

Role of ICT in the Context of Women Empowerment

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Abstract

A large group of working women of India is in the rural and unorganized sector. Majority of Indian women are still confined to the boundary of four walls of the house and are in a disadvantageous position. Due to liberalization, privatization and globalization Indian economy is moving at a very fast pace. Recent advances in Information and technology have opened new employment opportunity both for men and women but it is commonly observed that women are less engaged in ICT sector as compared to men in India. ICT is for everyone and women have to be an equal beneficiary to the advantages offered by the technology and the product and processes which emerged from its use. The benefits accrued from the integration of Knowledge and ICT need not be restricted to the upper strata of the society but should freely flow to all segments of the population including the women.

Key Words: ICT, Women empowerment

Introduction

ICT in collaboration with other forms of communication have the potential to reach those women particularly in the rural sector who have not been approached by any other media, thereby empowering them to participate in social, political and economic reforms.

Information adds to knowledge and knowledge leads to power. An explosion in the free flow of information and ideas has brought knowledge and its applications to millions of peoples creating a numerous choices and opportunities. The less informed are those who have poor access to this information and are therefore powerless, women falls into this category as their information on many matters is restricted for cultural, social, economic and geographic reasons. The main reason for the women's poor access to this information is illiteracy and lack of proper education. Over 50 percent women in India are illiterate and this illiteracy is a major barrier to the acquisition of knowledge on various matters related to their life.

A Nation that want to progress cannot afford to ignore the empowerment of women. Gender sensitivity is the pre-requisite that must prevail and be strengthened at all the levels. Women's development is now deeply linked with the technology. Thus technological intervention assumes a far greater and more vital role especially when viewed globally. Its potential to sweep across the political, social, economical and geographical barriers is just the leverage that women needs for her upliftment in the society so that she can carve a niche of her own and she gets the respectable position which she thoroughly deserves in the society.

The isolation of the women from the main stream economy and their lack of access to information because of societal, cultural and market constraints have led to their distancing from the global pool of information and knowledge. This distance is reflected in the low level of empowerment and inequality of men and women enormously contributed to the slow pace of development of our country. It is now well understood fact that without making efforts for progress towards empowerment of women, any attempt to raise the standard of living of people of our country would be incomplete and would lead to colossal wastage of time, money and power.

With reference to the sphere of knowledge the issues of gender equality, equity and empowerment of women become even more significant as women have a strategic role to play in the incubation and

transfer of knowledge. Women because of their social and biological roles are generally more rooted than man in the confines of their locality. Therefore the women are more aware of social, economic and environmental needs of their community. It is therefore essential that any knowledge sharing mechanism recognizes value of knowledge possessed by women and provides space for integration of women's knowledge in the global knowledge era.

Since India has been using ICT for development for more than two decades there many good practices for the use of IT for women empowerment. "India Shop" and e-commerce website (2005) in Tamil Nadu has been designed to sell products made by rural women co-operative and NGO's. The **Dhaan** foundation (2004) and 'Swayam Krishi Sangam' 2004 are using ICT in the form of hand held devices and smart card to improve micro finance projects to empower poor women. The **Self Employed Women Association (SEWA)** 2004 has several ICT projects for women including community learning centers, a school of science and technology for self employed women. In our country more than 90% of the women work in the informal sector and rural area. These women engage in economic activities such as handicrafts, weaving of baskets, carpets, rolling cigarettes, sewing etc. without any contracts or benefits. ICT will expose these women to telecommunication services, media and broadcast services that will create market for their products. The challenge will be to reach these women and provide them with ICT tools that they feel can make a difference in their income generation capacity. For example (SEWA) in India has done extensive work to assist women in the informal sector and has established an ICT programme aiming to increase efficiency of rural micro enterprise activities. One of the most powerful applications of ICT is electronic commerce (e-commerce). E-commerce refers not just to selling of products and services online but to the promotion of a new class of ICT savvy women entrepreneurs in both rural and urban areas. E-commerce initiatives can link products and trades directly to markets at natural, regional and even global levels, allowing them to restructure their economic activities and bypass middleman and male dominated exploitative market structure. PEOP link is one such organization which has been helping women communities traditionally involved with handicrafts to put their products online in the world market. In Gujarat, women producers used the 'Diary Information System Kiosk (DISK) which manages a database of all milk cattle and provide information about veterinary services and other practical information about the dairy sector. Lack of local and community related content in local languages continues to be a major barrier in women's use of ICT for economic empowerment.

One of the strategies adopted to increase access of remote area women and marginalized groups to ICT is the development of public access centers, such as public phones, tele centre's, libraries, information centers or cyber cafes. The potential of ICT for women in developing countries is highly dependent upon their level of technical skill and education and is the principal requirement for accessing knowledge from the global pool. Government and N.G.O. 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. Last but not the least it needs to be realized that information technology by itself cannot answer all the problems facing women's empowerment, but it does bring new information resources and can open new communication channels for rural women and marginalized communities that will lead them towards the path of empowerment.

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