



ROLE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

Empowering women is a crucial strategy for improving their socioeconomic status. Women who are empowered have a greater share over resources like material, human, and intellectual including knowledge, information, and ideas. They also have more influence over financial resources, including access to capital and the ability to make decisions for their families, communities, societies, and countries. Women are mistreated or exploited in many different contexts in underdeveloped nations. Their inherent nature is one of submissiveness, submission, and servility as a result of the inequity they experience. Even in many nations where education has advanced significantly, women are still not viewed as belonging to the same gender everywhere. Even in light of women's significant contributions to society, their standing is still regarded as insignificant or inferior. The timing is right for women to support her. The topic of women's empowerment is urgent. Numerous non-governmental organisations strive to improve women's lives and provide them with self-sufficiency training. The government has also declared a number of initiatives that support women, demonstrating how seriously it takes this issue. Information and communication technology is also crucial in this situation. Women are gaining jobs, security, awareness, knowledge, confidence, popularity, and other benefits through ICT. The current study examines the function of ICT, identifies obstacles to women using ICTs, and offers solutions to increase women's access to ICT.

Keyword: ICT, Women empowerment

Introduction:

“To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”

- Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

Hence, it is more important than ever to include women in India's growth. ICT gives women a direct line of communication with the outside world. They now have access to the same information as their male counterparts, and material is dispersed to them without distortion or censorship of any kind. ICT and power and change-making capacity are intimately related. People living in poverty can demand their rights, speak up, make better decisions, and take control of their own life when information flows are increased and communications are made more accessible. Globally, information technology is now a powerful force that is changing social, economic, and political life. Developing nations must embrace information technology, according to development strategists, in order to prevent further economic and social marginalisation and to take advantage of chances for economic growth and diversification. Women in poor nations are at the bottom of the divide, having lived longer outside of the information era than the men with whom they share the same poverty. Concern over the gender gap in the digital divide is growing. Since the growth of societies and economies is directly correlated with the availability and application of these technologies, it is critical

to make sure that women in developing nations recognise the importance of these tools and make use of them. If not, women will continue to be marginalised from the political, social, and economic mainstream of their nations as well as the global community due to a lack of access to information and communication technologies. Women lack the means to fully engage in the global world of the twenty-first century if they do not fully participate in the usage of information technology.

ICT:

A wide range of technological tools and resources are used in information and communication technologies (ICTs) to create, distribute, store, add value, and manage information. The ICT sector includes a wide range of industries and sectors, including telecommunications, radio and television broadcasting, computer hardware, software, and services, as well as electronic media like email and the internet.

New forms have been brought forth by the proliferation of personal computers, mobile phones, and other information communication technology (ICT) devices, their ever-improving performance capabilities, the growth of networks such as satellite, cable, and others, and the expansion of bandwidth (Media Perspektive 1999).

Women and ICT:

India's working women make up a sizable portion of the unorganised and rural sectors. The majority of Indian women still face social disadvantages and are constrained by custom. Women's lack of mobilisation to support women's contributions to society and their unequal access to and engagement in all forms of communication, particularly the media. Over the past few decades, information technology advancements have made it possible for a global communications network to transcend national boundaries and have an impact on public policy, private attitudes, and behaviour, particularly among children and young adults. This is because globalisation is causing the Indian economy to open up suddenly and quickly. There is always room for the media to play a far bigger role in the growth of women. Although there are more women working in the communications industry, few of them hold positions of authority or are members of boards that set media policy. The failure of public and private local, national, and international media organisations to completely eradicate gender-based stereotyping is proof of the absence of gender sensitivity in the media. It is necessary to alter the persistent dissemination of demeaning and unfavourable images of women in print, electronic, visual, and auditory media communications. The majority of nations' print and electronic media do not give a fair portrayal of the many lives and achievements that women have made to society in a world that is changing. These are a few facets of life where ICT directly affects people, particularly women. Women's improved entrepreneurship through ICT and more access to the employment market, The average household income in villages has increased; women are being empowered; information asymmetry is being reduced through ICT. Enhanced Family Communication; Indigenous Knowledge; and Better Governance (Mani& Mahendrababu).

ICT and Indian women:

"In developed countries, the proportion of households with Internet access at home is twice as high as in developing countries," according to ITU Facts and Figures 2017. In LDCs, just 15% of homes have access to the Internet at home. The percentage of women who use the Internet is 12% lower than the percentage of males who use it globally. Many people in these nations access the Internet through shared public connections outside of their homes, their places of employment, or colleges. In most regions, the gender gap has shrunk since 2013, but in Africa, it has gotten wider. The percentage of women who use the Internet in Africa is 25% lower than the percentage of men. Compared to one in five men, just one in seven women in LDCs use the Internet. There are 481 million internet users in India, 186 million of whom are in rural areas, according to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (AMAI) 2017 study, "Internet in India 2017." Youth make about 60% of Indian internet users. The preferred device for internet access is still mobile. The introduction of services like Reliance Jio has completely changed mobile internet, and the expansion of 4G technology will lead to even higher-quality services in the future. Despite this increase, just one woman uses the internet for every ten people. There are 143 million (30%) more women than males among internet users when looking at the male to female ratio. In rural areas, the percentage falls to 12%. In India, the internet market is still primarily for men. Even if "digital India" is spreading throughout rural India, there is still a persistent digital divide. The causes of the digital gender gap include infrastructure and affordability, a lack of places to charge devices, illiteracy and education, as well as social and cultural backgrounds. A recent Pew study found that 51% of persons in India own feature phones and only 22% own smartphones. A startling 26% of adult Indians have no phone at all. The gender disparity in smartphone ownership is further clarified by the findings. In India, the likelihood of men owning a smartphone is at least ten percentage points higher than that of women. In India, 28% of men and 11% of women use social media, resulting in a 17-point disparity.

ICT is identified as a tool for women's development in the UN Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. Since then, a large number of globally distributed research-based reports have been released on this topic. Government initiatives and legislation in India are emphasising the value of ICT for women. It's time to conduct empirical research to determine whether these initiatives actually improve women's standing in digital society (Pawar, 2017).

BARRIERS TO USE AND ACCESS OF ICT FOR WOMEN:

- Inadequate ICT infrastructure, ineffective phone services, unreliable electricity in remote locations, and frequent power outages.
- Insufficient or restricted proficiency with computers in multiple domains, such as setting up and maintaining hardware and software, and using the internet and offline applications like mailing, telnet, and file transfer protocol.
- Little knowledge of the entire array of benefits provided by ICT beyond information access.
- Minimal availability of internet content in languages other than English. Women's time is valuable. Information overload and the time required to find relevant and practical information are two obstacles to ICT use.
- Barriers based on culture and society.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S ACCESS TO ICT:

- For women, it is crucial to have equal access to ICT and the freedom to gather, process, and present information pertinent to their interests and viewpoints. Therefore, in order for them to fully engage in the development and effect of new technology, they must be involved in decision-making surrounding its advancement.
- Everyone has the right to affordable access to ICTs, hence developing ICT policies must follow a rights-based approach. Then and only then can we endeavour to ensure that all people have access to ICTs, which will in turn encourage and enable the use of ICTs for women's empowerment.
- For most women in poor nations, personal ownership of ICT is not realistic in the near future. Therefore, it becomes crucial to determine where and how they can use ICT. Intermediary organisations can assist in bridging the "last mile" of connectivity in this area. They can guarantee that email addresses, message boards, search engines, mailing lists, and other helpful features act as conduits for networking, communication, and cooperation between women's organisations and the outside world. These intermediary organisations should be positioned strategically in local institutions such as libraries, community centres, women's studies departments and institutes, etc. to make it easier for women from different classes and sectors to access them.
- The main prerequisite for gaining access to knowledge from the global pool is technical proficiency and education, both of which have a significant impact on the potential of ICT for women in poor nations. In addition to launching distant learning and vocational programmes, governments and non-governmental organisations must provide technical instruction on the use of ICT as part of both official and informal educational systems. Although information and communication technology cannot solve every issue affecting women's development on its own, it can provide underprivileged groups with new avenues for communication and new information resources.
- Encourage girls to join in ICT programmes by offering rewards like scholarships and awareness-raising events.
- Language access needs to be taken seriously (Mani & Mahendraprabu).

Apps for Women Safety:

Followings are the best applications for women safety:

My Safetipin:

It is a highest-rated app for women safety. This app helps by tracking GPS location, calling emergency contact number. It also shares details of nearby safety location where the app user can go in case of emergency and the pinned locations are marked with safety score (Patil 2021). It makes public place safer and inclusive for women. Vision of this app is to provide credible data and build vibrant ecosystems for safe, inclusive and accessible cities (safetipin.com).

112 India:

It is an emergency contact number under the Nirbhaya funds scheme to ensure safety of women and children.

Himmat:

It is a mobile application of Delhi police for women's safety. This app was launched on 1st jan 2015. This app is available freely for Android mobile phones (Singh, 2023).

Sheroes:

It is one of the largest social networking and personal application for women. Here women can share their common interests, post videos and connect with other women. It also provides free health advice to women (R. Savitha).

Raksha:

This app is designed with a button which will send alerts to five members with app user location in distress situation.

bSafe:

Using this app, users can establish a social safety network of people who will be notified in the event of an emergency. Additionally, it has an alert that transmits the precise location as well as audiovisuals of the surroundings. User can programme a timer so that, in the event that the user is not back in time to turn off the alarm, friends will receive an automatic alarm.

Letstrack:

This app can also function as a car security system. Customers can download this software to their smartphones and use them in their cars. The app has features including zone alerts, connectivity in rural areas, real-time tracking and 24-hour history.

Rescuer:

Sending messages to other users who have the app installed on their phone is unrestricted with this women's safety app. Two people's contact details can be put up so that they can get to the appropriate location to help the individual who needs help. All the user needs to do is click the app's emergency option if they're in danger.

CitizenCop:

This app is perfect for reporting crimes as soon as possible. When a lady finds herself in an emergency, she reports it right away. The well-being of users is the primary consideration in the creation of the app. The software serves as a conduit between the public and the law enforcement agency (Patil, 2021).

Conclusion:

ICT has the ability to reach women who have not previously been reached by any other media, enabling them to take part in economic advancement and make knowledgeable decisions about matters that impact them. It is necessary to alter the persistent dissemination of demeaning and unfavourable images of women in print, electronic, visual, and auditory media communications. The majority of nations' print and electronic media do not give a fair portrayal of the many lives and achievements that women have made to society in a world that is changing.

ICTs must be designed, developed, and applied with equal access and benefit to women. Information and knowledge derived from ICT applications must also be used, and opportunities presented must be fully utilised. However, women must advance into more technical or higher level, better-paying positions if they are to maintain and increase the employment gains linked to globalisation and information technology. They must, therefore, have access to the learning and development opportunities required to prepare them for the quickly evolving skill demands. In conclusion, it is evident that barriers to ICT access for women worldwide extend far beyond issues with socioeconomic conditions and technological infrastructure. As a result, civil society actors, such as NGOs dedicated to women's empowerment, must create advocacy strategies to address the role of ICTs in promoting women's equality in decision-making and accountability.

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