Role of ICT in Gender Equality in India

Final T4ID Project
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Introduction

The concept of Gender Equality is a common concern over the world. Moreover, with the introduction of ICTs it has acquired new dimensions to it. ICT has the potential to bring about change and development to a nation and has already started taking these steps in different areas like education, etc. More specifically to women, it can bring about an overall change and allow the movement of empowering women through its usage. In this paper we will focus on the current role of ICTs in India, and how specifically it has affected the role that women take in different economic sectors like health, education and entrepreneurship.

Role of ICTs in Economic Development

Information and communications technologies in recent years have been recognized as an effective tool for promoting economic growth and sustainable development. With low usage costs and the ability to overcome distance, ICTs have revolutionized the transfer of knowledge and information around the world (1).

Through research, using ICT has been shown to improve economic growth. For one, ICT increases overall productivity due to its obvious benefits of increased flow of information and knowledge (1). Secondly it helps with overcoming geographic boundaries by increasing the network of sharing information, reducing uncertainty, reducing transaction costs and increasing competitiveness in a more global marketplace (1). And lastly there is overall greater transparency, accountability and accessibility in the delivery of public services (1). Overall, ICT has already addressed certain economic problems in the world and moreover can be implemented to other specific goals like Gender Equality, which we will focus on in the paper.

Improving Gender Equality with ICTs

The characteristics of ICTs and its overall benefits for economic development makes it a key component through which gender equality can be improved. Looking more specifically, ICTs can for one influence the public opinions in a positive way about gender equality. Especially in a country like India, this can be a good strategy by inducing policymakers to include gender as an important component to their social and economic policies. In other sectors of the industry like health and education, ICT4D can be more focused on improving the lives of women in more rural areas. This will be better understood when explaining the project examples later on in this paper.

Specifically looking at India, ICT can be a powerful tool for gender empowerment. There has been a substantial growth in the ICT sector since the late 1980s and the use of ICT has dramatically expanded since the 1900s (2). Statistically looking into the World Bank, the number of Internet users is accounted to grow at a rate of 50% per annum with teledensity reaching up to 3.8% of the population by 2008. The IT and ITES sector is projected to grow 18% in the next five years to become an industry of Rs 4.58 Lakh Crores by 2011, according to an IDC release (2). Overall there is significant growth and strength in the IT sector of India. But the problem is spreading this growth of ICTs across women also. The main problem is the *digital divide* that exists in India. According to the 2004 report by the Cisco Learning Institute for women, only 23% of Indian women are Internet users (2). This gender digital divide in India is characterized by low-level access of technologies. Some of the factors restricting access to ICT infrastructure are poverty, lack of computer literacy and language barriers in these areas.

Given these problems, efforts have been taken by the society to bridge this digital divide and experience the overall benefits of ICTs. More specifically ICT4D has been taking place in

India to encourage girls and women to use ICT early on in their education and to pursue technical careers. Also different sectors have been targeted through ICTs such as health and entrepreneurship to bring awareness to areas the women can experiment and develop in. We will focus more on the different types of ICT projects done in specific economic sectors for women and its benefits and evaluating its sustainability.

Projects in Specific Development Sectors

1. SEWA

Organization

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an organization dedicated to creating employment opportunities for poor self-employed women workers. They believe that poor women's growth, development and employment happens when they have work and income security and food security. It also occurs when they are healthy and able to access childcare (3). Through this they have two main goals of Full Employment and Self Reliance for women to acquire.

Project Description

Video SEWA was established in 1984 with one set of ¾ inch U-Matic production equipment and three weeks of training from Communication for Change. Of the 20 SEWA members and workers who participated in the training, one third were non-literate and another third had less then high school-level education (4).

The project entailed creating videos to depict diverse opportunities for earning income, present innovative production techniques, and provide health information for members and their families (4). An example is the health video used by Women to produce footage on how to address diarrhea through oral rehydration therapy, and they distribute this through their networks. The videos were shown in computer screens set up in centers in the rural areas where the women will gather and watch these videos

These tapes have reached villagers and slum dwellers in Gujarat as well as policy makers in Delhi and Washington. Most of the members are from the informal sector like head loaders, vegetable vendors, home-based workers, etc (4). They have adhered to their goals of providing informative programs and increasing the socio-economic lives of the women.

Benefits of ICT in the health sector

ICTs have a great potential in the health sector. Using information tools like CD ROMs, databases and mobile ICT devices can carry out networked information, exchange systems and offline information to enhance public health delivery. They allow health education and information dissemination, bring communities and health facilities closer to each other through regular information exchange, and offer simple solutions for collecting and analyzing information about disease and health-seeking behavior to help health interventions become more locally relevant (5).

2. IKuppam

Organization

IKuppam is a part of HP's initiative to expose ICT to citizens of developing countries, especially in the rural areas. The main objective is to, through ICT, create self-sustainable

economic communities. IKuppam is an i-community that offers a host of services to the citizens of Kuppam, a small rural area near Bangalore. Many facilities are available through a main technology center; citizens can browse the internet for job opportunities, gain access to markets they wish to target with their products, learn computer programs helpful for their business, enroll in language training programs, etc.

Project Description

One of the projects Kuppam HP i-Community is implementing is focused on sustainable entrepreneurship ventures for women. In the program called HP Village Photographers, women are given solar powered portable camera equipment and are asked to photograph life in Kuppam, as they see it. During the first nine months of this project the women had captured 5000 photographs and made revenues amounting to Rs. 15,000 per month on a consistent basis.(6) The strength of this project is the easy-to-use technology that only requires one day of training and the inexpensive equipment necessary to print the photographs; there is also no tradeoff between the quality of the pictures and the cost. Women with a strong entrepreneurial spirit have had great success in this program. (6)

ICT and Public-Private Partnership

iKuppam's success can be credited to HP's business model approach to development work. As they would while exploring a new target market, HP gained an understanding of the needs of the Kuppam community and then defined their goals for this market; the overarching goal was a sustainable economic community. So, projects were designed envisioning a future when HP would no longer be involved in Kuppam and training, equipment and strategies were deployed accordingly. Along with HP's business approach, a substantial asset to its project is its partnership with the government of Andhra Pradesh and several organizations in the surrounding

community that could add utility to HP's overall deliverable- local hospitals, colleges, economic development agencies and NGOs were all sought out to contribute to the iKuppam community.(6) HP's i-community is successful because of its market approach to international development and because of its inclusion of the public sector in its project. HP's initiative can be seen as a model for other private institutions that wish to invest in an underdeveloped community that can be their target consumer in the near future.

3. Datamation Foundation

Organization

Datamation is a non-profit organization that is focused on meeting the Millennium Development Goals by employing ICT in the rural parts of India. Datamation targets women, economically distressed communities and the youth of India. Its objective is to deploy Community Multi-Media Centers and Information Kiosks to its target audience to alleviate economic hardships and expose the underprivileged to a world of information in hopes of changing mindsets and attitudes (7).

Project Description

Datamation uses ICT to sensitize people against the practice of female feticide, the act of aborting a fetus after receiving knowledge of its female sex. This type of abortion is a serious problem in India and has managed to create a disparity in the male-female sex ratio in many parts of the country.(7) Datamation provides basic information about female feticide, especially targeting the information towards underdeveloped communities. It provides information regarding the current laws in the country that are relevant to the practice and attempts to change the mindsets of the people about the female child. Along with providing information, Datamation

also has a website where citizens can report doctors, nurses and laboratories that are partaking in the process of female feticide in any way. (7) Datamation receives several complaints and provides a database of the complaints to the appropriate government agencies so investigations can be held and consequences can be assigned.

Conclusion

The implementation of ICT has changed the global scenario and many unexplored areas are now open for encashment. Gender Equality, being one of them has seen many benefits through this usage and more importantly have used the flexibility of adjustments of ICTs to their benefit. But it is important to consider the strategy of these implementations and what methodologies need to be used to keep it sustainable. So far, some of the projects mentioned have adhered to infrastructural, cultural and social needs which have worked out especially in the case of India. Overall ICT can make more impacts in this area: by amplifying women's voices and publicizing experiences this can open more doors and in turn initiate a change in the global scenario.

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