

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract—India, like any other knowledge economy, depends on the development of its educational sector. Higher education drives the competitiveness and employment generation in India. However, research findings have shown that the overall state of higher education is dismal in the country. There is a severe constraint on the availability of skilled labour. There exist socio-economic, cultural, time and geographical barriers for people who wish to pursue higher education. Innovative use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can potentially solve this problem. Education is the driving force of economic and social development in any country. Considering this, it is necessary to find ways to make education of good quality, accessible and affordable to all, using the latest technology available. However, new technologies have a vast potential for empowerment which needs to be fully exploited.

Index Terms— *ICT in Higher Education, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality*

I. INTRODUCTION

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. 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. Another hindrance pertains to ICT is lack of its access to women. This paper deals with Integrating ICT in Higher Education for Quality enhancement and women empowerment

ICT in Higher Education

The last two decades have witnessed a revolution caused by the rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). ICT has changed the dynamics of various industries as well as the way people interact and work in the society. Internet usage in home and work place has grown exponentially. ICT has the potential to remove the barriers that are causing the problems of low rate of education in any country. It can be used as a tool to overcome the issues of cost, less number of teachers, and poor quality of education as well as to overcome time and distance barriers. India has a billion-plus population and a high proportion of the young and hence it has a large formal education system. The demand for education in developing countries like India has skyrocketed as education is still regarded as an important bridge of social, economic and political mobility. The challenges before the education system in India can be said to be of the following nature: **Access to Education-** There exist infrastructure, socio- economic, linguistic and physical barriers in India for people who wish to access education. **Quality of Education-** This includes infrastructure, teacher and the processes quality. **Resources allocated-** Central and State Governments

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reserve about 3.5% of GDP for education as compared to the 6% that has been aimed (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2007). According to the recent survey, participation of Indian students in education at the elementary stage is 85%, in secondary stage 39% and in tertiary stages of education 9%. Thus, the participation rates of the Indian population in education, and especially in higher education are quite low. Education not only increases the productive skills of the individual but also his earning power. It gives him a sense of well being as well as capacity to absorb new ideas, increases his social interaction, gives access to improved health and provides several more intangible benefits. **ICT can be used as a tool in the process of education in the following ways:**

Informative tool: It provides vast amount of data in various formats such as audio, video, documents.

Situating tool: It creates situations, which the student experiences in real life. Thus, simulation and virtual reality is possible.

Constructive tool: To manipulate the data and generate analysis.

Communicative tool: It can be used to remove communication barriers such as that of space and time. ICTs also allow for the creation of digital resources like digital libraries where the students, teachers and professionals can access research material and course material from any place at any time. Such facilities allow the networking of academics and researchers and hence sharing of scholarly material. This avoids duplication of work. Use of ICT in education develops higher order skills such as collaborating across time and place and solving complex real world problems. It improves the perception and understanding of the world of the student. Thus, ICT can be used to prepare the workforce for the information society and the new global economy. Research findings show that technology can support pedagogical, curricular, and assessment reforms, which intend to support the process of knowledge creation. Students and teachers plan their learning activities and build on each other's ideas to create new knowledge. It also facilitates monitoring of their progress in understanding and preparation for lifelong learning and participation in the information society. ICT enabled distance education provides environmental benefits, as there is a major reduction in the amount of student travel. ICT can play a valuable role to monitor and log the progress of the students across time, place and varied activities. ICT based education can be expected to provide greater reliability, validity, and efficiency of data collection and greater ease of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation at any educational level. It also boosts the confidence level and the self-esteem of the students who acquire the ICT skills through the process of being exposed

to such kind of learning. India is making use of powerful combination of ICTs such as open source software, satellite technology, local language interfaces, easy to use human-computer interfaces, digital libraries, etc. with a long-term plan to reach the remotest of the villages.

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. 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. 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:

1. 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;
2. 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;
3. 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;

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4. Promoting increased employment in the IT sector for women and the use of ICTs for women's small and medium scale enterprises.

5. Implementing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women; and promoting women's lobbying and advocacy activities.

III. Women Empowerment in 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. 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. 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 recognizes equality of the sexes and in fact provides for certain provisions under the Chapter on Fundamental Rights more favorable to women but in actual practice they are observed more in breach than in compliance. One of the ignored ICT issues in India is the "gender sensitization" 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.

IV. CONCLUSION

The advent of ICT has changed the global scenario and many unexplored areas are now open for encashment. It is for us to utilize 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.

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