not find a space for them for deliberation among themselves (Fraser 1992: 122). Fraser argues that historical records support this argument, where women having found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics (ibid).

READ and DEF have created a public sphere where female users can meet like-minded. In the libraries a network is created among the women, where they can discuss freely in a democratic debate. Habermas argues that the public sphere is based on a dialogue between private people on a common goal. He furthermore argues that private interests have no proper place in the political public sphere, they are the *pre*-political starting point of deliberation, to be transformed in the course of debate (Fraser 1992: 130). According to Fraser, however, this view conflates the ideas of deliberation and the common good by assuming that "deliberation must be deliberation *about* the common good" (ibid: 130). By the evidence from my fieldwork, the women coming to the libraries, come for many different reasons; some for learning a skill, some for retrieving information and others to get connected to other women. Though all citizens have equal access to the public libraries mentioned in this thesis, it is without doubt the women who are in focus and for whom many of the activities are made for. READ and DEF provide the physical space with a variety of activities. The female users do not necessarily come to the libraries with a common goal of empowerment, but rather with an interest in learning. From new knowledge the women's curiosity often grow into a course of debate, which is the starting point to deliberative democracy. This argues against Habermas' thought of the public sphere, not being a place for private interest, as the private interest can be transformed when the women as well understand their ability to participate and their opportunity for empowerment.

Equal Access to Information

The RTI Act was implemented to give all citizens equal access to information. An informed citizenship can develop a more transparent government and help citizens make decisions on the basis of information provided to them. The RTI Act: "Enables citizens to question the public institutions on their performance and paves the way for new forms democracy in which relationship between citizen and state is direct and ongoing" (PRIA, 2007: 3).

Fraser argues that: "Lifting of formal restrictions on public sphere participation does not suffice to ensure inclusion in practice" (Fraser 1992: 132). With this it can be discussed that even though a formal restriction of discriminating has been implemented, some groups can still experience difficulties accessing information.

Studies on the RTI Act show an increase in the number of citizens who ask for information, but just as well has there been an increase in the number of attacks on the information seekers (Asia Disclosed 2015: 31). The key issues are to ensure that citizens are provided the

requested information and hold authorities accountable for the implementation of the Act (RTI Final Report, 2009). In 2009 the Government of India made a study on the implementation of the RTI Act (RTI Final Report, 2009). This study showed that only 13 % of the rural population and 33 % of the urban population were aware of the RTI Act (RTI Final Report, 2009: 6). Furthermore were only 12 % of the women aware of the Act and its advantages. The low level of citizens requiring information shows that, the RTI Act has not been well implemented, and the awareness of the Act is minimal (ibid). Institutions, such as the public library, can ensure and support in a broader knowledge on the RTI Act, facilitating information on the Act.

Marginalised groups, such as rural women, still suffer from exclusion of the public sphere and the democratic debate. Though access has been provided, some citizens are still unable to participate. The public sphere can be limiting when the members, in this case rural women, do not see themselves as a part of a wider public that function as base for advancing their status in society. The counterpublic must have a basic framework that generates an equal relation among its members. A subaltern counterpublic means a "widening of discursive contestation" (Fraser 1992: 124) where women interact as members of the public sphere, aspiring to disseminate one's discourse "to ever widening arenas" (ibid).

READ and DEF invite rural women in India to participate and take an active role in the libraries. By giving them a voice they create a counterpublic or sub-public sphere for deliberate democracy enforced by the RTI Act. It follows that "public life in egalitarian, multicultural societies cannot coexist exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere" (ibid: 126). Fraser argues that there is no culturally neutral society, and the norms would privilege one cultural group over other. In this case, men are dominant in the Indian society and women do not have a voice. The benefit of multiple publics, versus a single public as Habermas' argues for, is the privilege to express freely and participate in the debate with equals.

I have above discussed how women can be empowered by having access to information, as pledged by the RTI Act. READ and DEF provide digital tools and facilitates activities that give their female users access and broaden their horizons. Though the women at the libraries all state that the libraries have contributed to boost their self-esteem, there seem still to be a long way for them to be equal with men in the society, and though access to information have been given, they do not seem to take the opportunity to enforce this. This questions whether the libraries actually have an impact on empowerment of women in rural India.

Above discussion of my findings, the theory and my analysis leads me to following conclusion.

6. Conclusion

As a point of departure for this thesis, I wished to study the field of information access and public libraries in rural India with the prospect of getting an understanding of whether the libraries could have an influence on women empowerment through digital tools. Within this context, I used Habermas' notion (1989) on the public sphere as well as the critical theory by Fraser (1992). Moreover, I considered India as a specifically interesting context due to the development and increase of ICT in the country, which seem contradictory to the conservative culture, which international actors have put in place by addressing the issue of discrimination against women.

Four concepts; i*nterest, access, ability* and *opportunity,* have been pointed out as a tool to analyse the empowerment of women in Indian public libraries with evidence from my fieldwork.

Keeping this in mind I will now return to my initial problem formulation and research questions. Focusing on the connections and contingencies, though answering my research questions, I aim to build an overall picture and answer my problem formulation.

A Space for Women

Habermas (1989) argues that individuals with a common need create the public sphere. Citizens who take an active role in policy processes create a deliberative democracy through a public debate. Both Habermas' and the RTI Act indicates that by having access to information, citizens are empowered. Habermas' arguments on deliberative democracy stresses that all citizens must participate in the debate, whereas the basic object of the RTI Act (2005) is to empower citizens by giving them equal access to information. Putting this into the context of libraries in India, rural women should have reached some level of empowerment, as they now are both entitled- and have access to information.

In connection to Habermas' theory on the public sphere, Fraser (1992) argues that not all groups are informal allowed in the public sphere. Marginalized groups, such as rural women, are often excluded from the public sphere because of social constructions in the society, though formally allowed to participate in the debate. Fraser furthermore explains how the public sphere exists in a multicultural society, and that there therefor should be multiplicity of publics. The assumption that societal equality is not a necessary condition for political democracy challenges Habermas' perception of the public sphere being open and accessible for all.

Another assumption by Fraser is that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about common good, not private interests and private issues. This assumption is particular interesting considering the activities of women empowerment in the DEF library in both Unnao and Kanpur. Activities such as 'beauty tips' and 'online shopping' are of the women's interest, and are considered to empower the women. This idea seemed rather obscure to me at first glance, but talking to the staff of both the READ and DEF libraries, it became clear that activities as such, was the first step to empowerment as these gave the female users a sense of belonging as well as understanding of their own worth as they realise they are capable of more than being a caretakers of their homes. Srivastava, DEF researcher, expresses this with: "First step of empowering is giving the women self-confidence and a voice". Malhotra, READ country director, follows up on this idea: "The women realize their existence; they can talk in front of others about themselves, about their family, about the society issues and share their learning among their peers and even in front of the outsiders" (Appendix 4). When the women gain confidence, their interest in retrieving information for their own empowerment and their status in the society increase (Appendix 2).

International Influence

I can furthermore conclude that international mechanisms such as the CEDAW have added value to Indian libraries, in their mission to empower rural women. International mechanisms play a significant role for not only institutions but also for individuals. An universal understanding to the basic human rights as well as equal access to information are influenced by international actors, and have put the Government of India under pressure, for not upholding standards set by the UN among others (CEDAW Review, 2014).

Contributions from organisations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and IFLA have innovated the libraries, transforming libraries from its traditional form to being digital, with tools such as computers and internet. With these new tools, they can take an active role in ensuring women's right to equal access to information.

Malhotra states that: "Our model is partnership based. We believe that we cannot do everything on our own. We authenticate our content in partnership with expert NGOs" (Appendix 4). Malhotra refers to international actors such as IFLA and the UN and explains that the SDG's (and previously the MDG's) are the: "1st thing which we translate into action. We are addressing these goals at the grassroots level" (Appendix 4). She furthermore explains that the international actors can influence the government: "There are many organizations which influence the government. The International Organisation have their presentations with the Government" (Appendix 4).

Accessing Information

The idea of 'knowledge is power' is not new, but the development in ICT, uneven access to information, and the control of knowledge have changed this idea. Today it seems more relevant to argue that 'information is power'.

The RTI Act (2005) was implemented to give all citizens equal right to information. In the DEF libraries, the staff guides the users how to take advantage of the RTI Act. Srivastava explains that: "Rights can be understood differently from whom the receiver is" (Appendix 5). With this she further elaborates that women not always understand their rights or why they even need these rights. It is therefore important, as Srivastava states it, to: "Teach women what is beneficial for them" (Appendix 5). Certain information can help rural women realise their worth, and that they have rights.

Management from both READ and DEF agrees that: "First step of empowering is giving the women self-confidence and a voice. Change the social norms, then they can become activists" (Appendix 5). Taking this thought as a point of departure the four concepts considered in my analysis must be recognised to understand how information access and digital libraries can empower women.

The Power of Information Access

The consideration of the steps to empower women previously presented, can potentially contribute to understanding how libraries can strive for change in supporting political processes such as the RTI Act. Access is not equal empowerment and other variables such as interest, ability and opportunity must be considered as well. As Fraser discuss' (1992) marginalised groups must form their own public sphere. In the case of rural women in India, the women are not able to participate in public debate, furthermore they are not always interested in doing so as they do not know the value of participating. The public sphere has therefore been institutionalised, as the library management, in cooperation with international actors, have taken it as their responsibility to empower women. The library can influence the women's need and interest in accessing information, by facilitating different activities and by contributing to the growth of the individual. Malhotra explains READ's impact on the women: "It is a difficult task and we use different techniques to remove their inhibitions and make them understand about themselves and make them realize about their hidden potential" (Appendix 4). She furthermore points out the library's influence on the women: "Once they come to the Center and realize their potential and what they can get from the Center, they are eager to learn and earn" (Appendix 4). When women feel entitled to accessing information, they will most likely use their right. As previously stated above, India is being pressured by international actors, therefore, if the women use their right to

information, they can influence the democratic notion in India, by demanding their right for equality and uphold public authorities to this.

To lastly conclude on my initial problem formulation, above approach to women empowerment in India, indicates that information access and digital libraries can influence the empowerment of girls and women in rural India by contributing to all concepts of empowerment; interest, access, ability and opportunity. While my research does not aim to create generalised conclusions, I can contribute to the existing knowledge about the empowerment of women through digital libraries in these contexts. A great knowledge and understanding of the society is essential to facilitate the steps of empowerment; from giving the women a voice to assisting them in gaining information on their rights.
Malhotra supports this with her statement of READ's work:

"When women start coming to the center, their attitude towards their own self, their family, the society they represent changes in a positive direction as she realizes that she herself has come out of her own beliefs and the society pressure of non acceptance" (Appendix 4)

This study can contribute to the existing understanding of the information access and empowerment of rural women in India for further analysis of the opportunities and challenges related to the work of NGOs in rural India.

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