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Information communication technology and women empowerment

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has, within a very short span of time, turned out to be one of the basic building blocks of modern society. It is an important tool to help people communicate effectively, overcomes the limitations of time and space, empowers people by providing information and knowledge, provides income generating and learning opportunities, increases transparency and efficiency and enables people to express their concerns and to actively participate in decision making processes (Asian Development Bank, 2004). ICTs are becoming a vital engine of growth for the world economy. They have the potential to enable many enterprising individuals, firms, communities, in all parts of the planet, to address economic and social challenges with greater efficiency and imagination. ICTs and the Internet offer vast, new and unprecedented opportunities for human development and empowerment. The gender divide is one of the most significant inequalities to be amplified by the digital revolution, and cuts across all social and income groups. Inequality in women's access and participation in communications system is the main cause of their insufficient mobilization to promote contribution to society. ICT has a great role in empowerment of women. It's enhanced greater access to information, promoting knowledge, increase opportunities in employment, catalyzes to develop entrepreneurship and economic improvement etc. There are a number of challenges faced by the women community in terms of usage of ICT. ICTs have the potential to address these barriers to rural development through women empowerment by facilitating improved knowledge sharing and information exchange. The potential contribution of ICTs can enhance women empowerment initiatives.

Keywords: Information Communication Technology, Women Empowerment, Challenges

Introduction

Across the globe, countries have recognized Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as an effective tool in catalyzing the economic activity in efficient governance, and in developing human resources. There is a growing recognition of the newer and wider possibilities that technology presents before the society in the modern times. New Information and Communication Technologies is one of the most potent forces shaping the 21st century. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has, within a very short span of time, turned out to be one of the basic building blocks of modern society. It is an important tool to help people communicate effectively, overcomes the limitations of time and space, empowers people by providing information and knowledge, provides income generating and learning opportunities, increases transparency and efficiency and enables people to express their concerns and to actively participate in decision making processes (Asian Development Bank, 2004). 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. As an information and knowledge-based tool, ICTs can enhance networking, participation, and advocacy within society. They also have the potential to improve interaction between governments and their citizens, fostering transparency and accountability in governance as a result.

It includes electronic information-processing technologies such as computers and the internet, the rapidly changing communications technologies (including radio, television), networking

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and data processing capabilities, and the software for using the technologies as well as fixed-line telecommunications, mobile phones and other wireless communications, networks, broadband) and also includes compact disc-read only memory (CD-ROM), decision support system, geographic information systems (GIS), interactive multimedia etc. ICT helps us unlock any information needed, making them accessible to all, and it is a powerful tool for directing and expressing our creativity (Noor Sharifah, 2006) [8].

ICTs are becoming a vital engine of growth for the world economy. They have the potential to enable many enterprising individuals, firms, communities, in all parts of the planet, to address economic and social challenges with greater efficiency and imagination. ICTs and the Internet offer vast, new and unprecedented opportunities for human development and empowerment. The gender divide is one of the most significant inequalities to be amplified by the digital revolution, and cuts across all social and income groups.

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 to communications system is the main cause of their insufficient mobilization to promote contribution to society.

India's skewed gender ratio finds reflection in its internet usage as well. Even as an increasing number of people are going online in the country, and the government is aiming to provide internet access to all 1.25 billion citizens, several studies have shown that far more men in India are logged on to the internet than women.

Digital population in India as of January 2018 (in millions)

This statistic presents the digital population in India as of January 2018. During this period of time, it was found that the country had 250 million active social media users during the measured time period.

Table 1: Digital population of India in 2018.

Active Internet User (Millions)	Active mobile Internet User (Millions)	Active social media User (Millions)	Active mobile social media User (Millions)
462	430.30	250	230

(Source: Statista 2019)

Distribution of internet users in India in 2016 and 2020, by gender

This statistic illustrates the distribution of internet users in India in 2016 and 2020, by gender. According to the source, the majority of the internet user base in India will be male in 2020 at around 60 percent.

Table 2: Distribution of internet users in India in 2016 and 2020, by gender

Year	Share of Internet User	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
2016	70	30
2020	60	40

(Source: Statista 2019)

Half of India's internet users will be rural and 40% will be women by 2020, a report by the Boston Consulting Group. It also said Indian companies are underestimating and under-

investing in the country's digital potential. Gender discrimination in use of information communication technology is clearly visible from the data.

Since India has been using ICT for development for more than two decades, there are many good practices for the use of ICTs for women's empowerment. India Shop, an e-commerce website [2005] in Tamil Nadu, has been designed to sell products made by rural women's co-operatives and NGOs. The Dhan Foundation [2004] and Swayam Krishi Sangam [2004] are using ICTs, such as handheld devices and smart cards, to improve microfinance projects to empower poor women. The Self-Employed Women's Association [SEWA, 2004] has several ICT projects for women, including community learning centers, a school of Science and Technology for self-employed women, and the Theliphone project, which provides mobile phones to women in the informal sector. ICT has a great role in empowerment of women.

India's skewed gender ratio finds reflection in its internet usage as well. Even as an increasing number of people are going online in the country, and the government is aiming to provide internet access to all 1.25 billion citizens, several studies have shown that far more men in India are logged on to the internet than women.

Role of ICT in Women Empowerment

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. The gamut of areas in which ICT can put a greater control in the hands of women is wide and continuously expanding, from managing water distribution at the village-level to standing for local elections and having access to lifelong learning opportunities. 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 decisions on issues that affect them.

Information and Women Empowerment

Information is power. 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, lack of proper education and technological facilities. 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 of knowledge and information 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—and this should be stressed—is that women's most urgent need is awareness through dissemination of information, irrespective

of whether they are literate or not. Inadequate information has led to the establishment of misguided traditions. Surely education is an urgent requirement in affected areas. In this type of situation or problems can be solving only by the use of Information communication technology to empower them. Gender equality presupposes elimination of all kinds of bias against women, and communication technology intervention can accelerate the pace of equality through gender sensitization. Communication technology can be used to impart information, and that in turn will lead to motivation, mobilization 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 immunization, child mortality, maternal mortality, sanitation, nutritional awareness and causes, prevention and treatment of disease can be disseminated far and wide via communication technology.

Knowledge and Women Empowerment

Recent developments in the field of information and communication technology are indeed revolutionary in nature. By definition, Information and Communication Technologies are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information. Knowledge thereby becomes the fundamental resource for all economic and developmental activities in the knowledge society of which women form an equal part. The process of synthesis of knowledge possessed across communities, by men and women, with the global pool of knowledge with the scope for further enrichment lays the genesis for knowledge networking.

Knowledge networking catalyses the process of women's empowerment by opening up avenues for women to freely articulate and share their experiences, concerns and knowledge, creating the possibility of their further enrichment. By the use of ICT women can broaden the scope of their activities and address issues previously beyond their capacity. Knowledge networking opens up a new way of interactive communication between governments bodies, NGOs, academic and research institutions, and the civil society. It helps communities, both men and women, to take appropriate steps to recognize and document the knowledge they possess and in reflecting this knowledge in a wider social domain for directed change through the use of information and communication technologies. The one resource that liberates people from poverty and empowers them is knowledge. Possessing knowledge is empowering, while the lack of knowledge is debilitating. The World Bank organized a forum called "Voices of Poor", which got feedback from 60,000 people in 60 countries, which concluded that people wanted access to knowledge and opportunities instead of charity to fight conditions leading to poverty (World Bank, 2000)^[10].

In the context of knowledge sphere, the issues of gender equality, equity and empowerment of women become even more significant as women have a strategic role in incubation and transfer of critical knowledge, which often forms the blueprint of survival for communities to adapt and minimize their risk in adverse circumstances. Women, because of their biological and social roles, are generally more rooted than men in the confines of their locality. They are therefore more aware than men of the social, economic and environmental

needs of their own communities (Miller, 2000).

Employment and Women Empowerment

ICT has played an important role in changing the concept of work and workplace. New areas of employment such as teleworking, i.e. working from a distance, are becoming feasible with new technology. The question needs to be asked whether women are getting more opportunities. w. ICT offers women flexibility in time and space and can be of particular value to women who face social isolation in developing countries. As a result of the technologies, a high proportion of jobs outsourced by big firms are going to women. They can, therefore, work from outside the office often from their own homes and at any time, thereby raising their incomes to become more financially independent and empowered.

Entrepreneurship and Women Empowerment

Telecenters can solve these problems by combining home work with social spaces and organization. One way to do this is to move to Entrepreneurship on the internet. The Internet can offer great assistance to Entrepreneurship by women. It offers databases, put together by women's groups, from which woman can find relevant links, connections, resources and information and develop partnerships, not just for their services, but also for financing, mentoring and business coaching. It can even mitigate the effect of lack of access to capital. Support groups can be formed through electronic bulletin boards. Thus the internet itself can help to organize and build solidarity with and between people working from home offices. It can break down isolation, aid job related concerted action, or just increase information, opportunities and interaction. Rural women in developing countries may be able to sell their products directly without going through middlemen.

ICT contribution to Gender Equality

ICT may promote gender equality through the following channels:

- **Building women's capacity:** Several organisations are building the capacities of girls and women to make new ICTs accessible and useful to them. At one level, girls and women are being provided with general training in ICTs for ICT-related jobs; at another, women in business, women entrepreneurs and women in the professions are systematically being supported for skill enhancement, career growth, and greater work efficiency.
- **Dissemination of rights-based information for women:** New ICTs have been used by gender-equality advocates all over the world to disseminate rights-based information. From multilateral agencies like UN Women to feminist activists at local levels, actors at different levels are involved in creating, collating, and disseminating material on rights – legal rights, sexual and reproductive rights, women's human rights. This is done through websites, e-magazines, and email.
- **ICTs as amplifiers of women's voices and perspectives:** ICTs can provide spaces for diverse, bottom-up, and low-cost communication. They can amplify women's voices, and help publicise women's experiences and perspectives. The project of gender justice requires that mainstream spaces be infused with

new worldviews that derive from women's own experiences and that challenge, qualify, or expand accepted ideas.

Even if theoretically the potential positive impact of ICT on gender equality has been agreed within researchers, a lack of appropriate indicators makes it difficult to quantitatively explain this relation. Recently, however, some groups have begun shedding light on women, gender, and the information society.

Conclusions

New technologies have made it possible for people to communicate, network, and collaborate on a more global scale than was previously possible. Alliances have been built between the local and global. For individual men and women, the Internet has been a space that allows both for anonymity and solidarity, for self-expression and for building connections. ICTs have also facilitated the building of a more inclusive public sphere: enabling the aged, the disabled, and the discriminated to communicate, to network, and to reach policy makers. Particularly for sexual minorities, the Internet has provided subversive territory in which to assert their identity and lobby for their human rights. Networking can also enable women's organizations to mobilize international public opinion against discriminatory and unjust actions at local levels. The Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution is changing every area of our lives. At an ever-increasing rate it is reshaping our work, our, home and our leisure activities. The relatively cheapness and availability of the technology not only creates material wealth by improving the efficiency of our business; it also provides each one of us with access to what is now our greatest resource: information.

Technological revolution in ICTs has led to the emergence of a knowledge economy but the inability of developing countries to maximize the benefits of this revolution is a significant barrier to their participation in this knowledge economy. Knowledge transfer through education and training has been a central concern of women empowerment initiatives over the years. Recent developments in ICTs offer great potential to support and enhance education and training for development. Given the particular constraints to education and training in rural areas it is here that the potential impact of ICTs on knowledge development is greatest. It is becoming more open, more participatory and more demand driven, involving interactivity, negotiation and two-way information exchanges. There is a new emphasis on the acquisition of information and enabling the rural poor women to request information specific to their particular livelihood needs.

Current debates on the potential role of ICTs for rural development tend to be constrained by an inherent mutual lack of understanding between technology drivers and development agencies. As a result, ICT applications in developing countries remain largely uninformed by recent developments in the wider development literature and conversely many development agencies have failed to effectively mainstream strategies to harness the potential of ICTs. Rural areas in most developing countries are far from becoming integrated in 'global knowledge partnerships'.

ICTs have the potential to address both these barriers to rural development through women empowerment by facilitating improved knowledge sharing and information exchange. However effective application of these technologies requires

greater understanding of both the potential of the technologies in question and the social, political and cultural context in which they could be used. Instead, this paper has focused on role of ICT in empowering women in different ways and the potential for more strategic application of emerging ICTs to the immediate challenges facing by them. The potential contribution of ICTs can enhance women empowerment initiatives.

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