

Strategy Planning Workshop of the Feminist Network on Gender, Development and Information Society Policies

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Women's Illiteracy, Education and Empowerment using ICT

Progress has been made in promoting female education and training in recent years as seen by indicators for various countries. Some countries have achieved parity of status as in East Asia and some have narrowed the gap as in South Asia and North Africa; but with a few exceptions girls and women have less access to education and lower levels of literacy.

The statistics are revealing - 110 million children do not attend school and of these two thirds are girls and there are 42 million less girls than boys in primary school. Even if girls enroll in school the likelihood of their continuing and completing their education is less than that of boys. Women are two thirds of the 875 million illiterate adults and these are women who missed out on school when they were young. Recognising the disadvantages girls face in accessing education, the Millennium Development Goals (Goal 3) has the target of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015.

The advances in information technology that saw the growth of the Internet and later cellular technology held much promise in terms of educational possibilities particularly for countries with large illiterate rural populations. But more than a decade later the new medium of communication is still not accessible to the majority of the citizens. For example

- South Asia, home to 23% of the world's population has less than 1% Internet users. By contrast USA with less than 5% of the world's population has more than 50% users,
- The richest 20% have over 90% share of the Internet, the poorest 20% about 0.2%
- Men dominate the Internet,
- About 80% of the web sites are in English but only one in ten people worldwide speak English.

These trends are reflected in individual country contexts. Technology adoption has been mainly through advantaged groups in terms of income, education, occupational status, and geographical location. Gender dimensions further stratify these divisions. Disparities are however nothing new, but what is at stake here is that in the networked age women should not be allowed to forgo the benefits that the information age promises. Innovative and pro-poor policies are required for this purpose. Governments have taken measures to diffuse the technology, use local language, increase awareness among the general public but more often than not gender considerations have not been in the policy agenda.

With the economy becoming more and more technical and higher levels of skills being required from individuals there will be very little opportunity for those with basic education and for those who are illiterate to create wealth for themselves and the communities they live in. And since women are the majority of those who are illiterate and poorly educated there will be no progress unless illiteracy is eradicated and skills are enhanced. Can new information and communication technology be used to spread education and information to these disadvantaged people, especially women?

First we have to identify the obstacles and barriers that made women illiterate in the first instance. The reasons are historical and though some of these obstacles are eroding, they still

remain in many parts of the world - socio-cultural and religious practices, behaviour and attitudes, household poverty, and perceptions of educational relevance. To empower women through education and skill development via new information technology negative societal attitudes towards women and girls that lead to their discrimination, the internalization by women of attitudes that retard their growth and development must be overcome. These same obstacles are applicable to the use of technology, which is primarily perceived as a male domain. Education for women need not be formal. Every woman does not need to go to the university. But all girls and women need education to overcome the disadvantages they face, whether that education is formal or informal. Education for women should include building capacity to participate in the labour market and have control over the income that they earn, to make their voices heard and assert their citizenship rights, develop their confidence to challenge gender discriminatory practices, sexual exploitation, and gender based violence.

Affirmative action has been taken to bring girls into the education system and the policies adopted by governments and push by international agencies have had positive impacts as can be seen from countries such as Bangladesh. Non-formal education programmes have been initiated for those who are still outside the system. Distance education programmes have also existed for many years and had been delivered through the first generation of paper based correspondence courses, to second generation of multiple media systems to the third generation of computer based learning. The majority of these programmes was not differentiated by sex and was directed to both men and women. Although girls and women did take advantage of these programmes schooling trends have been replicated with a fewer number of women participating in these programmes than men. The fourth generation of flexible learning has emerged with a combination of multimedia, expanded teaching-learning resources via the Internet, wireless and mobile technology.

There are many examples from around the world where ICT have been used to provide basic literacy and skills to illiterate women. Many of these are donor funded projects, which however have not been replicated widely. When the government implements nation-wide programmes and projects the approach is usually gender neutral with the consequent marginalisation of women as for instance in the case of the Sri Lankan programme to spread "the dividends of ICT to every village, to every citizen, to every business and also to transform the way the government works." The strategy of spreading the use of ICT is to set up multi-service community information centres. They are to be the hub from which information resources required to improve livelihoods, and reduce poverty are to be disseminated and accessed. A business model has been adopted in setting up these centres and the operators are mostly private individuals. Content is also being developed and distributed to the centres. Usage of these centres is reported to be satisfactory though no assessment has been carried out as yet as the centres have been functioning for a few years only. As financial profitability is one of the key motivations for the owners to operate the centres their main activity is the conducting of computer training courses at which the participants are mainly out of school youth who are in search of employment.

Women's groups have pointed out that these centres do not cater to the specific needs of women. In setting up the centres no gender analysis has been undertaken with the result that the centres that have been established are owned mainly by men and are in locations that women are usually not comfortable in going to. The opening hours are not suitable for women

and the content that is provided is generic and has little or no relevance to them. The operators are centre-bound and have few if any outreach programmes to encourage poor, illiterate women or women with little or no education to use their services. Thus neither do women get the information that they require for their empowerment nor do they get the IT skills to access the information that they require.

Projects that have proved successful for women have been designed using participatory approaches that include women, men and children, to identify the critical issues that women face in a particular context and their information needs. In addition to assessing the needs of women the participatory approach will give the community ownership of the project while at the same time sensitizing them to gender issues. The community would be required to take responsibility for their own learning and development. In addition to the content supplied from the centre content developed using local examples and local resources would also be available. Such an approach would make the community reflect on social realities especially in relation to women's discrimination. Sustainability could also be ensured.

The issue at this point is the inclusion of gender dimensions into government policies, programmes and projects. Because of the resources it has, the government remains the most appropriate agency that could spread the use of IT throughout the country. The rapidity with which economic, social and political structures are changing due to advances in technology and its adoption intertwined with globalization makes it impossible for governments to ignore current developments. For instance a ubiquitous technology that is becoming more and more affordable, requires a very low learning curve and which could ensure equity to the disadvantaged exists in mobile phones. But there is a gender issue in ownership and access which need to be recognised and addressed if women are to be included in mobile learning.

Governments need to have policies in place to ensure that no one is left behind due to gender, race, geographic location etc. Projects conducted by non governmental agencies, particularly women's organizations demonstrate different models that could be used to reach marginalized and disadvantaged women. Because governments cannot act alone they work in partnerships with other stakeholders. However, inclusion of women's organizations in these partnerships is limited.