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Research Paper

Use of ICT Applications: Gender Inequality

Sociology

KEYWORDS :

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ABSTRACT

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications such as television, radio, cellular phones, internet, etc are being used by every person in the society and all the persons are benefitted from use of these technological applications. Due to the social and cultural barriers, women, especially living in towns and rural areas are deprived from use of the internet and related applications. Though internet facilities are available in all villages and towns, still women are hesitated to avail these facilities. Generally women have to visit Cyber Cafes to use internet and related applications and the cyber cafes are located in areas, where women are hesitated to visit. Further, parents are also restricting their girl children to visit cyber cafes. It is also not possible to majority of the families to go for internet at their homes. Further, there is also lack of training in use of ICT for the girls. Due to some indecent and pornographic web sites, many of the people believe that the use of internet spoil the personal character of girls. Due to all these reasons, the girls are deprived from use of ICT. It is concluded with the remarks that the parents should know the advantages of ICT and train their girl children in use of ICT for their overall development.

Introduction:

The present era is popularly known as 'information era', where there is emphasis and importance for information. The new technological applications especially Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have accelerated the Research and Development and led information explosion. The combinations of different technological disciplines such as Computer Technology, Information Technology, Telecommunication Technology, Satellite Technology, Digital Technology and Electronics have contributed to the emergence of Information and Communication Technology. The use of these technologies divided the society in terms of those who have got benefit from these technologies and those who are deprived of use of these technological applications and it is popularly known as digital divide.

The digital divide is usually referred to as the "inequality of access to the Internet." The digital divide is the gap between those people and communities who can access and make effective use of information technology and those who cannot. Simply, a common euphemism that describes the haves and have nots of the information age, usually urban versus rural communities or boys versus girls. The digital divide is the socio-economic/technological difference between communities in their access to computers and the Internet. The term also refers to gaps between groups in their ability to use ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) effectively, due to differing literacy and technical skills, and the gap in availability of quality, useful digital content. The divide is seen as a national/social/political problem. It became an issue among concerned parties, such as governments, scholars, policy makers, and advocacy groups, in the late1990s (Subhendu Kar and Pralay Sharma, 2006).

Significance of ICT:

The revolution in ICTs has profound implications for economic and social development. It has pervaded every aspect of human life whether it is health, education, economics, governance, entertainment etc. Dissemination, propagation and accessibility of these technologies are viewed to be integral to a country's development strategy. Secondly it reduces the cost of production. Knowledge is produced, transmitted, accessed and shared at the minimum cost. With the reduction in the transactional costs, there is also a reduction in the degree of inefficiencies and uncertainty. Thirdly it has overcome the constraints of distance and geography. ICTs have cut across the geographic boundaries of the nation states. It enables all to know the comparative advantage in the market economy. It leads to the larger markets and increased access to global supply chains. Fourthly it has led to more transparency. Networking and information sharing leads to demand for greater openness and transparency. Whether you want to know the status of the central banks' foreign exchange agency or the cost prize of potatoes in the local market, ICTs empowers the individual with the information access, which is transparent. Efforts are under way to integrate ICTs to all sectors and developmental activity.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), refers to forms of technology that are used to transmit, store, create, display, share or exchange information by electronic means. This broad definition of ICT includes such technologies as radio, television, video, DVD, telephone (both fixed line and mobile phones), satellite systems, computer and network hardware and software; as well as the equipment and services associated with these technologies, such as videoconferencing, email and blogs. In short, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is an umbrella term that covers all advanced technologies in manipulating and communicating information (Ingale, 2010).

Many social justice movements believe ICTs can be used to promote equality and empower marginalized groups. These groups advocate ICTs as a means of providing accessible and affordable information and as a platform for voices that might otherwise go unheard and ICT helps with hard works and business with communication.

One of the significant contributions of ICT is internet. Internet is a world-wide network of computer systems and computer networks connected together, so as to share the information on different issues such as social, economic, cultural, geographical, scientific, technological, commercial, etc. Internet is contributing information sources also to education and research at different levels. It is also channel to educate women in health, fashion, lifestyle, cooking, welfare activities, etc. But due to some limitations, especially cultural restrictions in India prevented the use of internet by women. Hence, it has also created gender inequality among women to use ICT applications such as internet, satellite communications such as mobile phones, etc.

Gender Inequality in ICT Accessibility and Use:

As discussed above, ICT is beneficial for education, employment, knowledge and such other aspects for women. But, due to the following reasons women can't use the ICT applications effectively in India.

1. Availability and Usage:

Concentration of the ICT infrastructure in urban areas limits the accessibilities of new technologies for women because many poor women in developing countries live in rural areas. Internet connectivity is frequently available only within capital and major cities in India. Access is especially important in relation to the right to communicate. Of course, men in rural areas access the

ICT facilities by visiting to towns or cities, but women can't able to access the same, as their family members restrict it.

2. Social and Cultural Issues:
There are also cultural issues related to the ICT facilities, especially for using internet. In internet, there are many objectionable information is available through web sites. As such, women restricted for using internet and such other ICT facilities. Frequently, information centers or cyber cafes are located in places that women may not feel comfortable visiting (the shared public access points). Women with multiple roles, heavy domestic responsibility, scarce leisure hours and public centers not being open find difficult to access the information. Girls are encouraged to enter the job market or get married rather than seek higher education. Sometimes gender-based cultural attitudes prevent young girls and women from accessing and using ICTs.

3. Training in Use of ICT:
Access by itself is not enough. Women need training to be able to use ICTs. Training in ICT skills tends not to be particularly gender-sensitive. Training methods are often not customized to women's needs. Training programmes for women should focus not only on how to use technology but also on how to find, manage, produce, disseminate information, and how to develop policies and strategies to intervene effectively and make use of this new medium.

4. Education and Skills:
With two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates being women, it is fair to say that women in developing countries are less likely than men to have the requisite education and knowledge to use ICTs. Compared with men, fewer women know the English that dominate the Internet. Given their limited access to schooling, women, especially in rural areas, are unlikely to acquire computer skills. Information literacy essentially involves using information contextually, a skill that women often lack.

5. Financial Resources:
Almost all communication facilities cost money. Women are less likely than men to own radios, televisions, cell phones, or to access them when they want to, even when the household possesses the technology. When involves paying for information access, such as at a rural information center or cybercafé, women may not have the disposable income to do so or may hesitate to use family resources for information, instead of for food, education or clothing. Hence, due to their financial problems women are deprived from use of ICTs.

6. Medium of Information:
Due to their inequality in their families, women are getting education at their local language as their primary language. Further, the parents' in backward families or rural areas don't encourage their women children to learn more things and languages. As such, women to a greater extent are less familiar to other languages. Majority of the web sites or information content that is available in web is in English or other foreign languages. Hence, it is difficult for the women to access the information and understand the same. Due to all these reasons, the women are deprived from the use of ICTs.

7. Limitations of Access to ICTs:
There are gender equality issues in the way that ICTs are used in developing countries. To date, ICT used by women in developing countries has been mostly e-mail and sometimes list serves (mailing list providers, discussion groups), generally in connection with the advocacy and networking activities. The main reasons for this concentration are cost of access and limitations of time, bandwidth and technical skills. Few women have used ICTs for business, for entertainment (the predominant use in the developed world), or for education, including education in matters related to livelihood and well-being (e.g., health and nutrition education). Promoting women's use of new technologies for business (including improved agriculture and agricultural products) and for education is an important undertaking.

8. Statistics and Indicators:
There is lack of reliable statistics in use of ICTs. The major collector and disseminator of statistics on ICTs is the International Telecommunication Union ((ITU). The ITU has official statistics on female internet users as a percentage of total internet users for mostly developed countries and very few data for developing countries. In the absence of reliable statistics those looking for data have to fall back on sources of dubious reliability. Many of the countries studies that purport to show large numbers of women internet users are marketing studies, conducted by firms that want to market products to women consumers. In other cases the studies are limited to country surveys, generally based on the subscriber of lists of a few, small internet service providers or e-mail services. In many countries, where public access is the dominant mode, subscriber lists may identify only a third or less users. Few studies have kept gender statistics on the users of public access facilities by sex. In virtually all studies that have recorded such data, the number of women users is much smaller than the number of men.

9. Industry and Labour:
The patterns of work in the ICT industry are highly gendered. Women are found in disproportionately high numbers in the lowest paid and least secure jobs. Few women work at higher levels, particularly in hardware and software engineering and in management. Many women have been displaced due to increased automation and computerization of workplaces. Men continue to crowd women out of the training required for high skilled work.

10. Decision Making Authority:
Women are underrepresented in virtually all ICT decision making structures, including policy and regulatory institutions, ministries responsible for ICTs, and boards and senior management committees of ICT companies. The ICT decision making is generally treated as a purely technical area, where civil society view points are given little or no space.

11. Privacy and Security:
One of the negative aspects of ICTs is the use of internet for women's sexual exploitation and harassment. The pernicious elements include trafficking of women through the internet, pornography and sexual harassment. Women need secure spaces online where they can be safe from harassment and exploitation. Legislation is needed to prevent ICTs from threatening human rights.

Of course, the government is active in launching the awareness programmes for use of ICTs by developing web sites of government agencies and educating common people on their welfare activities. But, it is emphasized that there is need to increase awareness against the socio-cultural barriers which prevent women to use the ICTs.

Suggestions:
From the above discussion, the following suggestions may be made.

1. It is suggested to educate women and their parents on the use of ICT applications, especially internet;
2. It is suggested to the government to block the web sites depicting objectionable content, such as pornography;
3. There is need to increase awareness of girl students at secondary school on the usefulness of internet and such other applications of ICT in their schools.

Conclusion:

Due to ICT, today information is shared, disseminated and communicated within seconds all over the world. The women should realize the significance of information, be it for education, research, empowerment, employment, welfare oriented and so on. Hence, the women have to come forward to use the applications of ICTs for their betterment in their life. In this respect, the parents and teachers should train their girl students in use of internet by providing appropriate ICT skills for better use of internet. Of course, few socio-cultural issues may become barriers in use of internet and such barriers should be avoided by comparative advantage of use of ICTs by women.

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