

The Digital Empowerment of Women in India: Going Beyond Tokenism

Abstract

A fast pacing nation like India that is progressing leaps and bounds cannot dare to be ignorant towards the imperative role that women can play if it wishes to shirk of its garb of 'third world country.' Women empowerment begins at home front which in turn pushes the multifaceted development of society. Women's development is inextricably linked with technology. Hence, for carrying this baton of development and empowerment further and further, women empowerment should be equated with national empowerment.

The purpose of this paper is to find out whether digital technologies can reduce the existing gender inequality in Indian society. The current debate around digitalization is limited to the ones who have access and the ones who haven't. This paper explores the answer to the above question from a gendered perspective. In order to close the digital divide, we must therefore recognise not only the economic factors but also address the social and cultural barriers that discourage women from meaningfully using the internet.

The presenters emphasise the fact that the benefits accrued from the synergy of knowledge and IT need not be restricted to the upper strata of the society but have to freely flow to all segments of the female population. Otherwise, the digital age will only marginalise the marginalised, and exacerbate existing hierarchies between genders.

Keywords: Digitalisation , Women Empowerment , Digital India , Tech sexism , Rural Digitalisation , Government Initiatives , Barriers in Digital Education , IT and Economic Empowerment.

Introduction

"Woman must not accept , she must challenge . She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her , she must reverence that woman in her that struggles for expression." - Margaret Sanger

A fast pacing nation like India that is progressing leaps and bounds cannot dare to be ignorant towards the imperative role that women can play if it wishes to shirk of its garb of 'third world country .' Women empowerment begins at home front which in turn pushes the multifaceted development of society . It is a well known fact that any attempt to improve the quality of lives in developing nations would be considered unaccomplished without granting supreme focus to women empowerment . Women's development is inextricably linked with technology . With the power of digital technology and ever growing opportunities , there is a revolution in the way women are doing business . A lot of women are passionately engaging in start -ups and running successful business enterprises . With effective digitalization , hopefully a lot more women will join this bandwagon. Initiatives like Digital India campaign provides ample opportunities for women empowerment . Hence , for carrying this baton of development and empowerment further and further , women should be crowned as key torch bearers .

The purpose of this paper is to find out whether digital technologies can reduce the existing gender inequality in Indian society. The current debate around digitalization is limited to the ones who have access and the ones who haven't. This paper explores the answer to the above question from a gendered perspective. In order to close the digital divide, we must therefore recognise not only the economic factors but also address the social and cultural barriers that discourage women from meaningfully using the internet.

Nidhi Yadav

Associate Professor
Deptt.of Political Science,
SPC Government College,
Ajmer

Paridhi Yadav

Research Scholar
Deptt.of Political Science,
SPC Government College,
Ajmer

Aim of the Study

To analyse the status of Indian women in digital world . To identify the roadblocks on way to digital empowerment and suggest measures to promote women tech empowerment.

Status of Women In Digital India

While estimates vary, a woman anywhere in the world today is less likely to be online, is more likely to have low or no digital skills and is at greater risk of being socially and economically excluded by the digital disruption currently taking place. Women make up a majority of the four billion people excluded from the digital economy. Primarily due to social, cultural, and economic barriers, women in the world's least developed countries are 31 percent less likely than their male counterparts to have internet access. Studies indicate that the digital gender gap in developing countries will only continue to grow, and by 2020, over 75 percent of women will remain unconnected.

Only 29% of India's internet users are women. Unless this digital gender divide is bridged, India's aggressive push towards digitisation will further entrench the political, economic and social marginalisation of women. The bulk of policy and commercial interventions focus on improving access to internet services by upgrading spectrum and broadband infrastructure. Isolated technical solutions however, will be inadequate to address the social and cultural roots of India's digital gender divide.

Take mobile phone connections for example. While 43% of Indian men own a cellphone, women lag behind with only 28% mobile ownership. A majority of the women who owned a cellphone did not know how to operate the phone. Unable to read or write, they could not dial a number or read messages; most do not know their mobile numbers and have to ask their husbands. Their cellphone usage is mostly limited to pressing the green button when the phone rang. The digital divide is thus not simply a question of access to digital technologies but about the capacity to make meaningful use of the access to technology. This capacity is directly shaped by gender biased belief and value systems that impose restrictions on the education and free mobility of women.

Opportunities for Women in a Digitized World

In urban India, gender-based digital exclusion is less pronounced as connectivity and literacy rates are relatively higher and social norms are less rigid. New opportunities are being created on the back of the boom in the IT sector and the expansion of the digital economy. Over the last 20 years, women's enrollment in technical institutions has increased from 5% to 45% and outsourcing of business activities has created new information and communication technology jobs in service industries, some of which have been occupied by women.

However, as studies show, women continue to be concentrated in "routine" back office services that require basic skills; 'specialised' jobs and managerial positions are dominated by men. For a small section of Indian women, new employment opportunities are also being created through the platform and shared economy, permitting them to

circumvent barriers of physical mobility and balancing work-home commitments. However, this 'gig-economy' can come create new forms of contractual employment, without access to the social benefits and work place protection that comes with formal employment.

In spite of Gender discrimination, IT Sector is considered to be non-discriminating. It provides equal opportunity to men & women entrepreneurs. No doubt, women have limited access to technologies in India. However there are now enough experiences to show that when women are trained, they show remarkable understanding and control in using technologies effectively. The IT sector in India has created employment opportunities in areas such as telecommunications, banking, shopping, education, health and business. In addition, the internet has also generated new jobs in areas like the design, maintenance and management and management of sites on the World Wide Web. There are real possibilities that women may be able to access opportunities they never had before.

Impact of It on Rural Women Empowerment

In India, women comprise a large portion of the rural population and play a substantial role in the rural sector. These women engage in economics activities such as handicrafts and sewing or weaving of baskets and fabrics, working in cities as vendors. IT has helped in rural women's empowerment by making them aware about the world and more particularly, What is happening in India? Internet has helped them in assimilating information about variety, range and quality of products publicity and marketing of products and services. Apart from being used as a tool of information, application of IT has created avenues for women empowerment. Note worthy examples thus follow -

SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association), uses ICT for women empowerment. The main goal of SEWA is to promote local income generating opportunities among women. The Self-Employed Women's Association SEWA, with 200,000 membership is spread over 800 villages in Gujarat. It uses an interactive satellite communication and Internet-based training programme to develop a cadre of barefoot managers among the poor women workers, focusing on women in panchayats, forests, water conservation and so on.

GYANDOOT is a project started in Madhya Pradesh to fund rural networked cyberkiosks through panchayats. Through this project, information is available about rural life and agricultural projects. The internet gives information which was earlier available through middlemen. Information is available about education and employment opportunities

Road Blocks in the Way of Digital Empowerment

Fluctuating low personal income: A majority of Indian rural households do not have a steady source of income. Often times their daily earnings are seasonal or are affected by factors like weather conditions, festival season, the demand for specific skills on a particular day , all this hampers an average woman to focus any attention to digital pursuits.

Multiple Roles of Women

The multiple roles and responsibilities of women in the household is one of the major constraints faced by women. Due to the rigid patriarchal system, often the magnitude of labour is never reduced. Hence, it becomes rather difficult for rural women to reach out to a community learning center or village knowledge center to learn new skills.

Functional Issues

As a large number of women in the rural areas are illiterate or have just primary education, they wish to have the use of technological tools in their vernacular language which are seldom available. Most of the training modules are not in local languages.

Social Problems

The various social problems faced by women in Indian society have to be addressed. Unless the violence against women, dowry, eve teasing and feminization of poverty is reduced, it may offer a conducive atmosphere for women to have further new learning.

Abating Tech - Sexism: The Way Forward Develop Gender Responsive Strategies and Policies

Integrate a gender perspective in ICT global, regional and national related strategies, policies, plans, and budgets. This includes capacity building in using gender analysis, as well as the active involvement of women throughout the design, implementation and monitoring of strategies and policies. Existing policies should also be reviewed for gender responsiveness.

Ensure Access to ICTs by Women and Mitigating Threats

Ensure women's and girls' affordable access to ICTs in line with global targets established and paying special attention to women in rural areas. This includes providing gender responsive models of public access and infrastructure, design and development of affordable technologies and services.

Promoting Women in the Technology Sector

This includes supporting early intervention in formal education and informal settings, providing incentives and opportunities for women's higher education, vocational and lifeline learning in ICTs,

developing related curricula that is gender sensitive and other steps for promoting women's recruitment, retention and promotion to decision-making positions in the technology sector.

Conclusion

The benefits accrued from the synergy of knowledge and IT need not be restricted to the upper strata of the society but have to freely flow to all segments of the female population. Otherwise, the digital age will only marginalise the marginalised, and exacerbate existing hierarchies between genders. It can be concluded that the women is empowered through the help of Information technology. It has changed their position from past. The development of IT has enabled the women section to participate in each and every walk of life. Digital fluency has the potential to sweep across political, geographical, economic and social barriers. It is the leverage women need to build for themselves a new identity and a more honorable place in the society.

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