



THE ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value addition and manage information. ICT as an effective tool in catalyzing the economic activity in efficient governance, and in developing human resources are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value addition and manage information. The paper mainly aims at the role and theoretical background of the information technology and to highlight the issues and challenges of ICTs to empowering of women and to assess the strategies to improve women's access to ICT and also to analysis the government policy frame work for empowerment of women through ICTs. This study explores conceptual framework of ICTs through empowerment of women have limited access to resources and public spheres due to socio-cultural restrictions. Women suffer from severe discrimination, and it is thought this is heightened due to a lack of access to information. ICT is a potential tool that can reach rural women and enrich their knowledge in women's access to and participation in all communication systems their insufficient mobilization to promote women's contribution to society.

Keywords: Role of ICTs, Women Empowerment, Policy Framework, Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communications Technology generally refer to an expanding assembly of technologies that are used to handle information and aid communication. These include hardware, software, media for collection, storage, processing, transmission and presentation of information in any format (i.e., voice, data, text and image), computers, the Internet, CD-ROMs, email, telephone, radio, television, video, digital cameras etc. While radio, television and print media were primarily used to perform these tasks earlier, with the advent of the new ICTs, these have now been considered as traditional ICTs through empowerment is the process of enabling individual to think, decide, and take action and work in an autonomous way. As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- a) Aspire gender parity in social and economic space.
- b) Self-belief and controls in one's decision making and actions.
- c) Developing the ability to become agent of household, social change of existing gender biased order.

The access of ICTs is crucial if they are to be a means for women's economic empowerment. There is a need to work towards universal access. It is important not only to establish physical facilities, such as communication networks or computers, but to ensure that these facilities are utilized by their users to the greatest possible extent. Women's access to and use of ICT is constrained not only by technological infrastructure, but also by socially constructed gender roles and relations. The capability of women to effectively use information obtained through ICT is dependent on key social factors like literacy, geographic location, mobility and social class.

THE ROLE OF ICTs IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

1) Social Empowerment:

- a) Gaining access to new and useful knowledge, information and awareness about a range of issues, topics and activities of interest to women. This new information and knowledge often provided mental stimulation and broadened participants' thinking.

- b) Participating in various activities with other women and people in positions of influence where you can openly discuss issues, share concerns and experiences, and reflect on issues affecting women.

2) Technological Empowerment:

- a) New knowledge, awareness and understanding about new ICTs and their potential benefits and impacts.
- b) The development of new skills, experience and greater confidence and competence in using new communication technologies.
- c) Advice and support in using email and the Internet, provided in ways that often met the participants' needs very well.

3) Political Empowerment:

- a) Having a voice for their rights.
- b) Feel decision making capacity.
- c) Networking or meeting with people in government and industry and other women to discuss issues affecting women and women communities, and to organize various actions.

4) Psychological Empowerment

- a) An increase in self-confidence and self-esteem.
- b) Feeling more valued, respected.
- c) Greater motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm and interest to develop new skills and knowledge.
- d) Feeling much less isolated from others (particularly other supportive women) and, as a result, experiencing greater wellbeing, happiness and enjoyment of life.

5) Educational Empowerment:

- a. ICT deliver information about whole world in a language they understand and a medium that they would be comfortable with.
- b. Wide knowledge of each area, understanding of new concepts.
- c. ICT help in non formal and adult women education.

6) Economical Empowerment

- a) ICT helps them to increase their monthly income.
- b) ICT provide jobs and opportunities to merge with large industries.

- c) ICT education makes women economically sound that is source of other all types of women empowerment.

Review of Literature:

Kumar (2011), this study focused on “Information Technology Empowers by Women” This study explores on have illustrated the effective usage of technology for small-scale industries, which are promoted by women under self-employment scheme. Further, the author opines that the strategy to encourage the participation of the poor women in the digital revolution is expected to reduce the gap in digital and gender divide. The study concluded that the economic empowerment of women via IT enables them to challenge discrimination and overcome gender barriers.

Beena (2012), this study was conducted on “Role of ICT education for women empowerment”. The study can be used to create awareness among women for betterment of their live and Information and communications are closely linked to power and the ability to affect change. ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application. This research concluded that the information and communication technology empower a women in various areas like social, educational, personal, psychological, political, technological and economical empowerment in India.

Matangi (2013), this study focused on “Empowerment and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) prospects and challenges for women in Zimbabwe”. The aim of this paper is to determine the perceived prospects and challenges of women in Zimbabwe regarding empowerment and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In the study, significant associations were observed between demographic factors of the respondents and perceptions on particular issues regarding the challenges and prospects of women empowerment and ICT initiatives in India.

Sankari (2014),this study was conducted on “Information and Communication Technology (ICT):A Game Changer in Women’s Empowerment”. This paper discovers the major difficulties and challenges that women in India are facing regarding Information technology and proposes some strategies to overcome these challenges resulting in women’s empowerment and also this study throw lights of varies organizations in India that are constantly working on women’s empowerment through the use of Information and Communication Technologies.

Kumari (2015), this study was undertaken on “Role of information technology in women empowerment”. This article explores how information Technology can be springboard to attain gender equality and empowerment in India. This study also focused on Indian perspective, IT provides unique opportunity to reduce gender disparity in varies space like educational, health, safety, economic space etc and also discusses how IT can be a vital enabler for gender Empowerment and Equality.

Aggarwal (2016), this study was conducted on “Central Pillar Of Employability: Skill Development”. The study also found that both the government and its partner agencies have undertaken various measures/initiatives for the effective implementation of the skill development system in the economy, but still faces a number of unresolved issues/challenges that need immediate attention of the policy makers. Hence, this study focused on skill development initiatives of the government should focus on these obstacles and develop the programs accordingly to resolve these hurdles for the complete success of the skill development in India.

Objectives of the Study:

This paper is aimed to discuss the following objectives:

1. To understand the theoretical background of role of information and communication technology;
2. To highlight the issues and challenges of ICTs towards empowerment of women;
3. To assess the strategies to improve women’s access to ICTs;
4. To analysis the government policy frame work for empowerment of women through information and communication technology.
5. To offer suggestions and conclusion for the study.

Research Methodology:

The data required for the present Research is considered as journey from unknown to the known. The present study is purely based on data gathered from secondary sources. The required secondary data constitutes the main source of information, suitable for the purpose of the present study. In this study an attempt has been made to study the issues and challenges of information and communication technology in empowerment of women. The secondary sources include the

articles from various reputed and impact factor journals, books, reports of national and international, thesis and dissertation work regarding empowerment of women.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF ICTs TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:

The following are the major issues and challenges of ICTs towards empowerment of women:

- **Lack of Confidence:** Due to differential socialization social norms, morals in the family rural women lack confidence, support, and decision making powers needed for the growth of an entrepreneur. Decision making power related to business activities is less due to economic dependent and domination of male headed society.
- **Dual Responsibility:** With the dual roles as, wife and mother women unable to manage the enterprise effectively because of lack of time, concentration and overburdened personal obligations.
- **Finance Problem:** There is no sufficient fund to execute enough programmes to meet numerous political and our rural areas. The multiplicity of schemes is not adequately listed nor is there networking among agencies. As a result, clients approaching one institution are not made aware of the best option for their requirements.
- **ICTs illiteracy among Women:** The literacy rate of women in India is found at low level compared to male population. The rural women are ignorant of new technology or unskilled. They are often unable to do research & gain the necessary training. The uneducated rural women do not have the knowledge of measurement.
- **Lack of Training and Development:** Indian families and society provide training to a girl to make her as a good wife rather than to uplift her as an entrepreneur she is not allowed to develop network with other business men, which is considered as a sin and bad culture.
- **Political Interference:** Most of the contracts awarded by the Agency went to loyalists and political lackeys of the political leaders. Projects locations are always influenced by political consideration and not where they are mostly needed by the poors.
- **Un-Cooperative Attitudes of Implementing Authority:** This has become a serious constraint, of recent. Since most of these Contractors are Political Stallwarts, they can hardly complete one single project given to them according to specification and design.

The projects are either executed haphazardly or unduly delayed or absolutely abandoned on the pretext of "unavailability of funds".

- **Insufficient Professional Personnel:** The Agency executed most of its Programmes through 'contractors due to paucity of personnel especially the highly skilled and professional staff the Economists, the Accountants, the Statistician, and the Lawyers (none) and others. Even the few monitoring staff available has no sufficient assets to use for projects monitoring which are running for the upliftment.
- **Lack of infrastructure and widespread Corruption:** There are also the other problems for the women. Women lack training and advisory services on managerial and technical skills to solve production problems. Here more than 70 percent of enterprises are micro-and small enterprises but their growth and the competitiveness is greatly challenged by a lack of infrastructure facilities.
- **Poor Internet Usage:** Women form a very small part of the internet population in the country, with working and non-working women accounting for only 8 per cent and 7 per cent of the internet users" universe.

Challenges of ICTs:

- ✓ Poor regulation, and support for women working in informal sector.
- ✓ Poor awareness of ICT for women.
- ✓ Lack of e-commerce related infrastructure in developing countries.
- ✓ Language barriers for the use of ICT for non English speakers.
- ✓ Paternal set up of Indian society.
- ✓ Conservative outlook for working women.
- ✓ Challenges of managing career and family
- ✓ Lack of analytical research of ICT usability in India
- ✓ No proper strategy to overcome the above mentioned obstacle
- ✓ Hindrances in sustainable development of use of ICT

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S ACCESS TO ICTs:

The following are the main strategies to improve women access to ICTs:

- 1) Equitable access to ICT technology and the autonomy to receive and produce the information relevant to their concerns and perspectives are critical issues for women.

They therefore need to be involved in decision-making regarding the development of new technology in order to participate fully in its growth and impact.

- 2) Access and costs being some of the greatest barriers for ICT use, it is of the utmost importance to engage women and gender advocates in the policymaking process and dialogue. It is important engender ICT policy to ensure that women, particularly rural and poor women, benefits from ICT.
- 3) There is need to use a rights-based approach to ICT policy development, where everyone has the right to affordable access to ICTs. Only then, can we work toward securing universal access to ICTs and consequently promote and facilitate the use of ICTs for women's empowerment. Mile' of connectivity.
- 4) In order to facilitate access for women from other classes and sectors, these intermediary organizations need to be strategically located in local institutions to libraries, women's studies departments and institutes, community centers etc.
- 5) Personal ownership of ICT is not feasible in the foreseeable future for the vast majority of women in developing countries. Hence, the question of where and how they can gain access to ICT becomes important.
- 6) The potential of ICT for women in developing countries is highly dependent upon their levels of technical skill and education and is the principal requirement for accessing knowledge from the global pool.
- 7) Government and NGOs need to impart technical education on the use of ICT as a part of both formal and informal education system and to initiate distance learning and vocational courses. It needs to be realized that information and communication technology by itself cannot answer all the problems facing women's development.
- 8) Promote the enrollment of girls in ICT programs by providing incentives such as scholarships and awareness raising activities.
- 9) Language access must be addressed as a serious barrier to gender equity on the international ICT policy level. Language options have to be taken as a political issue, an issue that must be in the policy decisions.
- 10) ICT policy must rest on the understanding that technology must be adopted to fit the needs of women. The key issue is that the technologies should be adapted to suit women rather that that women should be asked to adapt to suit the technologies.

- 11) Last but not the least, when policies and programs are in place to improve access, paucity of funds should not be a hindrance to establishing ICT access points or even implementing tele center-type programs.

THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH ICTs:

The following are the government policy frame work for empowering women through ICTs:

1. **Government's Effort:** Government should focus on ICT infrastructure development and ensure a deep diffusion quality of ICT facilities in the society, especially in educational institutions. ICTs are powerful tool as it bridges the gap of Gender Digital Divide. Appropriate policy frameworks to be established at the national, state and district level to address the issue of gender equality and gender mainstreaming along with proper research work on the issues of ICT and gender empowerment.
2. **Increasing Educational Opportunities for females:** ICTs are able to provide innovative ways for women to obtain and update their skills so as to enable them to participate fully and on a more equal bias in the economy. Female education is especially important in societies where gender biases that dictate solely domestic roles for women.
3. **Ensuring a gender perspective in ICT-based projects:** In the country like India, substantial disparities in access, use and regulation of ICTs exist across societies and regions. So ensuring an ICT based project would be an effective tool for addressing these disparities with a separate gender perspective and not as a single approach for both men and women together.
4. **Distance Learning Program:** There are many girls and women who face barriers to leave home for education. In such conditions distance learning programs are very helpful and the content of the syllabus should address the gender issues faced by women.
5. **Ensuring adequate and sustainable technology transfer:** It is important that adequate transfer of know how should accompany technology transfer. Moreover, for sufficient demand generation for a sustainable working model, active participation is required from both men and women.

6. **Print and Electronic media:** Print and Electronic media have highest intensity of diffusion in India, should initiate mass awareness programs regarding the female education, gender equality and gender empowerment. A more educated society would be more liberal towards female education and gender equality.
7. **Designing technologies appropriate to women's needs:** For women to adopt ICTs in the developing countries, the technology should be made suitable to the given social and cultural contexts of the society. It is very important to understand women's experiences with ICT and the kind of technology women want and how they want to use it for future.
8. **Ensuring gender-sensitive ICTs policy and regulation:** Adequate and appropriate policies need to be formulated at the national level for overcoming the persistent barriers to women's access to and use of ICTs as well as making sure that ICTs benefit women equally as men.
9. **Researches on gender equality and ICT:** Researches on ICT and gender equality issue at regional, national and global levels and documentation of good practices also contributes to deepening the understanding of practitioners and policy makers about the interplay of these technologies with gender equality and the empowerment of women in India.
10. **E-Learning in and for improving e-Government:** ICT-enabled education has great potential for increasing educational opportunities for women at all levels, in both formal and non-formal education environments. It can provide flexible access arrangements and study times and encourage interaction and networking with peers. It can also improve the outreach towards women in rural areas and in the workplace.

Suggestions for the Study:

The following are the suggestions for the study:

- ❖ Adopt legislative, regulatory and administrative measures to promote gender equality in the ICT area, and in particular, adopt legislation in ICT-specific sectoral areas to address gender equality, and create monitoring frameworks and capacity to ensure implementation.
- ❖ All educational institutes by law should be made to offer ICT based Job Oriented courses to the down trodden women in the society for free as their societal obligation.

- ❖ Develop gender-sensitive technical and regulatory instruments when addressing such ICT policy issues as universal access, regulatory frameworks, licensing, tariffing, spectrum allocation, infrastructure, ICT industry development etc
- ❖ Create awareness among women to the labor policies; attention is drawn to the detailed list of ICT policy issues and the gender aspects related to them.
- ❖ Develop reporting mechanisms to monitor progress towards gender equality in the ICT area.
- ❖ Collaborate with national machineries for the advancement of women to promote gender equality in ICT.
- ❖ Strengthen their own capacity, through increased financial resources and technical expertise, to lead advocacy in gender equality and ICT.
- ❖ Encourage and facilitate collaborative action among government bodies with responsibilities for the ICT area and for gender equality.

Conclusion:

The role of information and communication technology (ICTs) offer immense scope for sustainable economic development of people the world over for achieving complete men and women equality itself. However, on a cautious note, it needs to be realized that ICT. The study clearly found that the women were immensely benefited from the use of ICT. ICT has made a tremendous impact in imparting knowledge on modern technology and its uses. NGOs, SHGs working in the field, governmental agencies and other private agencies have also extended their help to promote ICT among the women. Thus ICTs can offer substantial possibilities to improve the lives of women and their families in developing countries such as India.

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