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Use of ICT to Empower Women in India

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Abstract

The concept of gender equality is a common concern all over the World. This has now acquired new dimensions with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The ICT has a potential to bring development for a nation. This can be made possible only if a nation follows sound ICT strategies and policies. ICT provides opportunities for women's socio-economic empowerment in many areas, including in health and education. In this paper we will focus on how ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and a tool to promote gender equality.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Development, Empowerment, Catalyst, Opportunities

Introduction

The role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as a tool for development has attracted the sustained attention of different countries especially India over recent years. The Millennium Declaration adopted in 2000 by the United Nations underscored the urgency of ensuring that the benefits of new technologies, especially ICT, are made available to all. To achieve this goal, it was aimed to develop political will and to establish the foundations for an Information Society for all.

Information and Communication Technologies comprise a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications and services used to produce, process, distribute and transform information. The ICT sector consists of segments as diverse as telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services and electronic media (for example, the Internet and electronic mail).

Information and communication needs can be met by more traditional means, such as print media and fixed telephone lines, or by satellite technology, mobile phones and the Internet. Traditional technologies continue to be important for large numbers of people around the world, particularly in rural areas. However, new technologies have a vast potential for empowerment which needs to be fully exploited. The term ICT has been used to encompass technological innovation and convergence in information and communication leading to the development of so-called information or knowledge societies, with resulting changes in social interaction, economic and business practices, political engagement, education, health, leisure and entertainment. Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that these technologies can be powerful instruments for advancing economic and social development through the creation of new types of economic activity, employment opportunities, improvements in health-care delivery and other services, and the enhancement of networking, participation and advocacy within society. ICT also have the potential to improve interaction between Governments and citizens, fostering transparency and accountability in governance. While the potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, socioeconomic development and effective governance is well recognized, the benefits of ICT have been unevenly distributed within and between countries. The term "digital divide" refers to the differences in resources and capabilities to access and effectively utilize ICT for development that exist within and between countries, regions, sectors and socio-economic groups.

The digital divide is often characterized by low levels of access to technologies. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers are among the factors impeding

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access to ICT infrastructure, especially in developing countries.

Gender equality and ICT

Gender equality is achieved when women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society. While there is recognition of the potential of ICT as a tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, a “gender divide” has also been identified and reflected in the lower numbers of women accessing and using ICT compared with men. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may aggravate existing inequalities between women and men and create new forms of inequality.

“The so-called digital divide is actually several gaps in one. There is a technological divide - great gaps in infrastructure. There is a content divide. A lot of web-based information is simply not relevant to the real needs of people. And nearly 70 per cent of the world’s websites are in English, at times crowding out local voices and views. There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike”.

– United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan’s Statement to the World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 10 December 2003

If, however, the gender dimensions of ICT - in terms of access and use, capacity-building opportunities, employment and potential for empowerment - are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality.

One of the ignored ICT issues in India is the “gender sensitization” that must be adopted while formulating and implementing the ICT policies in India. It is commonly understood that men and women understand and use Computers and Internet differently. Thus, the policy decisions must make sufficient provision for adopting itself with this aspect. Within India also we must understand that the training, use and adoption of ICT must be “gender neutral”. For a gender neutral technology we have to first place the women on an equal platform. They cannot be put on an equal platform till they have equal capacity and opportunity to use ICT and their “feedbacks and concerns” are incorporated in the National Policies including the E-governance plans.

For women the world over, information and communication technologies (ICT) can be leveraged for personal security, better access to education and jobs, financial inclusion or to access basic healthcare information. But benefits such as these rely on women having meaningful access to ICT which can be facilitated or prevented by several factors, including affordability, relevant content, skills and security. We should aim to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and facilitate enhanced use of enabling technology – ICTs

in particular – to promote the empowerment of women. Self-generated income from ICT businesses can give women greater power to close the gender wage gap. It has a critical role to play in making education accessible to women and girls and enables women and whole societies to derive benefits from Technology Enabled education, health or commerce. This will in turn lead to inclusive development and women’s empowerment. To enhance women’s economic empowerment, we need to empower women with knowledge, resources, networking and training. This can be done through partnerships with governments, civil society, the private sector and the United Nations system.

The empowerment of women can be enhanced by improving their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. Our main objective is to increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making through the media and new technologies of communication. ICT has created new opportunities for women and contributed to knowledge sharing, networking and electronic commerce activities. Poverty, lack of access and opportunities, illiteracy (including computer illiteracy) and language barriers have prevented women from using ICT, including the Internet. It should be ensured that women benefit fully from ICT, including equal access to ICT-related education, training and entrepreneurship opportunities and equal access as producers and consumers of ICT through public and private partnerships.

Conclusion

ICT project planning and implementation for social development and gender equality must take place in a context which consists of five main components:

- a. Creating an enabling environment which supports and encourages strategies to promote women’s equal access to and opportunity to benefit from ICT projects, as well as creating a regulation and policy environment which supports women’s use of ICTs;
- b. Developing content which speaks to women’s concerns and reflects their local knowledge, and which is of value for their daily lives, business enterprises, and family responsibilities;
- c. Supporting increased representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and using ICTs to promote their increased participation in education at all levels;
- d. Promoting increased employment in the IT sector for women and the use of ICTs for women’s SMEs.
- e. Implementing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women; and promoting women’s lobbying and advocacy activities.

We must not settle for “smart” societies, but also aspire for societies that are also “wise,” guided by rights and values, where gender equality is realized and where technology works for the poor and for women and girls. Technology can be a game-changer for women and girls. It can make the 21st century a women’s and girls’ century. We should ensure that ICT is given prominence as a powerful means

to advance women's rights, empowerment and gender equality. ICT can make more impacts by amplifying women's voices and publicizing experiences. This can open more doors and in turn initiate a change in the global scenario. ICT is a powerful tool for gender empowerment.

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