Role of ICT in Empowering Women

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ABSTRACT

Women are identified as seriously under-represented in science, mathematics and engineering fields. They are an under-utilized pool of talent and resource as they comprise more than half of the population of any society and could contribute immensely towards the social and economic development of societies through participation in science and technology programs. Science and technology have been an integral part of Indian civilization and culture. Over the years Indian women have overcome the traditional mindsets and have excelled in professions like teaching, medicine and pure sciences. Women have made important contributions in all walks of life and made inroads into new fields like engineering, information technology, biotechnology, nuclear science, space and many such specialized fields in the domain of science and technology.

In the education sector, information and communication technologies (ICTs) hold great potential. Distance education can enable women who don't have physical access to schools to participate through online, radio or other ICTs in education classes and programs. Training of women in the use of ICTs, media management and content development can enable them to participate in decision-making processes at government, private sector and civil society levels.

KEYWORDS :

Objectives:

- To assess ICT infrastructure in rural areas vis-a vis in urban areas for women empowerment.
- To assess the impact of economic/social/academic background of women workforce in ICT.
- To assess the status of ICT in education in terms of policies of scholarships, reservations, business development programmes for self-employment for women.
- To assess social and health implication of ICT with reference to women.

India is a vast and complex capitalist society. Said to be the largest liberal democracy in the world with a population of over 1 billion, India is not easy to assess. Viewed through a western perspective it can often seem an impenetrable place. Often we see the Indian woman cast as a victim of patriarchal and religious control (Chatterjee : 1989). Images of instances of 'sati' and stories of mass foeticide have helped form in the western mind the stereotypical ignorant and backward Indian women (Jeffrey &Basu : 1998). However there is a 'rich history linked to the social reform movements' that were taking place in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore in order to evaluate the position of women in India today it is necessary to first look at some of the fundamental changes that occurred through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ; in particular the nationalist and independence movement. These movements and the changes they brought about in India profoundly altered women's standing in society.

Education of women became a popular idea in India (amongst the higher castes at least) in the early nineteenth century (Patel : 1998) . This was done in the context of the nationalist movement as it was seen as desirable that women became educated in their own language, and desirable that they could achieve a superiority over western women, women of the preceding generation and over women of the lower classes (Chatterjee : 1989). This gave the women of the higher classes and castes a sense of freedom and self-emancipation.

Methodology

The women include: working women, house wife who have exposure in information and communication technology and work as part time, Women employees who work in the area of information technology in government and private organizations, members of self help group who also has exposure in the field of information technology and communication.

Primary data is collected by field surveys and by conducting semi-structured questionnaires. Secondary data are collected by consulting relevant published and unpublished documents and data analysis is done according to statistical package.

Women Empowerment through ICT:

"Any technology that is not appropriate for women is not truly appropriate technology." The concern raised in this expression is applicable to all walks of life where technology is an eminent and powerful tool that can bring about a change .What is the role of ICT in the economic and social development of women? This issue touches all facet of society. Information and communication technologies could give a major boost to the political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. Women must be active ICT participants - users, professionals, creators, producers and entrepreneurs. To make a difference, women must engage in productive ICT and ICT-driven activities – usage and production.

Socially the majorities of Indian women are still tradition bound and are in a disadvantageous position. The factors which are to be considered are:

- Technology to remove hurdles to women's growth
- Role of women in technological fields
- Decision-making capacity of women in technology-related issues
- Exposure of women to technological scenarios at national and international levels

International Status

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.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in 2003 in Geneva, saw ICTs as vital tools for women's empowerment: "We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this

end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end" (WSIS, 2003).

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)*.

National Status:
As Nath pointed out by focusing on the improved use of information and communication technologies, women can broaden the scope of their actions and address issues which were previously beyond their capacity.

Origin of the research problem:
Empowering and improving the status of women is essential for realising their full potential of economic, political and social development since 52% of the world's population is made up of women and studies demonstrate that there is no place in the world where women enjoy the same living conditions as men. According to the report entitled "The World's Women 2000" although women have made significant gains, disparities between women and men persist.

Absence from decision making process:
Although the number of women in jobs involving ICT expertise is constantly rising, the same is not necessarily true of women's access to decision-making and control of these resources. Women are under-represented in all ICT decision-making structures, including policy and regulatory institutions, ministries responsible for ICTs, and boards and senior management of private ICT companies. Decision making in ICTs is generally treated as a purely technical area where civil society viewpoints are given little or no space, rather than as a political domain.

Nature and Scope of the Study
- The rural women folk are deprived of ICT infrastructures
- Entry of women workforce in ICT Industry is affected by their social, economic and educational background;
- Impact on health of women working in ICT sector in relation to stress, working in shift, during odd hours, working culture etc;
- There is sufficient support from the government institution to provide ICT education to women in study areas;
- The ICT contribution in providing employment to women in rural and urban areas.

About the study(Major Activities Undertaken):
ICTs have created new jobs in the field of information processing for baking, insurance, printing and publishing specially for women.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.

The urban educated women need information mainly pertaining to:
Research, Educational opportunities including prospects abroad, Career advancement facilities , Matrimonials, Fashion and market values ,Health and child care facilities .

The urban lower middle class women however, specially need information on:
Inexpensive educational facilities, Career advancement and job opportunities in the city itself, Matrimonial within the restrictions of caste and class ,Inexpensive health and childcare, Inexpensive social support systems for working women ,

Conclusion:
Keeping these facts in mind, the proposed study identified the needs of infrastructure and policy intervention to make ICT sector to contribute towards empowering women. Enhancing ICT makes the role of time and distance less significant in organizing business and production related activities. As a result of the technology, a high proportion of jobs outsourced by big firms are going to women. Women therefore can work from anywhere and at anytime and raise that extra income to become more financially independent and empowered.

We can conclude then that whilst the Women's movement in India is an energetic and modern movement, influencing over social movements both nationally and internationally, there are still many problems to confront. Particularly the inversion of feminist values by right-wing groups and the problem of defining what exactly women's rights should constitute : The narrowing of feminist values. In this paper we have shown that the Indian women's movement is diverse and that women in India today are involved in redefining their own gender roles. Indian women today are far from the ignorant, oppressed stereotype perceived in the west. They in fact are active in both an individual and collective approach to organisation, and are centrally engaged in transforming their own lives.

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