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**INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY
(ICT): A PATHWAY TO EMPOWER WOMEN**

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Abstract: The world is in the midst of a knowledge revolution, where the entire society tends to becoming ‘knowledge society’ which complemented by opening up entirely new spectrum in the areas of communication technology. With the advent of ICT, it has become possible for the common man to access global information. This paper explores the empowerment of women in the context of knowledge society which is understood as building the ability and skills. It entails building up of capacities of women to overcome social and institutional barriers, and strengthening their participation in the economic and political process for an overall improvement in their qualities of lives. This paper highlight some of the ICT tools towards women empowerment, challenges of usage of ICTs for women and provides some of the recommendations aimed at promoting women empowerment through ICT.

Keywords: *ICT, Women Empowerment, ICT tools.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“To awaken the people, it is women who must be awoken; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

Towards development of India, there is a greater need for bringing women in to mainstream. ICT opens up a direct window for women to the outside world. ICTs represent critical tools and an infrastructure that are increasingly shaping our world, understandings, interactions and structures of society. They can also enable efforts towards realizing inclusive, equitable and development. At the centre of this is the empowerment of women and gender equality, where ICTs can play a catalytic role.

The year 2001 was declared as “*Women’s Empowerment year*” while formulating policies to think of female development with a view to alleviating inequality between male and female and to bring them at par, is women empowerment, the concept is gaining significance throughout the world. The core of the concept of empowerment is-the “*idea of power*” Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their



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own lives. Empowerment is an active and multidimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all sphere of life.

ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political, social and types of empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. Without full participation in the use of information technology, women are left without the key to participation in the global world of the twenty-first century. *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995* drew attention for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. It also included a strategic objective: “Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication”.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study and investigate women empowerment and ICTs
2. To highlight some of the ICT tools towards women empowerment
3. To identify the challenges of usage of ICTs for women.
4. To suggest some of the recommendations aimed at promoting women empowerment through ICT.

3.0 METHODOLOGY:

Data used in this study is secondary in nature and is collected from various sources such as Journals, periodicals, articles, books, reports, websites etc.

4.0 NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the recent past, ICTs have been added to the women and gender equality debate. ICTs are being presented as a tool having potential to benefit women’s ‘empowerment’ and a number of ICT projects that specifically target women have been established in several developed and underdeveloped countries. It is an important fact that no society will progress satisfactorily unless women, who constitute almost half of their population are given equal opportunities. Information technology has become a potent force in transforming social, economic, and political life globally. If not, lack of access to information and communication technologies becomes a significant factor in the further marginalization of women from the economic, social, and political mainstream of their countries and of the world.

5.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE



Beijing Declaration and platform for action (1995), states: women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access that information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry. With this statement, the international community was able to recognize, for the first time, the importance of the ICTs for economic and social empowerment of women.

Dinesh M. P. (2011) in his study entitled *Role of Information and Communication Technologies for Women Empowerment in Kerala* presents findings from two various ICTs initiatives in Kerala, ICTs Park and Kudumbashree ICTs Units, showing significant impacts on Women's employment, income, social roles and empowerment of poor women. One ICT initiative-"gender blind" and pursued within the globalised, competitive context of an increased role for markets and 'flexibility'-has generally reinforced gender inequalities. By contrast, a gender focused ICTs initiative involving significant state intervention has brought about positive changes to livelihood outcomes and empowerment of women. This paper concludes that ICT as a form of new technology are socially deterministic, with varied implications for women in terms of employment and empowerment dependent on the context within which the ICTs are utilized. It shows how ICT-based initiatives empower women.

Suresh, L. B. (2011) in his study entitled as *Impact of Information and Communication Technologies on Women Empowerment in India* focused the current ICT tools like e-governance, e-learning, e-education, e-finance e-marketing and ICT development like BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) and KPO (Knowledge Process Outsourcing) and their impact on women empowerment in India and also looking at the changes there on to the educational system and building up a strong socially viable KNS (Knowledge Network System) and suggested to Collaborate with national machineries for the advancement of women to promote gender equality in ICT. Strengthen their own capacity, through increased financial resources and technical expertise, to lead advocacy in gender equality and ICT etc.

Anjum, B & Tiwari, R. (2012) study on *Role of Information Technology in Women Empowerment* discussed the strengths, opportunities of information technology and the role it can play for women empowerment. It also highlights the various roles of government, NGOs, private sector towards taking initiatives for women empowerment through ICT.

Beena & Mathur, M. (2012) in his study entitled as *Role of ICT Education for Women Empowerment* concluded that the information and communication technology empower a women in various areas like social, educational, personal, psychological, political, technological and economical.

Baglari, J. (2014) study on *Information and Communication Technology (ICT) And Women Empowerment* points out at the avenues created by ICT-enabled networking processes for



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women's empowerment. It highlights the opportunities available for women empowerment through ICTs; the barriers face by women and suggest ways to improve the conditions leading to women empowerment through ICTs.

Pachaiyappan, P. (2014) in his study entitled as Education: A Tool for Empowerment of Women highlighted process, indicators, levels of women empowerment, educational position of rural women, factors responsible for poor female literacy, education - a tool for empowerment and role of ICT in women's education for empowerment. The countries which realized the importance of empowering their women developed fast educating their women and are involving them in the decision-making process of social and economic development.

Kumari, S. (2015) studied Role of Information Technology in Women Empowerment and explored how information Technology can be springboard to attain gender equality and empowerment in India.

Sanap, M. K. (Nd) in his study entitled as Role of Information and Communication Technology in the Women Empowerment has made an attempt to investigate women's empowerment through ICTs in rural areas and the role of the Government and the NGOs in promoting the IT sector for women's development. Besides this, the present study explores the barriers to the usage of ICTs by women and suggests strategies to improve their access to IT.

6.0 INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTs)

ICT is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application or diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value addition and manage information, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer etc. ICTs are emerging as a powerful tool for women empowerment in a developing country like India.

Information and communication technology comprises a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications and services used to produce, process, distribute and transform information. ICTs are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information. The ICT sector consists of segments as diverse as Telecommunications, Television and Radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services and electronic media, for e.g.: The internet and electronic mail (United Nations, 2005) The new ICTs are commonly referred to evolving applications or technologies that rely on the Internet, telecommunication networks, mobile phones, personal computers and databases. With new applications emerging and the costs of owning and accessing technologies reducing, the world is witnessing a growing convergence in the technologies of broadcasting, communication and information.



7.0 WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. Empowerment refers to the ability of people to control their own destinies in relation to other people in society (Mason, 2005). Empowerment dynamics is a complex and multidimensional process linked at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Narayan-Parker, 2005).

According to The World Bank (2008): Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.

So, one definition of women's empowerment could be a process that gives them control of power and resources, and changes women's lives over time through their active participation in that process. A process in which women gain greater share of control over resources—material, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation and to gain power.

8.0 ICT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in 2003 in Geneva, saw ICTs as vital tools for women's empowerment: "We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end" (WSIS, 2003).

ICTs emerge as a powerful tool for gender empowerment in a developing country like India. ICT offer the opportunities for direct, interactive communication even by those who lack skills, who are illiterate, lack mobility and have little self-confidence. Here are some aspects of life which have a direct influence of ICT especially on women:

- Women empowerment
- Shrinking Information Asymmetry through ICT.
- Indigenous Knowledge, Educational & research opportunities
- Increase of average household income in villages
- Easy-Family communication
- Health and child care facilities
- Art and entertainment
- Improved Governance



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- Legal rights and provisions
- Increase Social awareness
- Social support system for working women
- Women's increased access to job Market and improve entrepreneurship using ICT
- Career advancement facilities, Employment prospects in India and abroad

9.0 ICT TOOLS-WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

ICT has benefited women in a number of ways. It is a viable tool of information and communication which goes a long way in empowerment of women and has created avenues for women empowerment. Noteworthy examples are that of SEWA, Gyandoot, Smile, Datamation, DISK, NASSCOM, SKS and, NABANNA etc.

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 memberships 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. Through ICT, training is provided on issues as disaster management, leadership building, health and education, child development etc.

Gyandoot: is a project started in Madhya Pradesh to fund rural networked cyber kiosks through panchayats. The project was started in Dhar district, to offer villages multiple services through internet based project. Through this project, information is available about rural life and agricultural projects. Information is available about education and employment opportunities.

Smile: (Savitri Marketing Institution for Ladies Empowerment) is a voluntary organisation in Pune. This project has increased literacy level of underprivileged women through the usage of ICT. Internet has also helped them market their various products like soft toys, candles, bags, utility items, etc. Through Internet, there is greater awareness and exposure and market reach for the products.

Datamation Foundation: started a project in 2003 in Seelampur area of Delhi for Muslim women. The project localised appropriate communication and information networks by setting up an ICT centre at a Madarsa. This helped link resource-poor women to the information and tools for knowledge management. It also helped establish buyer-seller linkages towards eradication of absolute poverty. It has established its standing in the community and became a



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big attraction for the women of Seelampur. People drop in to consult on matters other than computer training. The ICT centre has created self confidence in women and creating awareness about their interest and helped them take collective decisions.

Dairy Information Services Kiosk: (DISK) is a project which uses Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the dairy sector in Gujarat. ICT enables the creation of cost effective solutions that strengthen the exchange of useful information between farmers and the union. ICT facilitates dairy farmers with timely messages and education to manage their milch cattle and enhance the production of quality milk. It is also assisting dairy unions in effectively scheduling and organizing the veterinary, artificial insemination, cattle feed and other related services. Usage of ICT goes a long way in empowering men and women.

NASSCOM: National Association of Software and Service Companies provide mentoring and empowering women managers across junior, middle and senior level from the IT Industry through various workshops, activities and training sessions.

Swayam Krishi Sangam (SKS) is using ICT's such as smart cards and hand held devices to improve microfinance projects to empower poor women.

NABANNA: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge, a UNESCO sponsored project in NABANNA, India was launched to empower women through use of intranet portals, databases, and web based applications. Through the NABANNA network women share local indigenous information and information obtained at group meetings and newsletter. Women gained more respect in their local community. Younger women were more confident to approach job market. Women became more creative after learning programs like paintbrush. Women developed a sense of unity among them and bringing forth leadership qualities.

10.0 CHALLENGES TO USE AND ACCESS OF ICT'S FOR WOMEN:

Women, however, are still very much in a minority among the beneficiaries of knowledge networking. Women still face huge imbalances in the ownership, control and regulation of these new information technologies, similar to those faced in other areas. (*New York Times, 2000*).

1. Equitable access to ICT technology and the autonomy to receive and produce the information relevant to their concerns and perspectives are critical issues for women.
2. Lack of clear National Policy for promoting ICT for women's development.
3. Little awareness of the full range of opportunities offered by ICT other than access to information.
4. Poor ICT infrastructure, lack of electricity in many remote areas, and frequent power cuts.



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5. Lack of or limited computer skills on various areas including hardware and software installation and maintenance, internet and non-internet based skills such as telnet, FTP, mailing etc.
6. Limited online information in languages other than English.
7. Women's time is at a premium. The barrier to ICT use includes the issues of information overload and the time consumed in searching for useful and practical information.
8. Social and cultural barriers.

11.0 SUGGESTIONS

In order to create an enabling environment and to support women's social and economic empowerment through ICT, actions are necessary by different actors, at local, regional national and international levels. The following recommendations are aimed at promoting such actors.

1. Adopt legislative, regulatory and administrative measures to promote gender equality in the ICT area, and in particular, adopt legislation in ICT-specific sectoral areas to address gender equality, and create monitoring frameworks and capacity to ensure implementation.
2. Creating an environment which supports and inspires strategies to endorse women's equal access to and opportunity to benefit from ICT projects, as well as creating a regulation and policy environment which backings women's use of ICTs;
3. Backing augmented representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and using ICTs to promote their amplified participation in education at all levels.
4. Promoting amplified employment in the IT sector for women.
5. Executing e-governance strategies which are accessible to women.
6. Women should be empowered by augmenting their skills, understanding and access to information technology.
7. Women need to be involved in decision-making concerning the development of new technologies in order to partake totally in their growth and impact.
8. NGOs and the government should come together to make paucity alleviation programmes popular through women centric initiatives.

12.0 CONCLUSION

“Empowering women is a pre-requisite for creating a good nation, when women are empowered, society with stability is assured. Empowerment of women is essential as their thought and their value systems’ lead to the development of a good family and ultimately a good nation”.

Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam



The empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development of countries all over the world. Empowerment of women, therefore, needs to get utmost priority in any national planning process. ICT revolution has not only opened up new opportunities for economic growth and social development but has also posed problems and challenges and unique opportunities for human development. It is necessary to build up women capacities to involve them in productive activities, institutional building, family and social transformation, decision-making process, political representation, trade and commerce, entrepreneurial development and social leadership. There is a need to enhance opportunities to women to enable them to own, manage and control industries and service enterprises including IT-based units. There is also need to provide more opportunities in related sectors to them in higher managerial, technical positions in government and non-government agencies, research, educational institutions in private and public sectors, without confining their role to only call centers, telecentres, data-entry level and lower levels in the organizations. ICT has to address to all these problems of women as a whole and has to be used to facilitate to build a women empowered society.

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