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EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Subramanian, C

Political Science & Public Administration Wing- DDE, Annamalai University

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that in today's society women have access to education and can promote themselves much more easily than in the seventies. Women's changing role is happening because women now-a-days are educated. It is recognised as an essential need for achieving equality in most walks of life. There are still problems for girl pupils or women students but no one would deny their rights to study or to question it. The Government's national policy on education laid down that the educational system must produce men and women of character and ability committed to national services and development. Only then will education be able to play its vital role in promoting national progress, creating a sense of common citizenship, culture and national integration. In India, the increase in the educational facilities and opportunities for women and the removal of traditional bars and obstacles on the entry of women to particular branches and levels of education got the wide support of champions of women's emancipation from the 19th century onwards. Yet the role of women in the overall development of the nation has not been fully understood, nor has it been given its full weight in the struggle to eliminate poverty, hunger, inequality, injustice and humiliation at the both national and international levels.

In order to realize women's potential for fuller participation in the productive and decision-making processes, there is a need for sharing of parental responsibilities but also for institutional provisions, which benefit children and families. Measures must be taken to expand the educational and employment opportunities and to improve their economic status. The provision of the necessary infrastructure should be treated as an important and integral part of national and international development strategies having in mind the vital linkages between science, technology and women's development. When such strategies are evolved, there will be an increase in the number of women students in the formal IT based education stream which would enable and facilitate them to pursue courses and careers. This can increase the cadres of women working for women's upliftment and development in the remote corners of the country, in addition to adding effectively to the wealth of skilled and trained science and technology manpower in the country for the numerous development programmes. The paper explores the avenues created by ICT for women empowerment and suggests strategies to ensure that greater benefits accrue to women.

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INTRODUCTION

"The proximate aim of education is the acquisition of the ability to face the realities of life and to adjust oneself with them effectively and efficiently"¹(Bhaskara Rao, D and Pushpa Latha).

Empowerment is defined as a process by which one gains greater control over resources like income, knowledge, information, technology and skill training, and hence participate in leadership and decision-making processes. When women's empowerment became one of the goals of women's education, a creative tension emerged between

* Corresponding author: +91 9443339194
E-mail address: drsubramaniann@yahoo .com

women's experiential knowledge and formal systems of knowledge. Access to information and literacy became part of women's attempt to redistribute power, and education got infused with or broadened its objectives to one that would,

- ♦ Enhance the self-image of women
- ♦ Encourage women's active participation in the process of change.
- ♦ Build collective and alternative visions of their environment.
- ♦ Question injustice and inequality.
- ♦ Reduce household drudgery.
- ♦ Help women to assert themselves and
- ♦ Modernize policies

But one should realize the condition of women also. The women of the world have been exposed to greater insecurity owing to war, violence, terror and atrocities whenever peace has eluded giving place to conflict. They have been affected more by poverty, lack of opportunities and facilities owing to the innate discrimination prevalent in all societies. Women do not have an equal status with men. In the last twenty five years there has been a global effort with a strong support from the United Nations to understand the discrimination and restore a status to women. The slogan has been quality development and peace.

Empowerment in the real sense would be realised when women are actively involved in larger struggle for social change. The empowerment of women requires transfer of skills of management and control of economic activities to women's groups over a period of time to enable women to feel confident and empowered. With women slowly gaining control and being involved in the decision making processes real empowerment will emerge and a change in the women's status will take place. Here comes the role of ICT education for women. The concern for ICT education for women would lead to the question of improving the IT education to a large number of women at various levels and at all age groups and to the kind of educational programmes that would attract more women into computing² (Seth Mira).

The areas of technology and engineering have traditionally been regarded as male spheres. Such a perception has not changed significantly even in today's high-tech world. Just like the area of science, the engineering area also remains a male-dominated sphere and proportion of female students in secondary technical high schools remaining stalled at a mere 1% to 10% for the past 30 years. As such, technical vocation education has so far been difficult for women to access.

But women have to be encouraged in ICT education and they should become aware of the expanded diverse opportunities available in this field. Enhancement of female enrollment into spheres nontraditional for females was aimed at resolving occupational gender disparity and to promote women's social and economic participation by expanding their participation in ICT.

With the INTRODUCTION of information technology across the industries, great changes such as office automation, production control, and the demand for new functions and improved functions of the products affected the industry in all ways. As computer skills related to the design, manufacturing and treatment of products expanded the demand for technology that emphasizes precision and flexibility rather than physical strength increased along with the need to develop relevant human resources. Such changes in the environment on the demand side made it inevitable for the supplier side to provide technical human resources in new technologies and information technologies.

India's human and natural resource in today's knowledge economy is its abundant technically-skilled man power. India has the second largest pool of English speaking scientific professionals in the world today, after the U.S. The advancement of IT has a profound impact on the country's economy. The convergence of computer and communications creates tremendous opportunities as well as challenges. The IT revolution has opened up new possibilities of economic and social transformations from which both developed and developing countries can potentially benefit³(Reddy Ranga. A and Hanumantha Rao).

The Indian software professionals have already created their brand image in global market. India's software industry has achieved a remarkable distinction for providing excellent quality. A large number of Indian software companies have acquired international quality certification. Out of the top 400 companies, more than 250 have already acquired ISO 9000 certification.

Policy planners and educationists have realised that without promoting women's education, growth and development of the society cannot take place.

Steps taken for the Empowerment of Women

The first National Conference on Women's Studies (NCWS) was held in Bombay in 1981, where women's issues in different subjects at the university, college and even at the school level were discussed⁴ (Sahay Sushama).

Several welfare schemes were enacted to ensure the overall development of women. In the field of education, the government sought to translate the constitutional commitment of compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14 years. One of the two significant committees that were appointed by the government to look into the issues of girls and women's education was the Durgabai Deshmukh Committee (1958). This committee recommended special measures to bridge the gaps between the education of girls and boys at the primary and secondary level, urging the UGC to set apart special funds for the higher education of women. The committee also suggested the creation of a National Council for women's education. The second significant committee was the Hansa Mehta Committee (1962-64) which recommended common curricula for boys and girls

at the elementary stage, with home science as a common core subject.

The sixth five year plan (1980-85) conceived of a multi-programmed strategy as essential for women's development relating to,

- ◆ The employment and economic independence.
- ◆ Equal opportunities of education.
- ◆ Access to health care and family planning.
- ◆ Support service to meet practical gender needs and
- ◆ The creation of an enabling policy of institutional and legal environments.

In the context of women's studies in India, the most important landmark was the enactment of the National Policy of Education, 1986. The policy clearly stresses on education as an agent of basic change in the status of women. The National Education system will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision-makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational instruction. The women's studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged taking up active programmes to further women's development.

The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to and retention in elementary education will receive overriding priority, through the provision of special support services, setting of time targets and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in the vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies of which ICT has come to occupy a very great part.

Community Information Centres

The Ministry of Information Technology has taken up a project to set-up of Community Information Centres (CICs) in 486 blocks in the North-East and Sikkim for the socio-economic development of the region at an estimated cost of Rs.220 crores to provide connectivity at the block level and to be completed within 2 years. VSATS are being used to provide Internet Connectivity under the scheme. A pilot project in 30 blocks has been completed⁵ (Vikasini).

Through this scheme, the Government has a goal to reach out to 95 percent of the people, who are outside the digital world, particularly in the application of IT in the health care, education, e-governance, data transmission, documentation, connectivity for management of national calamities, disaster management, etc. These CICs can help in combating escalating crisis in health, energy, water, education and literacy as well as poverty alleviation.

Major initiatives in IT Sector

Information Technology Act, 2000

In order to facilitate growth of e-commerce, electronic communication through Internet and accelerate induction of IT in critical sectors of the economy, an Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 has been approved by the government. It provides legal framework to facilitate electronics commerce and electronics transaction aims at recognizing electronic contracts, prevention of computer crimes, electronic filing / documentation, digital signature, etc.

The Semiconductor Integrated circuits Lay-out Design Act, 2000

This Act was enacted to provide protection of Semiconductor Integrated circuits Layout Design. The provision of the necessary infrastructure should be treated as an important and integral part of national and international development strategies having in mind the vital linkages between science, technology and women's development. When such strategies are evolved, there will be an increase in the number of women students in the formal IT based education stream, which would enable and facilitate them to pursue courses and careers. This can increase the cadres of women working for women's upliftment and development in the remote corners of the country, in addition to adding effectively to the wealth of skilled and trained science and technology manpower in the country for the numerous development programmes.

The lamp of knowledge must be lit inside every child of India and this should be done fast. As a very popular mantra says,

“From illusion lead us to enlightenment From
Darkness unto
Light From death to immortality”

The light, which illuminates the truth, which wipes out darkness, brings enlightenment and immortality, comes through knowledge. We owe it to ourselves to give this knowledge to our girls.

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