

## GENDER AND INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICTs)

A. Saghir, M. Ashfaq\* and A. Noreen\*

Dept. of Agri. Extension, Univ. of Agric., Faisalabad

\*Dept. of Agri. Economics, Univ. of Agric., Faisalabad

Corresponding author email: aqeela\_sagher@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

Gender is a social and cultural pattern designed by the society. Communication interventions play a key role in the progress of a nation. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) include Internet, cyber space, computer devices, multi media, cable, mobile and land line telephone. ICTs offer significant opportunities for girls and women, including those in rural areas. They can utilize in agriculture, health, sanitation, and education. However, there are many constraints faced by women in the operation of ICTs. But these can be overcome through government strategies. This paper presents various communication interventions in developing and developed countries, and barriers faced by several stakeholders in proper functioning of ICTs interventions.

**Key words:** gender, information and communication technologies.

### INTRODUCTION

**Gender:** Gender is an international issue operating in all fields of life. Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women and the relationship between them. Gender does not simply refer to women or men, but to the way their qualities, behaviours and identities are determined through the process of socialization. These roles and responsibilities are culturally specific and can change over time. Gender is seen as the social construction of men's and women's roles in a given culture or location. Gender roles are distinguished from sex roles, which are biologically determined, socially determined roles played by women and men. These different roles are influenced by historical, religious, economic, cultural and ethnic factors (UNDP, 2003). As women and men are defined in the weave of specific social fabrics, the relation they share constitutes what is known as gender relations. Whereas, Petersen and Runyan (1993) has defined it as a concept that refers to the social and cultural constructions that each society assigns to behaviours, characteristics and values belonging to men and women, reinforced by symbols, laws and regulations, institutions, and subjectivity.

**Historical Perspective of Gender:** Within this overall context, UNDP has its gender approach as:

Taking account of gender concerns in all policy, programme, administrative and financial activities, in organizational procedures, thereby contributing to a profound organizational transformation. Specifically bringing the outcome of socio-economic and policy analysis into all decision-making processes of the organization, and tracking the outcome. This includes

both the core policy decisions of the organization, and the small, everyday decisions of implementation.

Gender approaches in development have evolved over past decades:

In the 1950s & 60s, the welfare approach saw women as passive recipients of benefits. In the 1970s and 80s, the equity and efficient approach challenged women's subordinate position and attempted to increase women's participation in water supply and sanitation. In recent years, a gender and empowerment approach has attempted to transform existing gender relations through a more equal control of resources and a more equal sharing of water-related work burdens (UNDP, 2003).

Pakistan is a third world country and gender is a rising issue now a days. As women are 52% of the population but their economic contribution is meager on one hand and not recognizable on the other. They are facing information gap in every field of life although time has been changing day by day but their sources are very poor (GOP, 2008).

#### **Information and Communication technologies:**

Communication interventions play the key role for gender development in various fields of life. Like any other field, ICTs has various recent advances, such as: mobile phone, cable, internet, computer, digital devices, and cyber space (Elijah and Ogunlade 2007). These interventions are fruitful in working of several fields of life like medicine, research, education, industry and manufacturing. But the usage of latest interventions in agriculture technology transfer is very poor. Agricultural research in one part of the world can give benefit to the farmers of other country through effective utilization of these technologies.

**Role of ICTs for women:** Women are certainly an integral part of gender bisect. The information era call for more women activity in every sector through rapid sharing of information. Women can get recent information of modern technologies regarding cropping pattern, hybrid varieties, and emerging market trends. In the same way they can get modern approaches in livestock management like disease and its prevention, hybrid fodder crops, and cost effective techniques to improve the milk production. However, when we study rural development in which home management is very important, it was seen that in this field a great potential is present to improve. They can make efficient use of kitchen waste, save money through kitchen gardening, generate more income through development of small enterprise. They can develop their own cottage industry by utilizing local manpower and through export of these commodities. In all these sectors ICTs can make their linkages smart and direct to bridge up their information gap. Certainly there will be a rollout of basic ICT infrastructure and services for women farmers. Mobile and fixed line telephone service will surely expand in developing nations and probably become affordable. Computer hardware will also become more affordable, especially as low-priced devices are developed for markets in developing nations. Software will become more affordable as markets are expanded for commercial products and as more open-source software becomes available. The rural women can get either direct or indirect benefit from these cheaper products. Together these, trends will also encourage the continued expansion of the Internet. Community radio offers new local radio service, and television will reach a larger audience in rural areas. It seems inescapable that these trends will develop women with more information sources, with more information, and indeed with more voice in public affairs. But rural women are neglected both in ICTs development and operational opportunities. Due to which gender issues are fundamental concerns for agriculture, food security and rural development and inevitably, the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in these areas (Daly, 2003).

In the context of gender mainstreaming many efforts has been done by information technology development. World Bank (2001) in a research report demonstrates that societies that discriminate by gender pay a high price in their ability to develop and to reduce poverty. It also demonstrates that eradicating poverty depends on improving the situation of women and increasing the efficiency of their work, and that "countries with smaller gaps between women and men in areas such as education, employment, and property rights not only have lower child malnutrition and mortality, they also have more transparent business and government and faster economic growth, which in turn helps to further narrow the gender gap.

**Gender and ICTs in developing countries:** It is often argued that the concerns for gender and ICTs in developing countries is not a compelling one, and should be secondary to meeting basic needs. This contention, however, doesn't quite hold, as it is not and either 'or' situation, and both need to be addressed simultaneously. The major problems lie with developing countries is poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to ICTs infrastructure. However, ICTs can offer significant opportunities for girls and women, including those in rural areas; their ability to take advantage of these opportunities is contingent upon many things. Extension of infrastructure, particularly wireless and satellite communications, to rural areas and semi-urban areas is vital to increasing women's access to information technology (Singh, 2003). Whereas, Hafkin *et al.*, (2001) reported that fewer than 20 percent of people cited in the media in Southern Africa were women. In some countries women will have limited physical access to telecenters and other shared facilities, and even where social and cultural practices allow access to the expanding ICT infrastructure, women's access may be limited.

**ICTs and Institutional Development:** In this sector International organizations are interested in various sectors of human development like health, education, sanitation, water management, agriculture, natural resources management, ICTs literacy and infrastructure development.

ICTs has a wide range of institutional developments in the perspective of sharing of information, online lecture delivery, conference calls, tele-meetings by chief executives, short messaging services from various departments and tele-marketing. As argued by the Expert Group Meeting convened by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in November 2002, "when there is an enabling environment, ICT can provide diverse avenues for women's social, political and economic empowerment." Gender-responsive ICT can make technologies, from telephones to computers, available to more people and offer ways for both women and men to access information and markets, and participate in new income earning activities. When policies and programs recognize the different constraints women and men face, ICT can help reduce gender inequalities by reducing women's and girls' time demands, increasing their access to income-generating activities, and allowing them to benefit from technological advances. FAO (2005) showed that women who are involved in meaningful ICT projects produce results for improved economic or social well-being in the community. ICT can provide women with skills, training, and market information for their small-scale enterprises. Information on reproductive health can contribute to women's economic activities by improving health and

decreasing the number of children, thereby improving their income-earning ability.

**Barriers in the utilization of ICT:** Rajagopal and Bojin (2003) stated that as a result of rural women's lower level of access education, especially after primary school, women have less proficiency in English. The experience of an NGO in Africa is that failure to address multilingual in ICTs issues in access and use will disadvantage women than men. Bisnath (2004) found that in terms of qualitative information, answers to questions that serve to identify the activities, priorities and interests of women and men and the barriers they face, as well as analyses of the ways in which the responses are different or the same will enable us to develop projects that are more informed by the stated constraints and opportunities. In many developing countries female entrepreneurs increasingly dominate small- and micro-enterprises. These women are often aware that increased connectivity, computerization, and communications can enhance their productivity. Yet, it is often difficult for women to gain access to communications technology because of the obstacles they face in securing the capital required to make such investments. The barriers to women's access to capital can be legal, customary or based on perceptions about them as borrowers. Only qualitative assessments can reveal these constraints. In addition to understanding the material realities of women and men in the community in question, it is also important to locate that reality within the larger national, regional and international contexts. This is necessary because the individual preferences, choices and lives of women and men are informed by their place in their communities, which is in turn influenced by their position within their country, and their country's position in the global economic order.

Digital divide is actually among the several gaps is one. There is a technological divide—great gaps in infrastructure. There is a content divide. A lot of web-based information is simply not relevant to the real needs of people. And nearly 70 per cent of the world's websites are in English, at times crowding out local voices and views. There is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys. This can be true of rich and poor countries alike (Annan, 2003). Whereas, John (2003) reported that Canadian University Student Survey Gender Differences “Many female respondents to our survey note that they have no access to adequate computer hardware (female 48 percent versus 37 percent male), and to the Internet (42 percent male versus 34 percent female) at home, and therefore they feel restricted in choosing their courses, if the courses they wish to take are offered only online, and require researching online resources for class assignments. A major barrier most women students (75 percent versus 52 percent male) seem to face is the lack time for learning new technologies. This is particularly

significant because half of the women students (54 percent versus 33 percent men) report that they are often constrained by lack of training they need to use academic software and other advanced IT programs. These barriers would seem to create a lower interest in four in ten women students, more than among men, in their learning to use all IT resources, although few report a sense of alienation in using computers.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Developing world should facilitate their population through various strategies at grass root level like computer literacy should be inculcated in the syllabus at primary, middle and graduation level.
- For rural masses short courses on specific working software's should be developed.
- One focal point should be identified at village level for addressing all issues relating to rural women like credit, knowledge, skill, technological and marketing development.
- ICT policies could be designed with the concerns of women and marginalized people in mind, and that “if national ICT policy-makers were to gear deliberations towards what people in these areas need each morning when they rise, cook, want medical attention, seek crop prices, need weather forecasts, and seek education and jobs for their children, their ICT strategies would be more balanced” and therefore more successful in promoting national development goals.

**Conclusion:** Information and Communication technologies bridge the information gap in any discipline of life. It provides modern techniques and methods on the professional lines. ICTs provide various opportunities to women in various fields. However, they are facing a lot of problems like less education, computer illiteracy, costly ICTs infrastructure, and social norms. Government should design educational, digital and social reforms including training to progress the nation.

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