

Role of Library & Information Centres in Women Empowerment through ICT: Indian Scenario

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are for everyone and women have to be an equal beneficiary to the advantages offered by the technology, and the products and processes which emerge from their use. The benefits accrued from the synergy of knowledge and ICT need not be restricted to the upper strata of the society but have to freely flow to all segments of the female population. ICT in convergence with other forms of communication have the potential to reach those women who hitherto have not been reached by any other media, thereby empowering them to participate in economic and social progress, and make informed decision on issues that affect them. The paper explores the avenues created by ICT enabled networking processes for women in the areas of empowerment and governance, the hindrances faced in engendering of these processes and goes on to suggest ways to ensure that greater benefits accrue to women in a distributed manner.

KEY WORDS: Women Empowerment, ICT, Access to Information,, LICs, Economic participation and opportunity

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is in the midst of a knowledge revolution, complemented by opening up entirely new vistas in communication technologies. Recent developments in the fields of information and communication technology are indeed revolutionary in nature. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on Information and Communication technologies, reflecting a powerful global belief in the transformatory nature of these technologies. By definition, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information.

Information is the fundamental resource for all economic and developmental activities in the information age, of which women form an equal part. The process of synthesis of information possessed across communities, by men and women, with the global pool of knowledge with the scope for further enrichment lays the genesis for information networking. Information networking opens up a new way of interactive communication between government-bodies, NGOs, academic and research institutions, and the civil society. It helps communities, both men and women, to take appropriate steps to recognize and document the knowledge they possess and in reflecting this knowledge in a wider social domain for directed change through the use of information and communication technologies.

2. APPROACHES TO EMPOWERMENT

We know well that in general terms, the position of women in society is still low compared to their counterparts. Particularly in developing countries women have to face “the glass ceiling”. The major reason being the discrimination between man and woman on the basis of sex has created various types of gender biases. Hence, efforts were made to remove discrimination against females and to establish equality has become the part of the global movement emphasized in all the four World Conferences on Women including the Beijing Conference in 1995.

Another line of thought in development literature has promoted “social inclusion” in the institutions as the key pathway to empowerment of individuals and capitalism top-down approaches to development and /or poverty itself are

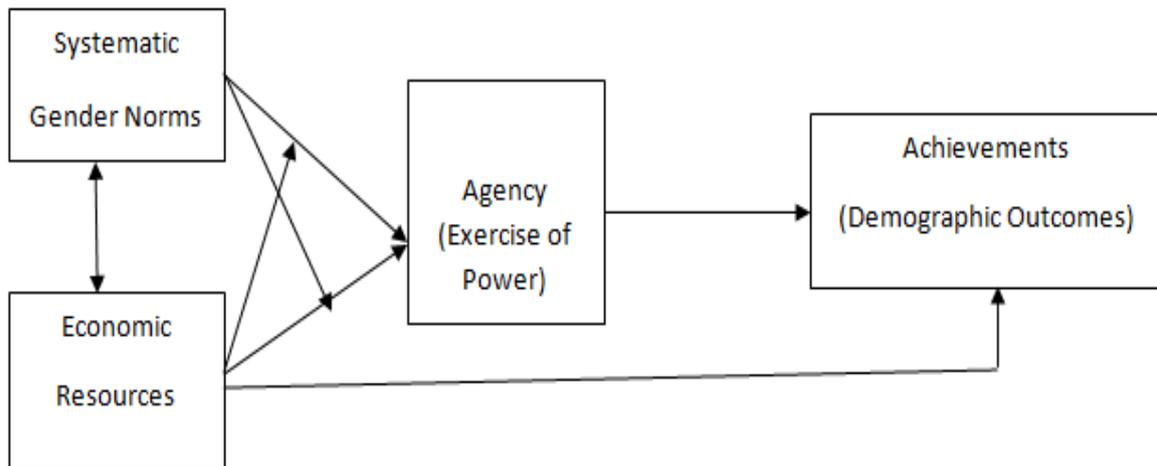
seen as sources of disempowerment. This process of social inclusion was viewed as a process that removes the institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities (Beteta Hanny,2006). The growth of civil society and participatory development methods at both macro and micro levels of society were also proposed as the mechanisms by which empowerment could take place. This approach to empowerment focuses on State and Civil Society institutions and interpersonal gender dynamics within the household as a part of the equation of social exclusion and in need of directed efforts at change.

2.1 The Modern Approach:

In recent years the concept of “empowerment” was modified to include “the power in plural form as “powers”. This “powers” approach was picked up by several feminist bodies and development NGOs which have argued that empowerment process should be broken down in four levels of power – power over, power to, power with and power within. A revised definition of poverty during the reforms period brought out a new dimension of empowerment. Haschemi and Schuler (1993) have identified six dimensions of empowerment based on activities of women identified as important for their day-to-day functioning. The concept “Poverty” was also redefined as “lack of real opportunity” and ultimately a matter of “capability deprivation”. Hence, it was argued that the basic objective of development was the “expansion of human capabilities” (Jean Dreze and Amartyasen, 1995). It was also argued that expansion of human capabilities empowers the people and facilitates the reduction of social and economic inequalities. Attempts were made to separate the gender and economic components of empowerment by combining the models of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999) and England (2000). Kabeer (1999) identified three main elements of empowerment: The first one is the preconditions of empowerment which include economic as well as human and social resources. The second one is “achievements”. Gender norms and economic resources must act as preconditions to exercise the power that positively affects the demographic outcomes. (Social Opportunities) and also to have an independent influence on these “achievements”. Malhotra et.al. (2002) used the definition of empowerment suggested by Kabeer (1999) and argued that empowerment is “the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”.. Based

on these arguments, efforts were made to build models that separate the gender and economic components of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999) and England (2000) as shown below:

Fig.1: Conceptual Model of Gender and Women Empowerment



Source: Jill Williams (2005) Measuring Gender and Women’s Empowerment Using Confirmatory Factor Analysis, IBS Working Paper, PAC- 2005-01

2.2 Global Initiatives

Of late, the Human Development Reports have been emphasizing on thinking about equality in terms of capabilities because inequalities in outcomes are largely the product of unequal access to capabilities. The Human Development Reports have introduced “Gender Related Development Index (GDI) (to measure average achievements in long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living which account for inequalities between men and women). Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) (which measures gender inequality) and Gender Inequality Index (GII- Human Development Report-2010)(which measures the losses due to gender inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation). The World Development Report-2012 observed that greater gender equality enhances productivity, improves development outcomes for the next generation and make institutions more representative. The World Economic Forum has been publishing The Global Gender Gap reports since 2006 and its Report- 2012 focused on three basic concepts underlying the Global Gender Gap Index. First, it focused on measuring the gaps between men and women rather than on levels. Second, it

captured gaps in outcome variables rather than on gaps in means or input variables. Third, it ranked countries according to gender equality rather than women empowerment.

3. EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

According to Census-2011, India has reached the population of 1210 million, as against 301 million in 1951, of which 58,64,69,174 (48.5 %) were females. The population of India accounted for 17.5% of the total world population and occupied second place. The sex ratio was 930 in 1971 and it has increased to 940 according to 2011 Census. The female literacy also increased from 18.3% in 1961 to 74.0% in 2011 and a decrease in male-female literacy gap from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7 per cent in 2011. Women empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables that include geographical location (rural/urban), educational status, social status (caste and class) and age. Policies on women empowerment exist at national, state and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic opportunities, and gender based violence and political participation. The scope and coverage of the schemes launched has been expanding that include initiatives for economic and social empowerment of women and for securing gender equality. The following schemes at present are aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India:

- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975)
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) (2010)
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
- Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) (2009-10)
- Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)
- Dhanalakshmi (2008)
- Short Stay Homes
- Swadhar
- Ujjawala (2007)
- Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan)
- National Mission for Empowerment of Women
- Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (1993)

3.1 India at global graph

In spite of the effective implementation of all the above schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievements and actual practice at the community level. The Global Gender Gap Index (2012) observed that India is simply not doing enough for its women. The ranking of the country has fallen from 113 (out of 134 countries) in 2010 to 113 and out of 135 countries in 2011. However, in 2012, its ranking has improved from 113 in 2011 to 105 with a score of 0.644 in 2012 according to the recent report of the World Economic Forum. The World Report-2012 released by the Human Rights Watch (Events of 2011) also observed that social unrest and protests deepened in resource rich areas of central and eastern India, where rapid economic growth was accompanied by rapidly growing inequality. Despite repeated claims of progress by the Government, there was no significant improvement in access to health care and education. According to the latest statistics released by World Economic Forum (2012) indicate that the current situation of gender gaps is alarming. The table below will clarify the exact figures.

3.2 Gender gap in India

Table 3.1 showing the gender gap figures in India

Gender Gap sub-Indices	India	
	Rank	Score
1.Economic Participation and Opportunity	123	0.4588
2. Educational Attainment	121	0.8525
3.Health and Survival	134	0.9612
4. Political Empowerment	17	0.3343
Overall Index	105	0.6442

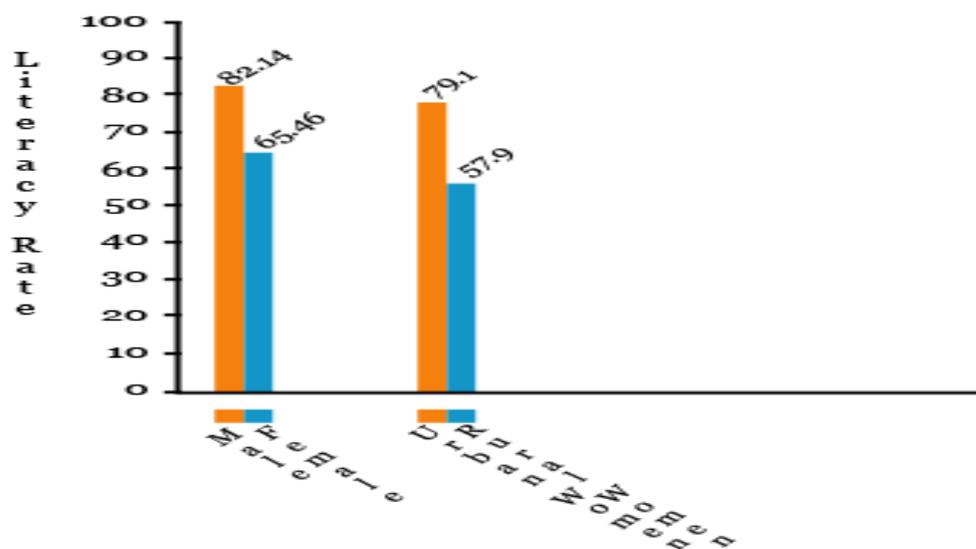
Source: World Economic Forum (2012) Global Gender gap Index -2012, p.10-11

The rankings and scores for India amply prove that it is found in the lower rank in all sub-indexes of gender equality. India gained eight places (from 113 ranks in 2011 to 105 rank in 2012) as a result of improvements in the educational attainments and political empowerment. Among the BRIC economies, India is the lowest ranked featured in the index. The report has observed that the persistent health, education and economic participation gaps are acting as detrimental forces to India's growth. The disproportionate sex ratio at birth has not changed over the past years. (WEF,2012).

3.3 Education Scenario

While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since its independence where education is concerned, the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. Not only is an illiterate women at the mercy of her husband or father, she also does not know that this is not the way of life for women across the world. Additionally, the norms of culture that man of the family is the be-all and end-all decisions, is slowly spoiling the society of the country.

Literacy Facts of Women in India



*Literacy rates relate to the population aged 7 years & above

Data Source: Census of India 2011

3.4 Access to Resources:

Access to resources is important for economic freedom of women as freedom of movement is linked with their economic independence and also infuses with power and expands agency. The National Family Health Survey-3 has identified following five important variables, also NFHS-3 has also captured “exposure to media” through following four variables:

Table. 3.4 Women’s Access to Resources and Exposure to Mass Media

	Variables of Empowerment	% of Women	Index
I	Access to Resources		
	a) Know about Loan Programme	38.6	
	b) Given Loan	10.48	
	c) Having Bank Saving Account	15.07	
	d) Educational Attainment-- Higher	7.3	
	e) Freedom of Working Outside	36.35	
II	Exposure to Mass Media		
	a) Read Newspapers Everyday	12.54	
	b) Listen Radio Everyday	17.14	
	c) Watch TV Everyday	43.66	
	d) Knows about Modern Contraceptives	97.95	
			0.7259

Source: NFHS-3

It is evident from the data in Table 3.4 that women’s access to resources is dismally poor in our country. The data show that only 22.0% of women have access to resources in general and at disaggregate level it is seen that a meagre 38.6% of women know about the loan programmes and only 10.5 % of women could get a loan. It is quite disappointing to note that the women who have a bank saving account was found very low at 15.07% and in spite of knowing about loan programmes, they have failed to secure a loan. 36.4% of the women had the freedom to work in outside. These variables are closely associated with

level of education and the higher education, a potent source of empowerment was found at only 7.3% for women.

It is also evident that women have least exposure to mass media and almost all women know (98%) about modern contraceptives. The percentage of women who read news papers and listen to radio every day was estimated at 12.5% and 17.1% only. It is evident that in our country only 43.7% of women are watching TV every day. It means 87% , 83% and 56% of the women in our country are not reading news papers, listening to radio and watching TV everyday respectively. However, about the modern contraceptives had a great bearing on the estimation of index for access to resources at 0.7259. NFHS-3 shows that women are less likely than men to have at least weekly exposure to TV (55% Vs. 63%). Radio (29% Vs 44%), newspaper and magazines (23% Vs.53%). In total, 35% of women have no regular exposure to these forms of media compared with 18% of men. The details on gender-differential in media show that it is greater for younger than older age groups.

4. ROLE OF LICs

Women's empowerment will lead to a balanced partnership of both sexes. This would involve the generation of awareness on the fallacies of gender stereotypes and the raising of consciousness against gender biases as acts of injustice. This has to be done through all the agents of socialization starting from the family to the community, to schools, churches, libraries, and government. According to Chan (2010), we will not see sustainable progress unless we fix failures in health systems and society so that girls and women enjoy equal access to health information and services, education, employment, and political positions. Libraries have long been crowned knowledge institutions as they provide the public with spaces for information and learning. This role of the library must be seen on the premise that the development of society and individuals can only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society (Drotner 2005). Similarly, Kargbo (2004) points out that education is an indispensable means of unlocking and protecting other human rights by providing the scaffolding that is required to secure good health, liberty, security, economic well-being and participation in social and political activity. Likewise, Zapata (1994) observes that information is prerequisite for any type of education, as it is an essential tool for accessing information and knowledge.

Libraries and librarians should mobilize their skills and expertise of their profession to ensure that the citizenry have access to the world's knowledge. Access to knowledge through libraries empowers every citizen and embraces the notion of social inclusion and of Librarians becoming active change agents in society (Tise, 2007). There are achievable through:

- Documentation and dissemination of existing international, local instruments on women's rights through handbills, leaflets, etc..
- Organizing library hours in the public libraries, radio/television programmes on women's rights issues.
- Participation at women group meetings e.g August meeting among south east Nigerian women and cultural enlightenment programmes on women's rights and gender issues. Association of Women Librarians of Nigeria (AWLIN) has a role to play here.
- Enabling legislation and litigation on issues effecting women's rights and gender discrimination through provision of current legal materials on the issue.

CONCLUSION:

There is a need to understand that the concepts of empowerment and autonomy are sufficiently different. As the data presented in the above tables exhibited, still a large part of women do not have sufficient autonomy regarding the value choices for their own life. The data also makes us to infer that there is a necessity to look beyond economic resources or material prosperity and into cultural and social influences, which are playing a significant role in shaping the women's autonomy and agency. Again, it is also true that though not the women empowerment and autonomy have a link with women's access to resources or material well-being, it is to be accepted that there is a variety of potential connections and there exists various forms of linkages among these variables. Hence, the answer for the question "Are women really empowered in India" is nothing but "not yet to the desired level"

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