

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A NECESSARY PREREQUISITE FOR A DEVELOPING NATION

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Abstract

Women and girls are exposed to great discrimination in economic, education, health and social services access worldwide. On the other hand the range of women's economic activities in developing countries is very broad. It includes formal sector and informal sector employment, as well as self-employment in farming, trading and crafts production etc. There are numerous possibilities for ICTs to improve women's economic activities in the field of trade, governance, education, health, crafts, employment in formal as well as informal sector. ICT's bring lot of opportunities to women in the work situations and small business. Teleporting, flexi time and work from home arrangements are some of the gender dimensions of ICT's usages. The proposed study identified the needs of infrastructure and policy intervention to make ICT sector to contribute towards enhancing empowerment of women in India.

Keywords : Women and ICT, Women Empowerment, use of technology for women

Women and 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 benefits 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 segments of the female population. 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 participate in economic and social progress, and make informed decision on issues that affect them.

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, (Goonawardena Chandra (ed) 1995) :

- Technology to facilitate women's productivity
- Technology to reduce women's drudgery
- Technology to empower women
- Technology to remove hurdles to women's growth
- Role of women in technological fields
- Familiarity of women in handling technology
- Decision-making capacity of women in technology-related issues
- Exposure of women to technological scenarios at national and international levels
- 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. As has been experienced the world over, 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. The experience of women in the field of animal husbandry—particularly dairying—is a case in point. Women have expressed their helplessness in looking after cows, diagnosing various ailments and providing immediate care. The reasons cited were their ignorance of modern veterinarian care, on the one hand, and the lapse of traditional methods of care on the other. A study of the situation in different parts of the country resulted in the proliferation of a whole range of manuals for animal husbandry workers. But technical information was presented in such complicated 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 welcomed this information as it empowered them with relevant knowledge, bypassing the otherwise prerequisite need for schooling and literacy. In Himachal Pradesh, women mid-school dropouts repair water pumps and manage computer data for the maintenance of the pumps.

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, (HRD, 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 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.

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 (RMK) 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 enroll 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.

Conclusion

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 benefits 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 segments of the female population. 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

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