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# ICT- An instrument for Women's Empowerment

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**Abstract**
There has been a lot of interest during the last two decades in employing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for achieving development. While many of these initiatives have benefited rural women by way of access to new information and new employment opportunities, women still face a number of constraints in accessing ICTs. This paper explores the role of ICTs in empowering Indian rural women, through a review of ICT initiatives in India. The paper concludes that, while most of the ICT initiatives are disseminating new information and knowledge useful for rural women, many are not able to make use of it, due to lack of access to complementary sources of support and services. Among the varied tools, the knowledge centre and the community radio were found to have the greatest potential in reaching women with locally relevant content. Therefore, strengthening the ICT initiative of such organizations can go a long way in empowering rural women. Besides generating locally relevant content and enhancing the capacities of rural women in accessing ICTs, efforts are also needed to bridge the different types of digital divide (rural-urban; men-women).

**Keywords:** ICT, women, empowerment.

## Introduction

**I**t is imperative for a sustainable development in developing, over-populated countries like India that women have access to education and appropriate need-based technologies. 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.

Unfortunately the access to these technologies is highly unequal, somewhat built-in in all our development sectors. This is true for different geographical regions and diverse socio-ethnic groups inside India. The inequality contributes to increasing the gap between those who have access to abundant information resources and those who are deprived of this access, thus reinforcing the marginalization that already exists in terms of development and technical resources. If not the worst, but a major suffering group of this bias is the women. They are not only under-represented in terms of access to these technologies, they also do not get a fair deal in many social transactions. Developing and less- developed regions inside the country portray a vivid story of this inequality. Ironically, these women contribute largely to the work force that produces computer components and finer elements of technology in extremely deplorable working conditions. Women are in high demand for these jobs, but are conspicuously absent in computer systems administration, technical development and decision-making. Women are very few as producers of information, thus with less access than men to the information and networking resources. Naturally they have fewer possibilities of orienting technology to address their specific needs. What are the reasons for this gender inequality? Some of the probable answers can be:

- Lack of a clear National policy for promoting ICT for women's development.
- Poor ICT infrastructure, inefficient telephone services, lack of electricity in many remote, far-flung areas, and frequent power cuts.
- Poor literacy among women (in spite of intensive measures to promote education), and inadequate computer skills
- Unaffordable costs of computer hardware and software, maintenance and connectivity.
- Little awareness of the full range of opportunities offered by ICT other than access to information; limited online information in vernacular languages.

- Absence of favourable bandwidth and connectivity for smooth operation.

These are not insurmountable barriers, neither have we lacked resources to overcome these barriers. Shifting the focus partially towards unconventional areas of use, ICT can catalyze remarkable changes in society.

**Role of the Government and the NGO Sector**

A number of women's organizations have realized the importance of creating and participating in regional and worldwide information exchange which will enable them to share ideas, proposals, documents and information. Computer networks are a form of appropriate technology that makes this exchange possible. Combined with other media forms like printed material, radio, television, to name a few, such exchange can more easily be extended to regions and groups that cannot access computer networks. Need of such networks has mainly arisen due to issues of concern to women, which do not preclude basic housekeeping, health & sanitation, children's education, balancing resources and traditional chores. ICT is not at all aimed at breaking the traditional role of women. It rather aims at empowerment that will fortify the male bastions. In doing so, they often face obstacles like resource crunch (financial and technological), reduced access to training and technical assistance or non-gender sensitive methodologies, social and cultural barriers for women and girls to access technology, educational short- comings, misconceptions about technology, language barriers, etc., some of which have already been mentioned above. Since problems are inter-linked and solutions are diverse in nature, the endeavours also have to come from different quarters.

There have been attempts to overcome the obstacles of women's access to ICT in India. The major initiatives undertaken in the formal sector may be summarized as follows:

- Repackaging of Internet-accessed information and combining Internet technology with 'traditional' or more established tools of communication like radio, television and print media.
- Facilitating content development on the web-production and use of ICT resources in different Indian languages.
- Government policies to ensure that women are brought to the mainstream through ICT programmes through accessible technology, relevant and useful to women.
- Institution of scholarships and awards, with incentives, to promote the enrolment of girls and women in ICT programmes.
- Continuing training programmes and awareness workshops on the use and potential of ICT throughout the country.

These are significant openings created for women. Decentralisation and devolution of powers through Panchayats (these are smallest units of local administration) have included computerization, installation of kiosks for information and networks for dissemination. The elected women representatives can use these to interact with their constituencies and their colleagues in other parts of the country. ICT can influence changes and restructure in the prevailing power equations.

The Department of Women and Child Development under the Ministry of Human Resource Development is the key agency for development and welfare of women and children. Most of the provincial governments also carry out women related activities through Social Welfare Departments. Ministry of Human Resource Development and Ministry of Information Technology have formulated a number of schemes, particularly in the area of education and training in ICT. These schemes can succeed with gender-sensitivity and removal of regional biases. Opportunities galore in ICT-enabled services in a country like India where there has never been a paucity of ideas or knowledgeable people. Political networks and advocacy groups have been formed due to proliferation of these technologies. Income generation is another area where ICT has been making headway. ICT can link women in various areas, help coordinate agenda, speed up communication, reaching a vast number of people in less time. ICT offers invaluable tools for dissemination of indigenous knowledge. Women's effective participation in the information society needs to be assumed if countries are to successfully achieve their development goals and practices. While there have been lots of development efforts to increase the access and use of ICT in general, there is still a marked difference in their impact on the lives of men and women. That is precisely the reason why international agencies prefer to do their work in India through certain Non-government Organisations (NGO) and voluntary bodies.

As the largest democracy in the world, India has a huge array of non-government organizations active in education and women's issues. There have been numerous experiments in India devoted to addressing the digital divide, particularly because of the high-profile domestic IT industry against an extremely poor and uneducated population. However, only a few are specifically targeted at women.

Intermediary organisations could also contribute to building capacities of women by providing them training in basic computer skills (like accessing the Internet), and other skills like desktop publishing, website creation, e-commerce, etc. To facilitate access for women from various classes and sectors, the intermediary organisations need to be strategically located in local institutions, such as health centres, women's employment centres and studies departments, libraries, community centres, etc, to which women have open and equal access. A large number of NGOs are showing genuine interest in this sector.

**New Horizons of ICT for Women: *Problems and Prospects***

The ICT policy when looked at from a gender perspective must take into consideration the various dimensions, including education, employment and empowerment.

According to the 2001 census, female literacy is 54.16 % as against male literacy of 75.85 % in India. The enrollment of girls in educational institutions decreases as educational level goes higher. The enrollment of girls in Engineering/ Technology/ Architecture at the Bachelors level (in 1998) is 57,968 as against 285,137 boys. This imbalance is largely due to socio-economic reasons, and a very large concerted drive is required to remove this imbalance.

Since the percentage of women enrolling for higher education is quite low, the benefit of ICT can go to a large section if more and more IT courses at 10+ or 12+ levels are introduced as vocational streams. The girls' polytechnics are promoting some of these with preferences in jobs, and special incentives in the initial years.

Keeping in view the plight of rural women, who are more unaware of new technologies than their urban counterparts, government is providing special packages for them, who are

involved in home based or small-scale activities related to handloom, handicraft, sericulture, etc. From identification of projects to the marketing of products, these packages are helping women entrepreneurs to a great extent. Government of India is in the process of establishing Community Information Centres (CIC) at all block levels, which are designed as the prime movers of ICT in the most economically backward and geographically difficult terrains. CICs are supposed to provide multipurpose information (on health, education, social welfare and small-scale industry, etc). This might prove to be a "shot in the arm" for the rural women that can boost their economic and social status.

Information and communication technologies have created new types of work that favour of women because the technology enables work to be brought to homes and allows for better accommodation of work and family schedules. Women have also been able to capture a large proportion of jobs in ICT-enabled services because of the worldwide shortage of skills necessary for work in this sector.

Many women are software programmers, but very few are in hardware design. New ICT jobs for women especially in India are in the service industries in information processing, banking, insurance, printing and publishing. So far, the most promising potential for women is in the creation of new jobs at "Call Centres" and in work involving data processing. The International Labour Organisation reports that 'telecasters and fax booths have created a quarter of a million jobs in India in the last four years alone, a huge proportion of which have gone to women'.

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.

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