GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN INDIA

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Abstract: The concept of gender equality is a common concern all over the World. The same has now acquired new dimensions with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The ICT has a potential to bring development for a nation. IT together with communication Technologies has brought about unprecedented changes in the way people communicate, conduct business, pleasure and social interaction. The evolution of new forms of technologies and imaginative forms of applications of the new and older technologies makes the lives of the people better and more comfortable in several ways. The ICT sector consists of segments as diverse as telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services and electronic media, for example, the internet and electronic mail. This paper looks at the prospects generated by ICT supported networking processes for women's empowerment. It discusses the foremost challenges and a hindrance confronted by women and recommends strategies to address those challenges and means to revamp the situations giving rise to women's empowerment.

Keywords: Gender equality, Need of ICT, Status of Women in ICT, Women empowerment, ICT Applications

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment is focused on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits. For women who can access and use them, ICT offer potential, especially in term of reducing

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poverty, improving governance, overcoming isolation, and providing a voice. Despite the numerous challenges to equity in the ICT arena, many social actors have exploited ICTs as tools for social transformation and gender equality. Women artisans are directly accessing global markets through e-commerce initiatives and are using the Internet to support their activities with market and production information. E-governance programmes have been initiated using ICTs for delivering government services; in some cases with an explicit strategy to ensure these services reach women and others who face barriers to access. Health educators have used the radio to communicate information related to women's sexual and reproductive health. Email, online newsletters and List Serves have enabled women to communicate on a global scale, resulting in increased collaboration to push the agenda of gender equality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

ICTs are constantly hailed as one of the most effective tools for economic progress. An ITU study (2005) describes ICTs as potentially powerful development enablers: They are cost-effective with significant transformative power, allow developing countries to leapfrog several stages of the development process and, in furnishing individuals directly with tools for self-empowerment, avoid top-heavy and corrupt bureaucracies (Heeks, 1999; Karake Shalhoub & Al Qasimi, 2006). Specifically, Eggleston, Jensen, and Zeckhauser (2002) argue that ICTs can enhance the functioning of markets that are critical for the well-being of the poor because ICTs can foster greater market integration in many ways:

- They allow firms and individuals in developing countries to contribute more competitively and with better ease in the regional, national and global economies and reduce uncertainty in doing business;
- Information concerning prices enables producers to plan their product mix and input purchases in a proficient manner;
- Access to ICTs allows producers to sell their products in the most profitable markets and find out the optimum timingof sale;

- Availability of price information shrinks the informational asymmetry between the rural producers and middlemen;

- ICTs reduce the exploitation of rural producers by e-middlemen;

- Increased information about the availability of jobs could result in better and faster matching between landless labourers and available jobs, ultimately leading to increased productivity;

- ICTs provide greater access to weather-related information and credit opportunities.

GENDER EQUALITY AND ICT

While there is recognition of the potential of ICT as a tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, a "gender divide" has also been identified, reflected in the lower numbers of women accessing and using ICT compared with men. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men and create new forms of inequality. If, however, the gender dimensions of ICT—in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, employment and potential for empowerment—are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality.[2] In the past few years, the global community has seen the "gender issue" come onto the agenda. Despite economic and socio-cultural barriers to women's use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), when women are able to use them productively, they can substantially improve their lives and increase their income. They have proved useful in: health care delivery; distance education; enhancing rural productivity through access to market information and access to finance; promoting empowerment and participation in national and international policy processes; improving service delivery by governments; improving environmental monitoring and response systems; and facilitating environmental activism. In general, women make up a small percentage of internet and computer users. This is changing in some

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countries – generally those which have greater levels of development and gender equality. ICTs are potentially an important knowledge resource for women, but a focus on access is insufficient. We need also to consider what kind of information is being accessed? Who produced it? Who can use it? What is it used for? In sum, we need to view women not as passive recipients of information, but active knowledge and technology developers.

To orient ICT projects so that they address these areas, ICT project planning and implementation for social development and gender equality must take place in a context which consists of five main components:

(a) Creating an enabling environment which supports and encourages strategies to promote women's equal access to and opportunity to benefit from ICT projects, as well as creating a regulation and policy environment which supports women's use of ICTs;

(b) Developing content which speaks to women's concerns and reflects their local knowledge, and which is of value for their daily lives, business enterprises, and family responsibilities;

(c) Supporting increased representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and using ICTs to promote their increased participation in education at all levels;

(d) Promoting increased employment in the IT sector for women and the use of ICTs for women's SMEs.

(e) Implementing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women; and promoting women's lobbying and advocacy activities.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ICT

It is a commonly held view that women are less engaged with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) than men. Information and Communication Technologies are for everyone and women have to be an equal beneficiary to the advantages offered by the technology, and the products and processes, which emerge

from their use. The paybacks accrued from the synergy of knowledge and ICT need not be restricted to the upper strata of the society but have to freely flow to all parts of the female population. The scope of areas in which ICT can put a greater switch in the hands of women is wide and uninterruptedly expanding, from man – aging water dissemination at the village-level to standing for local elections and having access to lifelong learning prospects.

ICT in convergence with other forms of communication have the potential to reach those women who hitherto have not been reached by any other media, thereby empowering them to partake in economic and social progress, and make informed decision on concerns that affect them.

As par all surveys piloted by *BMRB international*:

- The number of women who have used a PC at some time has amplified since 1996 but is below that of men (51% compare to 66%).

- Women are less likely than men to have access to or use a PC.

- Women's use of internet lags behind men.

- Women are less likely to feel that PCs and internet would be beneficial in their daily lives.

- Women seem to be less confident in the computer abilities.

- As it is demarcated in ICT Industry, women are understated in all sectors, accounting for around 30% of employees.

- Women are underrepresented on higher education courses relevant to the ICT sector.

- Evidence from US recommends women entrepreneurs are more likely to adopt internet and new technologies for business growth than men.

A) Need of ICT for Women

Information needs of women in the new globalize environment are as diverse as the socio- economic scenario. Considering women, as

a monolithic group will over simplify their information needs. Within women's group itself, globalisation has generated the haves and the have nots i.e those who are in a valuable position due to globalisation and those relegated further into disadvantaged position under the new economic policy. The information needs will also vary accordingly. Within women's group itself, the needs fluctuate accordingly.

URBAN WOMEN AND ICT

a) Urban educated women need information on:
- o   Educational & research opportunities
- o   Career advancement facilities
- o   Employment prospects in India and abroad
- o   Fashion and market values
- o   Health and child care facilities
- o   Art and entertainment
- o   Social support system for working women
- o   Legal rights and provisions

b) Urban lower middle class women need information on:
- o   Educational facilities and opportunities
- o   Career advancement and job opportunities
- o   Inexpensive health and childcare
- o   Inexpensive social support systems
- o   Legal rights and provisions against social injustice, domestic violence,

c) Poor urban women may need information on:
- o   Free health services and child care facilities
- o   Job opportunities in the low paid informal sector including domestic services
- o   Housing availability specially in slums

o Free educational facilities, information regarding government programmes for poor

Thus, ICT can play a foremost role in women empowerment. But this cannot occur till the e-governance and ICT strategies and policies become transparent and accountable.

To orient ICT projects, ICT project planning and implementation for social development and gender equality must take place in a context which comprises of five main components:

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(b) Developing content which speaks to women's concerns and replicates their local knowledge, and which is of value for their daily lives, business enterprises, and family responsibilities;

(c) Backing augmented representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and using ICTs to promote their amplified participation in education at all levels;

(d) Promoting amplified employment in the IT sector for women.

(e) Executing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ICT

A nation that wants to progress cannot afford to disregard capacity building and empowerment of women. Gender sensitivity is the precondition that must prevail and be strengthened at all levels. Women's development is now inextricably associated with technology. Thus, technological intervention undertakes a greater and more vital role, especially when viewed globally. It's potential to sweep across political, geographical, economic and social

barricades are just the leverage that women need to build for themselves a new distinctiveness and a more honourable place in society.

As has been experienced the world over, women have restricted access to technologies in India. However, there are now enough experiences to show that when women are trained, they show noteworthy understanding and control in using technologies commendably. In India, women comprise a large portion of the rural population and play a significant role in the rural sector. Their involvement in a number of productive actions is commonly overlooked. The experience of women in the field of animal husbandry—principally dairying—is a case in point. Women have stated their helplessness in looking after cows, diagnosing several diseases and providing instantaneous care. The reasons cited were their unawareness of current veterinarian care, on the one hand, and the lapse of outmoded methods of care on the other. A study of the situation in different parts of the country resulted in the proliferation of a complete range of manuals for animal husbandry workers. But technical information was offered in such difficult terms that it mystified even technical workers. It is from the United Nations Fund for Women's Development (UNIFEM), an expert team of veterinarians worked on simplifying the manuals and drawing up pictorial charts. The manuals and charts listed the do's and don'ts for practitioners in the field. Large groups of women in the dairy industry greeted this information as it empowered them with appropriate knowledge, bypassing the otherwise precondition need for schooling and literacy.

Barriers to engendering knowledge networking processes with the inception of ICT and convergence technologies, it is possible to bring up a significant fraction of women communities in a more symbiotic digital network which focuses on localized information and customized solutions, and works on the theme of Global Technologies for Local Use. Women, however, are still very much in a minority among the beneficiaries of knowledge networking. Women still face huge imbalances in the ownership, control and regulation of these new information technologies, similar to those faced in other areas. *(New York Times, 2000).*

A) Specific Impairments to the ICT

- **Cognizance:** Governments and civil society organizations have still not entirely absorbed the comprehensive potential of ICT in gender development and therefore are far from the stage of generating enabling frameworks and spaces for the growth of engendered ICT -models.

- **Access issues:** The new technology comes at a financial cost, which obstructs its infiltration to the individual and community level. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that women in developing countries have little switch over the household income and do not have the decision-making power to capitalize in these technologies. The availability of ICT in these countries is therefore skewed towards the urban areas and women in rustic areas constitute one of the main marginalized groups.

- **Capacity and skills:** Instigating knowledge networking processes and benefiting from them entails a level of capacity and trained human resource power. Women because of their backward positions are at deprived position than men to fully benefit from knowledge networking.

- **Linguistic blocks:** Much of the knowledge existing in the global pool is in the English language, which is not understood by the poorest communities. This makes the combination of local knowledge of women with the universal knowledge a difficult task.

ICT strategies and models can succeed in linking the gap only if there is a concerted effort towards designing of enabling policy frameworks and avenues; these create opportunities and incentives for women to partake and profit from the networking processes. The —Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women 2000 states that, —women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology.This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of power of an increasingly important industry.

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(B) Formation of Intermediary Organizations

The starting point for any efficacious gender-entrenched knowledge net working approach is the development of relationships that make it easier for women to talk about their needs, share information, and work together. This is where the intercessor organizations can offer a platform for women to get energetically involved within the processes.

The ownership of ICT for the majority of women in emerging countries is not viable for the foreseeable future, which infers that the question of where and how they can gain access to ICT becomes essential to the knowledge networking processes. The intermediary outfits can facilitate in bridging the ˉlast mile' of connectivity by offering community based technological interface for the networking process. Intermediary organizations can confirm that e-mail accounts, bulletin boards, search engines, mailing lists, list serves and other suitable functions serve as communication, networking and collaboration channels among the women's group, and between women and the external sphere. They could also contribute to building capacities of women by providing offering in basic computer abilities, Internet and access to information via Internet, desktop publishing, and ecommerce.

SUGGESTIONS

- Women should be empowered by augmenting their skills, understanding and access to information technology.

- Women need to be involved in decision-making concerning the development of new technologies in order to partake totally in their growth and impact.

- To offer accessibility to women in order to derive the paybacks from applications like tele-education etc.

- It is needed that Multifunctional Converged Application Community Centres (MCACs) should facilitate the Telecommunication services, computing services like E-mail and Internet access, information about local data base and generating awareness about governments' programmes.

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- NGOs and the government should come together to make paucity alleviation programmes popular through women centric initiatives.

- Community networking may offer many profits to the world. This is predominantly true of rural ICT projects that seek to bring emerging technologies like low cost computing and Internet access to rural areas, social institutions and governments.

- There is no common design for all rural ICT networks as communities vary in social, economic, and political outfit, and therefore information needs, and the design of community networking system, will vary. For fruitful community networking, the design and implementation of projects should be driven by the explicit needs of communities.

- Need of incessant monitoring of women's adoption of the ICT interventions.

CONCLUSION

Breaking old traditional norms, women are showing their real potential and mental strength. They have infinite opportunities in this global arena. They share equal partnership in every business, government activities and jobs. Some age-old traditional barriers and societal attitudes must be removed for their upliftment. They have to demand for their rights and should be ready to take their fight of equity and honour to next level.

Information needs of women as well as their ICT use differ widely. However, there is no ideal ICT that fits all situations. Though women are engaged in numerous roles in agriculture, they are keen to have information on other parts, such as child health, nutrition, prevention and cure of common diseases, employment opportunities etc. Those trying to install ICTs for women empowerment should build their strategies grounded on ICT use pattern and varied information needs of rural women. Emerging a dynamic and relevant content for rural women continues to remain as a major challenge. Adequate resources need to be allocated for this activity,

if profits from resources invested in connectivity and hardware have to be copiously realized.

The advent of ICT has altered the global scenario and many unexplored areas are now open for encashment. It is for us to exploit the paybacks to the maximum possible extent. The best part about ICT is that it is capable of several adjustments as per the necessities of the segment using the same. The same can also be adjusted as per the needs and requirement of women in India. This means that even the traditional and traditional families can allow the women to participate and use ICT from their respective homes. In India there is a copiousness of ¯women entrepreneurs who are capable of making their mark at the international level.

However, the awareness and facilities are missing radically. The national policies and strategies have not yet taken into consideration this unexplored potential pool of intellectual inputs. With meek training and awareness programmes we can make a big transformation. Further, we can also inspire the creation of ¯Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Small Scale Industries (SSIs), etc. The need of the hour is to display a positive will to attain that much needed purpose.

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