



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effective Utilisation of Information Communication Technology (ICT) For Empowerment of Women In India

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ABSTRACT

Women empowerment in India is largely dependent on several variables ie. geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Women are deprived of decision making in family affairs, freedom of movement, access to education, access to employment, exposure to media and subjected to, domestic violence. Forty-one percent of women in the age group of 15-49 have never been to school. Today, the major cause of high infant mortality and malnutrition has more to do with lack of knowledge about feeding than insufficient food and nutritional status because of poverty. information technology has changed the communication paradigm, making it no longer difficult to reach a large number of people more or less at the same time; and that too enable them to respond, interact as well as obtain a copy of the information within a low-cost. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) apart from sensitising people against this heinous crime and helping them in general to change their opinion about a girl child, can also play a highly interventionist role by proactively pursuing cases against erring doctors, booking them under the law of the land.

Key words: Women empowerment, Information Communication Technology, geographical location

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INTRODUCTION

Women Empowerment refers to increase the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender, or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. Women empowerment in India is largely dependent on several variables ie. geographical location (urban/rural), educational status, social status (caste and class), and age. Women are deprived of decision making in family affairs, freedom of movement, access to education, access to employment, exposure to media and subjected to, domestic violence. Forty-one percent of women in the age group of 15-49 have never been to school. Educational attainment remains very low, even among the 20-29 age group, only 27% of women have 10 or more years of education. Women empowerment basically means providing a healthy and congenial environment for women where they can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as enjoy equality in the society. The worth of a civilisation can be judged from the position that it gives to women. Women constitutes about half of the population of India, received only a small share of development opportunities. Education of women can empower women in any nation. Education, provide them greater awareness of their role in society. Education and training have opened up the avenues of employment and self-employment in the organized sector. As never before women are working in diverse fields as doctors, engineers, civil services as IAS & IPS officers, bank officials and in a wide range of sectors in the unorganized sector. In agriculture, most of the operations are run by women.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ICT

A large group of working women of India is in the rural and unorganized sectors. Socially the majorities of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in a disadvantageous position. Inequality in women's access and participation in different communications systems, especially the media, and their insufficient mobilization, are the major factors of women's substantial

contribution to society. Since globalisation is opening up the Indian economy suddenly at a very high speed, during the past decades, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private local, national and international media organizations. The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women, in mass media communication i.e. electronic, print, visual and audio must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society. Programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting. The worldwide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately.

STATUS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN INDIA

The less informed are those who have poor access to information and are, therefore, powerless. Women fall into this category, as their information on many matters is restricted for cultural, social, economic and geographic reasons. The primary reason for women's poor access to information is illiteracy and lack of proper education. A great deal of information available through print media and books is lost to women and men who cannot read. Over 50% of women in India are illiterate, and this illiteracy is a barrier to the acquisition 15 % of knowledge on various matters relating to their lives. After much research, several surveys and the cumulative experience of implementing a variety of social development programmes in recent times, two realizations have emerged strongly. The first is that, in many ways, the current system of education is irrelevant and, therefore, there is no great incentive to send girls to school. The second factor, which should be stressed is that women's most urgent need is awareness through dissemination of information, irrespective of whether they are literate or not. So far life skills are concerned, schooling is both necessary and desirable because it enhances knowledge and awareness for better adaptation and smooth living in family life.

Today, the major cause of high infant mortality and malnutrition has more to do with lack of knowledge about feeding than insufficient food and nutritional status because of poverty. Thus, it is equally crucial to inform and involve not only women, but also the whole family and community, if to bring about a change in the nutritional and health status of women. Inadequate information has led to the establishment of misguided traditions. Surely education is an urgent requirement in affected areas.

WOMEN AND TECHNOLOGY

The inevitable course of action is to convene a gender perspective on technology. "Any technology that is not appropriate for women is not truly appropriate technology." The concern raised in this expression is applicable to all walks of life where technology is an eminent and powerful tool that can bring about a change. The gender and technology concept comprises many dimensions,

1. Technology to facilitate women's productivity
2. Technology to reduce women's drudgery
3. Technology to empower women
4. Technology to remove hurdles to women's growth
5. Role of women in technological fields
6. Familiarity of women in handling technology
7. Decision-making capacity of women in technology-related issues
8. Exposure of women to technological scenarios at national and international levels

9. Gender sensitivity in technological aspects

A nation that wants to progress cannot afford to ignore capacity building and empowerment of women. Gender sensitivity is the prerequisite that must prevail and be strengthened at all levels. Women's development is now inextricably linked with technology. Thus, technological intervention assumes a greater and more vital role, especially when viewed globally. Its potential to sweep across political, geographical, economic and social barriers is just the leverage that women need to build for themselves a new identity and a more honourable place in society.

In comparison to other countries in the world, women have limited access to technologies in India. However, there are now enough experiences to show that when women are trained, they show remarkable understanding and control in using technologies effectively. In India, women comprise a large portion of the rural population and play a substantial role in the rural sector. Their involvement in a number of productive activities is generally overlooked.

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Information technology is the common denominator that links people, irrespective of caste, class, sex, religion, race or political alignments. This is why it becomes even more important to evaluate and assess the role of communication technology in empowering women, particularly from the point of view of access and utilisation. Gender equality presupposes elimination of all kinds of bias against women, and communication technology intervention can accelerate the pace of equality through gender sensitisation. Communication technology can be used to impart information, and that in turn will lead to motivation, mobilisation and action. Communication technology can encompass different approaches—welfare, participatory and catalyst approaches with women as change agents. Information, reinforced with success stories, can motivate women to adopt healthy lifestyles. For instance, information on immunisation, child mortality, maternal mortality, sanitation, nutritional awareness and causes, prevention and treatment of disease can be disseminated far and wide via communication technology. Although computers, mobile phones with multiple and popular applications and the Internet are altering the way we work, communicate, learn and play, the possibility of installing personal computers (PCs) in Indian villages is still fairly remote. Most villages in India at present are still without roads which neither usable by cars, nor do they have a stable electricity supply.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

In the last 30 years, communication technologies have been used in a number of educational and developmental applications. While many of the projects have been promising, in the long run they have been uneven in performance and impact. Despite the vast range of experiences, there is little conviction in the education sector that communication technologies can be designed to effectively address the problems of education. The former Secretary for Human Resource Development was pleasantly surprised when teachers demanded the extensive use of video for training, (MHRD, Policy Papers 1990).

The national policy on education, 1986, observed that modern communication technologies have the potential to bypass several stages and sequences in the process of development, encountered in earlier decades. Both the constraints of time and distance become manageable at once. Further, in the policy document there are directives to encourage the enrolment of girls. Consequent to experiences gained during SITE, the Ministry of Human Resource Development put in considerable effort to utilise technologies in the primary school sector. These technology schemes envisaged distribution of audio cassette players and television sets in primary schools. In addition, there were special schemes to provide primary teachers' training through video and television. In the last few years there have been special schemes and campaigns to encourage girls to attend school and, thus, elevate their status in the family. However, no special policy or schemes have been formulated to encourage women in tertiary education, particularly in the areas of science, information and communication technologies.

Information networks spanning the length and breadth of the country provide wide coverage. (All India Radio has over 200 radio stations and 300 transmitters excluding FM Radio Networks and

Doordarshan has 600+ transmitters.) With this service provision at national, regional, and local levels, there should be no delay in harnessing networks for better education. In fact, both All India Radio and Doordarshan are powerful tools with which to disseminate information in a country the size of India. They are being used for this purpose, particularly by the University Grants Commission (UGC), but in a limited manner. Plans are in the works to use these services more extensively. They need to be carefully yet urgently worked out and implemented.

WOMEN AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Distance education has come to stay in this country. It holds great promise for the future with emphasis on quick training and communication of information. The Department of Women and Child Development has made a modest start with small experiments in educating people at the grassroots level on procedures for obtaining loans from the Rashtriya Mahila Yojana (RMY) for micro-enterprises. The distance mode has also been used for nutrition education and organization of women's groups under the Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) on an experimental basis. The status of women in distance learning, according to the UGC Annual Report, 1990-91, the enrolment of women for Distant Learning was 37.06%. In 1998, the enrolment of women in Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was 28.4%. The enrolment of women in IGNOU is considerably lower than the national average, and an analysis shows that women continue to enrol in courses which fall in the domain of women's work and extending home skills. The enrolment in the various university shows that the perceived relationship between technology and masculinity is so entrenched that women are excluded from technical education and, hence, from technical jobs. The fault lies in gender stereotyping and is further compounded by the fact that technology is not included in school curricula. Since it is a subject exclusive to higher education, it is projected as abstract and complex. The present under-representation of women in science and technology requires a larger awareness that encompasses parents and other authority figures and educates them on the debilitating effects of gender bias within the family, society and nation at large. The women enrolment in science, technology and vocational courses, such as the B.Sc., B.A., M.C.A. and M.B.A. offered by distance learning is below 30%. There are a few studies that focus on aspects of gender in distance learning. In one, "Problems of Women Students in Distance Education," Rathore, Singh and Dubey list many problems that, though they are common to male students too, become more acute in the case of women. The most severe of these are irregular and unsystematic tutorial help, supply of reading material and lack of study centres. They concluded that women "re-elect the concern about their learning and academic achievements." (Rathore, Singh and Dubey).

CONSTRAINTS OF INDIAN WOMEN OVER THE AGES

1. Patriarchy and social pressures.
2. Gender inequality
3. Caste based discrimination and social restrictions
4. Inadequate access to productive resources
5. Poverty & Insufficient advancement facilities and Powerlessness

The above problems have plagued the lives of Indian women with little respite. But in the new circumstances created by Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) for globalization are diverse and encompass all aspects of women's lives in India. It has affected both the quantity and the quality of work available to the majority of women in India. The traditional role of women in agriculture, livestock and animal husbandry, Khadi and village industries including handicrafts, handlooms fisheries, etc, is being undermined because mechanization and automation is becoming prevalent in the market based economy.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ICT

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.

SPECIFIC DETRIMENTS TO THE ICT

Awareness:

Governments and civil society organizations have still not fully absorbed the full potential of ICT in gender development and therefore are far from the stage of creating enabling frameworks and spaces for the growth of engendered ICT-models. This is often because the use of ICT in knowledge networking is a fairly new process and requires a modicum of sensitization and belief in the technology which is a factor of time as well as the willingness to adopt.

Access Issues:

The new technology comes at a financial cost, which hinders its penetration to the individual and sometimes even at the community level. The problem is even more compounded by the fact that women in developing countries have little control over the household income and do not have the decision-making power to invest in these technologies. Further, there are associated physical and infrastructure requirements such as electricity, telephone lines, spare parts, and internet gateways etc., which are unevenly distributed in developing countries and add to the cost of initiating knowledge networking. The availability of ICT in these countries is therefore skewed towards the urban areas and women in rural areas constitute one of the main marginalized groups.

Capacity and Skills:

Initiating knowledge networking processes and benefiting from them requires a threshold level of capacity and trained human resource power to handle technology and networking issues. Women because of their backward position in family and society, are, therefore, at an even more disadvantaged position than men in developing countries to fully benefit from knowledge networking.

Linguistic Barriers:

Ironically, much of the knowledge present in the global pool is in the English language, which is not understood by the poorest communities. There is very little content in the global pool in the vernacular language of non-English speaking communities. This makes the amalgamation of local knowledge of women with the global knowledge a difficult task.

CONCLUSION

Empowerment is needed to break a number of real dichotomies affecting women: personal/collective, domestic/public, material and ideological. Women who are empowered should be able to stop the undesirable, to transform ongoing practices, and to create new visions. While several governments and institutions are including the word empowerment in their discourse, much less often is there evidence of developing and funding activities that identify empowerment as a genuine goal.

Today, information technology has changed the communication paradigm, making it no longer difficult to reach a large number of people more or less at the same time; and that too enable them to respond, interact as well as obtain a copy of the information within a low-cost. Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) apart from sensitising people against this heinous crime and helping them in general to change their opinion about a girl child, can also play a highly interventionist role by proactively pursuing cases against erring doctors, booking them under the law of the land.

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