

The Role of ICT in Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women in India

Tohida Rehman

Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science, Surendranath College (C.U), Kolkata, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of ICTs in empowering Indian rural women, through a review of ICT initiatives in India. Women are equal beneficiaries to the advantages offered by technology and the products and processes, which are by products of technology use. The present study was carried out to assess ICT infrastructure for women's empowerment, and gender sensitization and to assess the status of ICT in gender sensitization in terms of policies regarding scholarships, reservations, business development programmes, etc. for self-employment opportunities for women. 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 : ICT, Woman Empowerment, gender, Gender sensitization

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of ICTs is recognized in Millennium Development which emphasizes the benefits of new technologies, especially ICTs in the fight against poverty. "With 10 percent increase in high-speed internet connections, economic growth increases by 1.3 percent" observed the recent World Bank report on Information and Communication for Development (World Bank, 2009). The same report also observed "connectivity – whether the Internet or mobile phones is increasingly bringing market information, financial services, and health services to remote areas, and is helping to change people's lives in unprecedented ways".

While discussing ICTs, one should also need to look at the traditional ICTs such as radio, television and print media, and the emerging convergence of many of these with the new ICTs. We are currently witnessing a revolution in both the media as well as the ICTs. There is a vast literature on the potential and benefits of using these technologies for wider women empowerment and gender sensitization. However, the contradiction between the potential for ICTs to address the challenges faced by women empowerment and gender sensitization and the current failure to harness them for this purpose is striking (Chapman and Slaymaker, 2002). There is an increasing realization that the digital divide the gap between those who have access to technology and those

who do not is not merely technological. Besides a digital gap between women and men in society, there is a social divide among the information rich and poor in societies (Huyer and Mitter, 2003) [11,12].

The gap between people's opportunities for self-employment in the informal economy and the high growth sectors of the world's economy. SEWA has started using telecommunication as a tool for capacity building among the rural population. It was suggested that Government departments and others should come together to make poverty alleviation programmes successful through women centric initiatives in which Poor women are organized to circumvent the problems of liberal development processes. Women need to be encouraged and trained to become producers on all ICTs. Clearly, engendered ICT policy needs to be developed.

II. ICT as tools to challenge gender Inequality and promote women empowerment

As gender inequality is embedded in a series of systemic inequalities, there is a need to employ different types of empowerment Economic, social and political Empowerments are all inter-related and all these are critical for women empowerment, though the emphasis vary during different stages in the empowerment process.

2.1 What are ICTs?

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are defined for the purposes of this primer, as a “diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information” [7, 9]. These technologies include computers, the Internet, broadcasting technologies (radio and television), and telephony. ICTs are a potentially powerful tool for extending educational opportunities, both formal and non-formal, to previously underserved constituencies—scattered and rural populations, groups traditionally excluded from education due to cultural or social reasons such as ethnic minorities, girls and women, persons with disabilities, and the elderly, as well as all others who for reasons of cost or because of time constraints are unable to enroll on campus [8, 10].

The computer and the modem, along with many other ICT hardware and software innovations and services, have placed us at a highpoint of a very significant stage of development in the history of human communications, often called “the information society”. A major challenge is to integrate these diverse and disparate elements into a high-speed, interactive, broadband, digital, seamless whole to complete the highway, ensuring that it reaches all parts of the world where it is needed, and is made available to as many people as possible.

2.2 Meaning of gender and gender sensitization

Gender refers to the socio cultural differences between the males and females in terms of their strength, ability, performance, wage earning capacity and social acceptability etc. In fact the biological process does not discriminate [5, 6].

Gender sensitization refers to theories which claim that modification of the behavior of teachers and parents (etc.) towards children can have a causal effect on gender equality. Gender sensitizing “is about changing behavior and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and the other sex.” It helps people in “examining their personal attitudes and beliefs and questioning the ‘realities’ they thought they know.”

2.3 Types of women empowerment

Broadly speaking, there are three types of women empowerment:

- Economic empowerment:

Women are economically empowered when they are supported to engage in a productive activity that allows them some degree of autonomy. This type of empowerment is also concerned with the quality of their economic involvement, beyond their presence as poorly paid workers.

- Social empowerment:

This is a process of acquiring information, knowledge and skills; and supporting participation of women in social organizations without any gender discrimination in day-to-day activities. It is also concerned with inculcating a feeling of equality instead of subordination among women.

- Political empowerment

It is concerned with enhancing the power of voice and collective action by women. Besides, it ensures equitable representation of women in decision-making structures, both formal and informal, and strengthens their voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies.

2.4 ICTs and Women Empowerment

Women empowerment generally refers to the process by which women enhances 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 [1,3]. Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (UNPOPIN, 2010).

The present situation 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 enrollment 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 centers [2,4]. They concluded that women “reel the concern about their learning and academic achievements.” (*Rathore, Singh and Dubey*).

The main Objective of using ICT in gender sensitization and women empowerment are given below-

- To assess ICT infrastructure in rural areas vis-a-vis in urban areas for women empowerment.
- To assess the impact of economic/social/academic background of women workforce in ICT.
- To assess the status of ICT in education in terms of policies of scholarships, reservations, business development programmes for self-employment for women.
- To assess social and health implication of ICT with reference to women workers.

III. 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. 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.

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 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.

Educational enhancement: The main condition of all types of development as well as improvement we have to enhance the formal as well as informal educational opportunities.

IV. Engendering the ICT arena for gender equality and women Empowerment – future directions

Where women have used ICTs for their own purposes, they report increased knowledge and Self-esteem. This empowering process has the potential to destabilize existing gender relations. However, an enabling environment is a must if women are to enjoy equal access to the benefits of ICTs.

The ICT arena needs to be engendered through gender-sensitive ICT policy, programmes, designed and implemented creatively for optimum effectiveness. Gender equality advocates have a critical role in providing leadership and perspective to these processes.

- Need for a Gender-sensitive Policy Environment
- Need for Advocacy towards Gender-sensitive ICT Policies
- Gender concerns in Project Planning and Implementation

V. CONCLUSION

A more inclusive, democratic and gender-just information society is possible only if the multiple actors in the ICT arena commit to work in coordination, cooperation and collaboration. Developing a shared vision of a world information society that contributes to human development based on agreed principles including women’s human rights, is a long-term undertaking. Strategic wisdom needs to inform future action, particularly in the renegotiation of gender relations through ICTs. Based on the discussion on this paper, it was recommended that enabling environment which supports and encourages women more access to benefit from ICT been created. Women should continue to be orientated so as to break their attitudinal barrier on ICT usage. There is a need for a regulation and policy which supports women’s use of ICT, and equitable distribution of ICT jobs between men and women.

VI. REFERENCES

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