

IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

V. Thiruvani

*Research Scholar, Department of Visual Communication,
Mother Teresa Womens University, Kodaikanal*

Abstract

Out of the five thrust areas earmarked for India's Vision 2020, the information and communication technologies (ICT), like the other four, have also given us vital tools to achieve our development strategies. These tools and technologies coupled with the power of knowledge can enable women in developing countries to join the battle for economic, social and political empowerment. Already a "digital divide" implying uneven distribution of the technologies within the societies and across the world has set in, upsetting the balance of gender equality. Ready access and use of ICT is expected to bridge this "gap" or "divide" to a large extent, provided social and economic benefits are directly linked to these emerging technologies. There are factors like education, financial independence, language barriers, cultural cross-linkages, traditional skills and remoteness of locations, besides cost of technologies, which would determine the participation of women in this sector. Presently, women constitute 31% of the total workforce. NASSCOM has predicted that male-female ratio by the year 2005 would be 65 to 35, which indicates towards a healthy trend. But, the socio-economic disparity would not be removed by these statistics alone. A Herculean task lies ahead to provide ICT to many more segments of women, not considered hitherto. While it is being strongly felt that women take up the challenges of ICT, the problems at the grass-root level also cannot be ignored. Women's participation in ICT may be in the form of dedicated users, workers, entrepreneurs, technical service facilitators, inventors, managers and policy makers. Information and communication have been playing an increasingly important role in economic and social development of nations. Experts believe that this century belongs to the power of Knowledge & Information. On one side, the recent developments in communication technology have drastically reduced the geographical barriers, while on the other side computers have enormously enhanced the capacity to accumulate and access information. The possibilities for information access are infinite. This 'information society' has grown in the last one decade in leaps & bounds breaking many existing paradigms and creating an image of "indispensability" in our lives.

Key words: *India's Vision 2020, Digital divide, Uneven distribution of technologies, Entrepreneurs and Indispensability.*

Introduction

Empowerment of women is the key-device to enable them resurrects their status multifariously in the society and reconciles them to share virilities of the fast developing world. It had come out of the consensus arrived at the 40th Session of the UN commission

on status of women in New York on March 11, 1996. This device is significant in view of the role that the women can more effectively play in all vital areas the male factor alone is not capable of any effective and reliable performance in socioeconomic spheres and a partnership is a must throughout the world in these spheres between men and women to ensure the progress in the right direction. Noteworthy is the fact that there exists a rift between the present miserable plight of the women due to the socioeconomic inequalities that have been persistent throughout the world and the new mandates that require a decisive role of women side by side with the men folk.

The commission has warned all the member states of the UNO that the women concerns are mainstreamed to with the impact of the economic and social changes on families. Eradications of Poverty, elimination of gender prejudices discriminations, and providing equal opportunities to women to exp their views, are essential to check further drift in the socioeconomic situations in their respective countries. The commission has stressed this is not just a formality to oblige the women folk with a view of their morale or pacify them. But it is an integral part of empowerment women that they participate in decision making at all levels in all are the critical concerns that were identified in the world women conference held in China in 1995. By empowerment of women is meant that the conferment of power by means of law in all matters affecting gender interests, related to family well-being and socioeconomic national affairs, providing for participation in decision making in all such matters. As a matter of all such matters that were categorically termed as 'critical concerns the women in the world women conference in China in 1995 were required to be mainstreamed to deal with the impact of economic and social changes on families. In eradication of poverty, counter sexism and viol in the global media. It is not India alone where the plight of women is pitiable and status has been depleting and losing day by day, but it is an international phenomenon. Because exploitation of women in the forms of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, in one form or the other is equally found throughout the world, including the advanced and developed countries of the west. And this is the main reason that the status of women their plight have grown into an international problem and a concern the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

Experts of the economy have arrived at the consensus that so eradication of poverty is concerned, it requires full and equal participation of women in decision-making at all levels for which their empowerment and autonomy are essential prerequisites. It implies legislative administrative measures to give right to women no inheritance ownership, to credit and to natural resources and technology. It necessitates to promote women's participation in employment and employment and ensure economic and social protection, unemployment, ill-health, maternity, child bearing, widowhood, disability and old-age. Meanwhile in India, reservation of seats in parliament and legislatures for women

is being actively pursued at the government to offer a political toast to entertain women. Many important court rulings regarding relating to harassment of women at work, maintenance of even if not legally married etc. have made the womenfolk stronger. Many savings and insurance schemes, announced from time to time by the central government and various state governments, have helped women to become economically stronger, resulting in their better social status. The constitutional amendment regarding reservation of one-third seats for women at the level of Panchayat has enabled one million women to participate in the decision-making process, right from the grassroots up district level. At the international level, however, the initiatives to improve editions for the women have resulted in the creation of an international legal framework to achieve legal equality by. UN bodies are also continually striving to bring about equality by raising public awareness and by a commitment to change long-ingrained traditions and attitudes, rich prolong discriminations.

Women Empowerment

Women have generally been looked upon with contempt for centuries with various strictures inflicted upon them reducing their status to the mercy of men. They have been confined to hearth and home. But now the perspective of the society has changed and a general thinking to work for the emancipation and empowerment of women is being developed so that they could also contribute in the enhancement and welfare of the society.

Their Emancipation

But their emancipation is not without challenges. Breaking the age old barriers, storming into a predominantly male bastion are something they have to fight for. Even as they are becoming aware about their rights and demands, the violence and crime against women is on the increase. History is the witness that the women had enjoyed a privileged position in ancient India. It is definitely a matter of pride that there existed a culture and them a respectful. Living in the social life. However, the woman lost their status with the coming up of Brahminical traditions and with the advent of Islam, they were further pushed into the background. They were left secluded, devitalized and sheltered and these practices slowly turned into customs which have now become traditions.

It was in the medieval period that the social evils like female infanticide, child marriage, purdah. Jauhar. Sati and slavery emerged. Such evils and ill- practices were imposed upon them in the name of customs. They were reduced to the mere household obligations and with this the Indian society plunged into abysmal darkness. The Britishers introduced a few measures to raise the status of women in the society and they initiated

the legislation to ban the Sati and to limit the child marriage. With women's participation in the struggle for India's independence, there ushered a new age and a recognizable future for them in India. Putting aside the veil they came in the forefront of the national movement for India's liberalization. A new chapter was added into the history of women's empowerment with India gaining independence. The norm of their less, unimportant of secondary role to that of men was withdrawn.

When the new constitution was formed, the constitution makers took into account the Women's plight and asserted by introducing various measures in the constitution to hold their rightful place in the society. They were given freedom to participate in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the nation.

Feminism Movement

During 1960s and 1970s the movement by the women to seek equality with men gained ground all over the world. With this movement called feminism, the educated women in particular and poor rural women in general realized the need to break the old shackles to breathe in the open space. Still the experience shows that man's tyrannical hegemony is overwhelmingly strong and deep rooted to allow for any change in the short run. In India a crime is committed against a woman every seven minutes. Every 26 minutes a molestation take place and every 54 minute somewhere a woman is raped. The burning of brides for dowry continues unabated in the various parts of the country. The condition of rural women is still more deplorable. The various women's movements are led and organised by white collared middle class women and social workers from upper and upper middle class non-working women who are unaware about the ground realities existing in the rural structure of Indian society and are not concerned to the rural women's miserable conditions. Women's organization have lobbied heavily for the introduction of Women Reservation Bill for 33 per cent reservation in Lok Sabha and in state assembly seats.

In the Panchayats and municipalities the reservation has already been provided. They have said that the reservations would give them political platform to work for the rest of women for their emancipation. The government has also taken various measures like committee on statues of women in 1974, followed by National Plan of Action for women and the National Perspective Plan for women in 1988. However despite of these measures, the challenges before the women for their emancipation has remained still an uphill task and their conditions still remained the same. What is required is the seriousness of the various government agencies to work for the women's empowerment by spreading awareness through various educative programmes.

Information & Communication Technologies and Women Empowerment

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are a diverse set of technologies tools and resources to create to create disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage 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.

A large group of workingwomen in India is in the rural and unorganized sector. Socially the majorities of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in the disadvantageous position. Inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially the media, and their insufficient mobilisation to promote women's contribution to society.

Since the globalization is opening up the Indian economy suddenly at a very high speed, during the past decades, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women. More women are involved in careers in the communications sector, but few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. The lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that can be found in public and private local, national and international media organizations. The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products [are also negatively affecting] women and their participation in society. Programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting. The worldwide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately.

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. 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. There is even greater realization that instead of a single-track technology, lateral integration of technologies can deliver startling results and the world seems to be moving towards such converged systems. With the emergence of IT on the national agenda and the announcement of ICT policies by various state governments have recognized the “Convergence of core technologies and E-Governance” as the tool for good governance, sustainable development, globalization of economy and social empowerment. Information is the key to democracy. With the advent of ICT, it has become possible for the common man to access global information. The realm of electronic communication encompasses telecommunication, broadcasting, information technology, enabled services and industries, to undergo profound changes leading to a Global Information Infrastructure (GII), which will be capable of carrying any type of information, be it text, data, voice or video. Information is now broadly defined to embrace voice in telephony, text in fax and newspapers, images in video and television broadcasting, and data in computers. All information can be digitized, transported, stored, retrieved, modified, and then distributed. All of these are getting transportable over common infrastructure viz. high-speed, broadcast, digital electronic highways. Emerging digital techniques, new network alternatives (Intelligent Networks), high bandwidth communication technology, and state-of-the-art software for network functions and services, are the new technology trends evident in the development of electronic communication systems. The convergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) involve not only the integration of carriage and content but also of the industry. In such convergence, instances of conflicting interests might surface and it may trigger a competition and end up with the survival of the fittest industries and of sustainable applications. It may also be realised that converged applications have a lot of bearing on e-governance, which, people perceive as means to ‘good governance’.

Initiatives of the government and the private sector to adopt standards develop interconnection and accounting systems and to deploy infrastructures, due to liberalization policies, have seen the growth of satellite systems and regional WANs (Wide Area Networks) in India. Emergence of ICT on the national agenda and announcement of ICT policies by several state governments has strengthened India’s position in the software-driven ICT sector in the world. For example states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Orissa, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Pondicherry etc. announced several ICT policies in their respective states.

Impact of ICT and Women

ICTs have created new jobs in the field of information processing for banking, insurance, printing and publishing especially for women. To mention, UNCTAD report 2002 says women in Asia & Latin American countries hold more than 20 percent of professional jobs in software services. If one goes by statistics, there are about 8 million internet user women in China & 2 million in India. Further, projections indicate that over 3,50,000 women are expected to be working in remote data processing by 2008 in India as one million jobs are expected to be created in call center alone by 2007. However, it depends on availability of good telecom infrastructure, IT training in and out of school, training in marketing and business development supported by conducive policies of the government. 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.

Women are the equal beneficiaries to the advantages offered by technology, and the products and processes, which are by product of the technology use. However, it should not be confined to elite group of society but to flow to the other segments of women in Indian society.

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 man - aging 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 decision on issues that affect them.

Knowledge

The world is in the midst of a knowledge revolution, complemented by opening up entirely new vistas in communication technologies. Recent developments in the field of information and communication technology are indeed revolutionary in nature. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on Information and Communication technologies, reflecting a powerful global belief in the technologies. 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. Interestingly, ICT, when used as a broad tool for amalgamating local knowledge incubated by the communities with information existing in remote databases and in public domain, heralds the formation of a new class of society - the Knowledge Society. 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 opens up a new way of interactive communication between Government 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.

Conclusion

However, in spite of the constitutional and legal guarantees aiming to eradicate the inequality and discrimination in any form, the plight of women still remained far from improved. Even today the evils like child marriage, eves teasing, sexual assaults, wife beating, female infanticide and gender discrimination are widely prevalent in the society. However, still the realization is taking roots in the various structures of the society and the women themselves try to raise their voice against the discrimination and violence by the male dominated society. There are many more cases of similar and different nature, which have encouraged the NGOs, the government and the funding agencies to expedite women's development through ICT. From managing water distribution at the village-level to standing for local elections and having access to lifelong learning opportunities, ICT is opening up new vistas of development. The Information and Communication Technologies are for everyone and women have to be an equal beneficiary of the advantages offered by the technology. Moreover, the benefits accrued from the synergy of knowledge and ICT cannot

be restricted to the upper strata of the society and have to freely flow to all segments of the women population.

Bibliography

- Vikas Nath, 'Women & ICT', London School of Economics, Know Net Initiative
- ICT Country Profile: India, 'Women and IT in India'
- Asia Pacific Development Information Programme
- <http://www.digitaldividend.org/pubs/pubs>
- <http://www.unescap.org/rural/publications>
- Women Empowerment by R.K. Dutta
- Emancipation and Empowerment of Women by V. Mohini Giri, V.R. Krishna Iyer
- Empowerment of Women Perceptions and Realities by Chakradhar Satapathy, Kalyan Gadhai, Sabita Mishra