

# **Use of ICT for Women Empowerment in India**

By Praveen Dalal

The concept of gender equality is a common concern all over the World. The same has now acquired new dimensions with the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The ICT has a potential to bring development for a nation. It can reduce trade distortions, eliminate poverty, empower weaker segments including women, etc. The same is, however, possible only if a nation follows sound ICT strategies and policies. We have to set our priorities to those areas where we are lagging far behind. One such area is the unequal access of ICT to women.

## **I. Introduction**

Information and Communication Technologies comprise a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications and services used to produce, process, distribute and transform information. Traditional technologies continue to be important for large numbers of people around the world, particularly in rural areas. However, new technologies have a vast potential for empowerment which needs to be fully exploited. Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that these technologies can be powerful instruments for advancing economic and social development through the creation of new types of economic activity, employment opportunities, improvements in health-care delivery and other services, and the enhancement of networking, participation and advocacy within society. ICT also have the potential to improve interaction between Governments and citizens, fostering transparency and accountability in governance.

While the potential of ICT for stimulating economic growth, socioeconomic development and effective governance is well recognized, the benefits of ICT have been unevenly distributed within and between countries. The term “digital divide” refers to the differences in resources and capabilities to access and effectively utilize ICT for development that exist within and between countries, regions, sectors and socio-economic groups. The digital divide is often characterized by low levels of access to technologies. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy and language barriers are among the factors impeding access to ICT infrastructure, especially in developing countries.[1] Another hindrance pertains to ICT is lack of its access to women.

## **II. Gender equality and ICT**

While there is recognition of the potential of ICT as a tool for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, a “gender divide” has also been identified, reflected in the lower numbers of women accessing and using ICT compared with men. Unless this gender divide is specifically addressed, there is a risk that ICT may exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men and create new forms of inequality. If, however, the gender dimensions of ICT—in terms of access and use, capacity-building

opportunities, employment and potential for empowerment—are explicitly identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality.[2] In the past few years, the global community has seen the “gender issue” come onto the agenda. Despite economic and socio-cultural barriers to women's use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), when women are able to use them productively, they can substantially improve their lives and increase their income. They have proved useful in: health care delivery; distance education; enhancing rural productivity through access to market information and access to finance; promoting empowerment and participation in national and international policy processes; improving service delivery by governments; improving environmental monitoring and response systems; and facilitating environmental activism. In general, women make up a small percentage of internet and computer users. This is changing in some countries – generally those which have greater levels of development and gender equality. ICTs are potentially an important knowledge resource for women, but a focus on access is insufficient. We need also to consider what kind of information is being accessed? Who produced it? Who can use it? What is it used for? In sum, we need to view women not as passive recipients of information, but active knowledge and technology developers.

To orient ICT projects so that they address these areas, ICT project planning and implementation for social development and gender equality must take place in a context which consists of five main components:

- (a) Creating an enabling environment which supports and encourages strategies to promote women’s equal access to and opportunity to benefit from ICT projects, as well as creating a regulation and policy environment which supports women’s use of ICTs;
- (b) Developing content which speaks to women’s concerns and reflects their local knowledge, and which is of value for their daily lives, business enterprises, and family responsibilities;
- (c) Supporting increased representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and using ICTs to promote their increased participation in education at all levels;
- (d) Promoting increased employment in the IT sector for women and the use of ICTs for women’s SMEs.
- (e) Implementing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women; and promoting women’s lobbying and advocacy activities.[3]

### **III. International Treaties and Conventions**

The 20th century has witnessed the upsurge of women empowerment movement universally. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) reaffirming faith in the fundamental Human Rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women, contemplated the entitlement of all cherished freedoms to all

human beings without any distinction of any kind, including discrimination based on sex. The World Conference on Human Rights at Vienna in 1993 had declared the human rights of women and the girl child to be "inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights" and eradication of any form of discrimination on the basis of sex, is the priority objective of the international community. The Convocation on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 is the United Nations' landmark treaty marking the struggle for women's rights. Described as the Bill of Rights for women, it spells out what constitutes discrimination against women and propagates strategies based on "non-discriminatory" model, so that women's rights are seen to be violated, if women are denied the same rights as men.[4]

#### **IV. Indian Perspective**

For centuries, women in this country have been socially and economically handicapped. They have been deprived of equal participation in the socio-economic activities of the nation. The Constitution of any country is supreme law of the land and is followed absolutely, subject to the limits provided in the solemn document itself. So much is the importance of the Constitution that if a statutory law is in conflict with it, the same would be "unconstitutional" and void in nature. The Constitution is organic and living in nature. It is also well settled that the interpretation of the Constitution of India or statutes would change from time to time. Being a living organ, it is ongoing and with passage of time, law must change. New rights may have to be found out within the constitutional scheme. It is established that Fundamental Rights themselves have no fixed content; most of them are empty vessels into which each generation must pour its contents in the light of its experience. The attempt of the court should be to expand the reach and ambit of the Fundamental Rights by process of judicial interpretation. There cannot be any distinction between the Fundamental Rights mentioned in Chapter III of the Constitution and the declaration of such rights on the basis of the judgments rendered by the Supreme Court.[5] Thus, horizons of Constitutional law are expanding. Further, it is presumed that the Parliament intends the court to apply to an ongoing Act a construction that continuously updates its wordings to allow for changes since the Act was initially framed. While it remains law, it has to be treated as always speaking. This means that in its application on any day, the language of the Act though necessarily embedded in its own time, is nevertheless to be construed in accordance with the need to treat it as a current law.[6] Thus, we cannot allow the dead hand of the past to stifle the growth of the living present. Law cannot stand still; it must change with the changing social concepts and values. If the bark that protects the tree fails to grow and expand along with the tree, it will either choke the tree or if it is a living tree it will shed that bark and grow a living bark for itself. Similarly, if the law fails to respond to the needs of changing society, then either it will stifle the growth of the society and choke its progress or if the society is vigorous enough, it will cast away the law, which stands in the way of its growth. Law must therefore constantly be on the move adapting itself to the fast-changing society and not lag behind.[7] Thus, for conferring the strongest protection and to emancipate women, the provisions of the Constitution should be interpreted liberally and in a purposive manner.

The Constitution of India recognises women as a class by itself and permits enactment of

laws and reservations favouring them. Several articles in our Constitution make express provision for affirmative action in favour of women. It prohibits all types of discrimination against women and lays a carpet for securing equal opportunity to women in all walks of life, including education, employment and participation. Article 51 of the Constitution obligates the State to honour international law and treaty obligations. Our natural obligation to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women has been elevated to the status of fundamental duty by Article 51-A.[8] The Constitution of India recognises equality of the sexes and in fact provides for certain provisions under the Chapter on Fundamental Rights more favourable to women but in actual practice they are observed more in breach than in compliance. In our society the freedom of women to seek employment outside the family is a major issue. This freedom is denied in many cultures and this attitude in itself is a serious violation of women's liberty and gender equality. The absence of this freedom militates against the economic empowerment of women, with many other deleterious consequences.[9]

Thus, these Constitutional ideal have by and large remained unaccomplished and we have to cover a long distance before the benefits of ICT can be reaped by women effectively. One of the ignored ICT issues in India is the “gender sensitisation” that must be adopted while formulating and implementing the ICT policies in India. It is commonly understood that men and women understand and use Computers and Internet differently. Thus, the policy decisions must make sufficient provision for adopting itself with this aspect. Within India also we must understand that the training, use and adoption of ICT must be “gender neutral”. For a gender neutral technology we have to first place the women on an equal platform. They cannot be put on an equal platform till they have equal capacity and opportunity to use ICT. They cannot also effectively use ICT till their “feedbacks and concerns” are incorporated in the National Policies including the E-governance plans.

The position is worst when it comes to women that also rural women. In our society, whether they belong to the majority or the minority group, what is apparent is that there exists a great disparity in the matter of economic resourcefulness between a man and a woman. Our society is male dominated both economically and socially and women are assigned, invariably, a dependant role, irrespective of the class of society to which she belongs. It must be appreciated that a nation that does not respect its women cannot be described as a civilised nation at all. Such a nation cannot grow and develop and will ultimately perish due to its own rudimentary and tyrannical dogma. Thus, the national consensus should concentrate on betterment of women by suitably empowering them. The plight of the women, however, cannot be improved till they are duly represented in the "power structure" of the nation. In a democratic country the voice of women can be heard only to the extent they are sharing the power structure in the supreme governance of the country.[10] Thus, ICT can play a major role in women empowerment if they are provided employment opportunities at the village level after providing them suitable training. We have to open more village kiosks so that greater women participation can be there. This cannot happen till we first make the e-governance and ICT strategies and policies transparent and accountable. Mere computerisation is not e-governance.

## **V. The roads ahead**

The advent of ICT has changed the global scenario and many unexplored areas are now open for encashment. It is for us to utilise the benefits to the maximum possible extent. The best part about ICT is that it is capable of various adjustments as per the requirements of the segment using the same. The same can also be adjusted as per the needs and requirement of women in India. So much so that it can be operated from every home irrespective of its location. This means that even the traditional and orthodox families can allow the women to participate and use ICT from their respective homes. In India there is an abundance of “women entrepreneurs” who are capable of making their mark at the global level. However, the awareness and facilities are missing drastically. The national policies and strategies have not yet considered this unexplored potential pool of intellectual inputs. With simple training and awareness programmes we can make a big difference. Further, we can also encourage the establishment of “Small and Medium Enterprises” (SMEs), Small Scale Industries (SSIs), etc. The need of the hour is to show a positive will to achieve that much needed purpose.

© Praveen Dalal. All rights reserved with the author.

\* Arbitrator, Consultant and Advocate, Supreme Court.

Managing Partner- Perry4law, Law Firm, New Delhi, India.

Contact at: pd37@rediffmail.com/ perry4law@yahoo.com

[1] <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/ks/exhibits/78/w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf>

[2] <http://ics.leeds.ac.uk/papers/ks/exhibits/78/w2000-09.05-ict-e.pdf>

[3] [http://www.science.oas.org/gender/IDRC%2004%2011%2030%20%20Huyer%20Position%20Paper%20\(2\).doc](http://www.science.oas.org/gender/IDRC%2004%2011%2030%20%20Huyer%20Position%20Paper%20(2).doc)

[4] [http://www.ebc-india.com/lawyer/articles/2005\\_2\\_49.htm](http://www.ebc-india.com/lawyer/articles/2005_2_49.htm)

[5] P.U.C.L v U.O.I, (2003) (3) SCALE 263.

[6] State of Maharashtra v Praful. B.Desai, (2003) 4 SCC 601.

[7] Justice Bhagwati in National Textiles workers union v P.R. Ramakrishanan, (1983) 1 SCC 228.

[8] [http://www.ebc-india.com/lawyer/articles/2005\\_2\\_49.htm](http://www.ebc-india.com/lawyer/articles/2005_2_49.htm)

[9] <http://www.ebc-india.com/lawyer/articles/2002v5a1.htm>

[10] <http://www.countercurrents.org/gender-dalal080305.htm>

Source: <http://cyberlawindia.blogspot.com/> 08/30/2006