



INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Dr. Jeemina Baglari*

Abstract: *Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are emerging as a powerful tool for women empowerment in a developing country like India. The advancement of ICTs has brought new opportunities for both knowledge sharing and knowledge gathering for both women and men. To the extent that the global community can reach heretofore unconnected individuals, families, and populations to better understand their needs and challenges. Several reports have also discussed opportunities for women empowerment through ICT, e.g. through education and knowledge creation, poverty alleviation and employment generation. But there is a high degree of illiteracy inhibits use of ICT. Women especially in developing countries, lacks financial resources to purchase hardware, software and to connect to the internet. They also lack sufficient computer education and training facilities to develop the needed competencies to seize the opportunities opened up by ICTs. Therefore the step need is to open up doors of access for women to ICT with user friendly system and relevant indigenous content. This paper looks at the avenues created by ICT-enabled networking processes for women's empowerment. It highlights the opportunities available for women empowerment through ICTs; the barriers face by women and suggest ways to improve the conditions leading to women empowerment through ICTs.*

Key Words: *ICT, women empowerment, employment, entrepreneur, e-governance*

*Department of Education, Guest Lecturer Kokrajhar Girls' College, Kokrajhar, Assam, India



INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, countries have recognised 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 communicates, 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. Given the capacity of ICTs to access, transfer and apply knowledge and information to almost every aspect of human engagement, they are increasingly being recognised for their potential to carry the new global knowledge-based economy. ICTs may reshape, re-organise and restructure working methods. They offer generic advantages of efficiency and productivity gains; information – sharing, storage and communication; faster knowledge-accumulation, dissemination and application; in support of the specific purposes for which they are used. It also permit new, collaborative work methods, enabling rapid and continuous transfer of commercial, financial and political information crucial to the development process.

ICTs could give a major boost to the economic, political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers are among the factors impeding access to the ICT infrastructure, especially in developing countries and these problems are particularly acute for women. But women's access to ICTs is constrained by factors that go beyond issues of technological infrastructure and socio-economic environment. Socially and culturally constructed women's role and relationships remain a cross-cutting element in shaping the capacity of women and men to participate on equal terms. World Bank (2008) has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction and sustainable development. So it is important to empower women to change their lives through enabling their contribution to society, thereby eradicating or reducing poverty.



WOMEN AND ICT

Women from the grass roots level are using ICTs to expand their mission, drive their passion to improve the world. There is growing reality that women's engagement in ICTs is important for multiple forms of development. But it is commonly held view that women are less engaged with ICTs compared to men. ICTs are for everyone and women have to be an equal beneficiary to the advantages offered by the technologies, and the products and processes, which emerge from their used. What Huyer and Hafkin found in their work is that there is little correlation between internet penetration in a country and the percentage of female internet users. Women's full participation in the knowledge society is indeed a necessary condition for development to take place. Conversely, the lack of participation by women will slow progress and negatively impact families' communities.

The access of ICTs has help women to acquire education from home through online and distance mode. Still use of ICTs will be limited in impact wherever women have limited or no access to roads or transport, credit and other development inputs. ICTs require that users have some skills and one should not assume that providing the facilities means that everyone in the community will immediately embrace the technology. Numerous studies have shown when women have access to educational resources, their families and communities benefit. Without access to computer, the internet and technology training women will continue to be excluded from many opportunities for social economic leaderships. Gaining the required skills further empowers women to use ICT in order to increase their employment choices and contribute to community development.

The 2012 World Development Report by the World Bank and UNCTAD 2011 Information Economy Report demonstrate that providing women with ICT tools such as mobile phones can lead to a better quality of life and wider economic growth. However, despite the fact that mobile phone are seemingly ubiquitous, our previous research indicates that there is a significant gender gap in access to mobile technology in South Asia, where a man is 37 percent more likely to have access to mobile phone than a woman.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

ICT has played an important role in changing the concept of work and work place. New areas of employment such as teleworking, i.e. working from a distance are becoming feasible with new technologies. 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 their extra income to become more financially independent and empowered. New areas of employment such as tele-marketing, medical transcription etc. have also opened up tremendous job opportunities for women. These jobs are definitely under-paid and fall at the lower segment of ICT jobs; nevertheless, they are opening up avenues where none existed before.

Teleworking is another growing employment trend that has open up new opportunities for women, using ICTs to enable them to work from their homes. Women in India and the Philippines benefit disproportionately from employment opportunities in IT services with women accounting for about 65 percent of professional and technical workers in the Philippines, and 30 percent in India. Both are higher participation rates than in other service industries (World Bank 2009). There are also indication that women's participation in India ICT economy has improves their earning potential and bargaining at home. More women work in IT companies located in cities away from home. This has had the triple effect of enhancing their social as well as their ability to make choice and challenge power relations.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The evolving ICT landscape is offering women entrepreneurs' new opportunities to strengthen their business and become more effective. Through mobile phones, electronic platforms and networks, radio, T.V, blogs and the internet, women entrepreneurs are reaching out to customers and building their businesses in ways they could not do before. Effective use of ICTs is now helping to overcome several challenges that women entrepreneurs in developed and developing countries. At the same time, institutional and systematic barriers, and legal gender inequalities, as well as socio-cultural norms and practices, often systemic the potential of women entrepreneurship. These factors may cause constraints in such areas as women's access to finance, time availability due to multiple roles, physical mobility, and access to education, skills and training. ICTs can help to overcome some of them, and there are also business opportunities in ICT sector itself.

One of the most powerful applications of ICT in the domain of knowledge networking is electronic commerce (E-commerce). E-commerce initiatives can link women producers and traders directly to markets at national, regional or even global levels, allowing them to restructure their economic activities and by pass middlemen and male-dominated and



exploitative market structures. Beyond generating new jobs for women, ICTs are being used in projects implementation in developing countries by the UN, World Bank, government, corporate and private sectors, through the millennium development goals and local and international programmes. For example, the African Women's Network of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) has conducted training and workshops to support electronic networking among women's groups. The India shop, an e-commerce website in Tamil Nadu, sell product made by rural women's co-operatives and NGOs. The DHAN Foundation Swayam Krishi Sangam is using ICTs, such as handheld devices and smart cards, to improve micro-finance projects to empower poor women. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has several ICT projects for women including community learning centres, a school of science and technology for self-employed women.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH E-GOVERNANCE

ICT is a forceful tool to improve governance and strengthen democracy and citizen empowerment. It can help faster more transparent government by enhancing interaction between government and citizens, revitalizing civic institution and public debate, promoting equity and equality, and empowering minorities. It can be particularly powerful in providing a voice to women who have been isolated and invisible. In recent years, e-governance has become a priority area of many governments resulting in the implementation of programmes that apply ICT in delivering government services and promoting transparency and accountability. These new models of governance open up avenues for direct participation of women which so far has been limited to representatives forms of participation in which women were insufficiently represented. E-governance would lead to a more interactive and pro-active form of communicating with officials in the local governance spheres of a process which lead to greater transparency and accountability of their actions. The notion of distance and time would become meaningless as the technologies have the capability of working at all times and from all geographical locations. It also means that women in rural areas for whom time is a scarce commodity and for whom it is absolutely impossible to commute to public offices- the new technologies would enable them to leap-frog to an altogether different platform where they can voice their opinions and communicate to the concerned person without additional burden on their time or commuting large distances.



The Indian Government, realising the importance of IT, has created a separate Ministry of Information Technology to promote IT in the country. There is example of efforts to use ICTs to support gender equality and alleviate poverty. In India, UNDP (United Nation Development Programmes) is supporting the government in pilot programmes that integrate e-service delivery, local governance, rural livelihoods and women empowerment. These pilots aim to improve the speed, convenience and efficiency of public service delivery, by enabling online access for poor women and men to information, such as land records and various other government services.

CHALLENGES OF ICT USE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

ICTs offer vast, new and unprecedented opportunities for human development and empowerment in areas ranging from education and the environment to health care and business, they are also one of the key contributing factors to social and economic disparities across different social and economic groups. The gender divide is one of the most significant inequalities to be amplified by the digital revolution, and cuts across all social and income groups. Throughout the world, women face serious challenges that are not only economic but social as well as cultural-obstacles that limit or prevent their access to, use of, and benefit from ICTs. For a society as a whole, ICTs offer immense possibilities for reducing poverty, overcoming women's isolation, giving women a voice, improving governance and advancing gender equality. But this potential will only be realised if the factors that contribute to the current gender digital divide are recognised and addressed.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Women have reduced access to ICT for a number of reasons, ranging from socio-cultural attitudes and preconceptions about women's interaction with technology to resource constraints. For the majority of women, specific barriers include illiteracy, unfamiliarity with the dominant languages of the internet, absence of training in computer skills, domestic responsibilities and the fact that the information delivered by ICTs is not that valuable to them.

The social factors that produce these gender differences operate in both institutional and informal settings. In some societies, cultural norms discourage interaction between women and men outside the family, and women may be uncomfortable in situations where men are present either as trainers or as peers. Even in countries where women and men mix freely,



women who are learning to use computers- in particular older women- may be uneasy if a man is in charge of the training. An awareness of these socio-cultural barriers is essential if decision-makers are to shape remedial programmes and design facilities that encourage women's participation.

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Women face challenges in pursuing education at all ages due to lack of time to attend classes, family and domestic responsibilities, and socio-cultural practices that rate girls' education as less important than boys'. Literacy, language, computer skills and information literacy are critical skills for drawing some benefit from ICTs for development initiatives. Addressing illiteracy is an important step to building people's capacity to use ICTs, as well as the provision of training to build peoples' especially women's typing skill and ability to use different software. Since the internet is provided in English and women in particulars in rural areas do not speak or read English. The predominance of women in rural areas in developing country contexts means they are also less likely than men to access computers, which are concentrated in urban settings. Information literacy is essentially the ability to evaluate different sets of information against each other, and apply it to real-life contexts. The isolation and limited exposure of women in developing countries means that women are less likely than men to have these skills. Therefore language and basic computer literacy are prerequisites for women to benefit from the use of ICTs for education. Initiatives that focus on educating women in poor communities and teaching them literacy have demonstrated the value of ICTs for women.

COST, TIME AND MOBILITY

Women have less time available to seek out ICT connections or spend time online than men, as suggested by findings of time use surveys conducted in a number of countries, which showed that women use ICTs for communication (mainly email) and electronic banking, while men spend time browsing the internet and reading news papers. Women's greater family and nurturing responsibilities mean that they usually have less time and less choice, when it comes to spending their money. Even community access, often seen as the key to internet diffusion in the developing world, may be outside the financial reach of many women. Nor can it be assumed that women will have access through associations or NGOs.



Furthermore in most countries, women's mobility much more restricted than that of men. This may be the result of social customs that forbid women to travel unaccompanied, or because of family or caring responsibilities that make difficult for women to move far from home. This lack of mobility is fundamental given the absence facilities in rural areas, where women constitute up to 70 percent of the population.

The cost is also one of the challenges for women, the poor in remote areas as they may not have sufficient income to purchase new technologies and the accompanying cost such as subscription to the internet or cell phone services. Women especially, are likely to have less income than men. However, it is worth noting that the cost of ICTs is dropping dramatically in real terms, while the type of technologies are more powerful than ever before and can have global reach which can change women's lives.

STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ICTS

Realising the challenges allow us to address the barriers better and devise strategies that consider the complex dimension of women's lives. Efforts should be made in these processes to ensure that women's specific needs are addressed particularly in relation to access use and employment. This would require adequate resource allocations to support initiatives focused on increasing the access to and use of ICTs by women. The following are some of the strategies suggested for women empowerment through ICTs.

- Improving the access to women's entrepreneurs relevant ICTs and the climate remaining socio-cultural constraint that may act as barriers to their use of ICTs.
- Creating an environment where women feel welcome and comfortable learning with others getting trained on using ICT and participating in community development activities, including community advocacy efforts.
- Establishing ICT education centre for women where women can receive basic course: Internet use, MS-Excel, MS-PowerPoint, computer basic.
- Content in local language is extremely important if ICTs are to make a difference in women's lives. It is therefore important to develop content that addresses local/regional/national needs, to provide information relevant to local/regional/national issues and disseminate that information in appropriate language.



- Increasing opportunities for women in supervisory and management level leadership positions in ICTs companies.
- Developing ICT based programmes that address women's specific needs and that are run by women e.g. literacy programmes, business planning courses, ICT training, access to health information and services, access to market and trading information services and e-commerce initiatives.
- Enabling women's participation in e-governance and building gender awareness among women and men participants.
- Engendering projects requires participatory processes that involve men and women in the community, inputs from gender experts and organisation that work on gender issues and gender sensitisation of project staff.

CONCLUSION

Women need to have equal access to and benefit completely from the design, development and application of ICTs, the use of the information and knowledge stemming from ICT applications and finally the opportunities offered. However in order to retain women build upon the employment gains associated with globalisation and information technology, women need to move into more technical or higher level, better-paying jobs. For this, they need access to the educational and training opportunities necessary to equip them for the rapidly changing skill requirements. In conclusion, it is clear that for women the world over access to ICTs is inhibited by factors that go far beyond questions of technological infrastructure and socio-economic environment, therefore civil society actors, including NGOs committed to women empowerment, need to develop advocacy strategies to address the role of ICTs for promotion to their equality in decision-making and accountability.

REFERENCES

1. Dutta, N. And Jha, S. (2014). Women Empowerment and Globalisation. Published by Pacific Books International Prahlad Street, Ansari Road Darys Ganj, New Delhi.
2. Gurumurthy, A. (2004). Gender and ICTs: Overview Report. www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/.../cep-icts-or.pdf
3. Hijab, N. And Zambrano, R. (2007). Gender Responsive E-governance: Exploring the transformative Potential. Primers in Gender and Democratic Governance. www.coa.gov.ph



4. Huyer, S. and Sikoska, T. (2003). Overcoming the Gender Digital Divide: Understanding ICTs and their Potential for the Empowerment of Women. www.iiav.nl
5. Jorge, N. S., (2002). The Economics of ICT: Challenges and Practical Strategies of ICT use for Women's Economic Empowerment. www.un.org
6. Macier, S. and Reichert, N. U. (2007). Empowering Women through ICT Based Business Initiatives: An Overview of Best Practices in E-Commerce/E-Retailing Projects. www.itidjournal.org
7. Malhotra, A., Kanesathasan, A and Patel, P. (2012). India: A Case Study. Connectivity how Moblie Phones, Computers and the ainternet can Catalyze Women's Entrepreneurship. www.icrw.org
8. Melhem, S. and Tandon, N. (2009). Information and Communication Technologies for Women's Socio-Economic Empowerment. www.siteresources,worldbank.org
9. Sandys, E. (2005). Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women through ICT: Women 2000 and beyond. www.un.org/.../w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf
10. Primo, N. (2003). Gender Issues in the Information Society. UNESCO Publications for the World Summit on the Information Society. www.portal.unesco.org
11. UNCTAD. (2014). Empowering Women Entrepreneurs through Information and Communications Technologies A Practical Guide. UNCTAD Current Studies on Science, Technology and Innovation. United Nations New York and Geneva. www.unctad.org
12. UNCTAD. (2011). Measuring the Impact of Information and Communication Technology for Development. Current Studies on Science, Technology and Innovation. New York, Geneva. www.unctad.org