# ICT: A Key Factor in Women Empowerment

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**Abstract:**

*Women's status is the best indicator of progress of any nation. In the recent times ICT is catering a greater platform for women to rise from their subjugated and prove themselves on par with their counterparts. Similarly, it is providing novel avenues for women to empower themselves economically, technologically, socially and politically. The present times are earmarked by the use of Information and Communication Technologies that are evident in almost every field. ICTs mean a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information. In the present times women are using ICT in almost every walk of life. These technologies have boosted not only the morale of the women entrepreneurs, mangers, professionals and students, but it has also it has opened new avenues of income, identities and social statuses for rural women as well. The present paper attempts to examine the role of ICTs in the empowerment of women in India in the recent times.*

**Key Words:** ICT, women empowerment, status.

**Introduction:**

Women play a pivotal role in the development of any country. Women's status is the best indicator of progress of any nation. The present times are earmarked by the use of Information and Communication Technologies [ICTs] that are evident in almost every field. ICTs mean a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, bring value-addition and manage information. This sector consists of segments as diverse as telecommunications, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware, software and services and electronic media. The terms Information and Communication Technologies needs to be traced. ICT is generally accepted to mean all devices, networking components, applications and systems that combined allow people and organizations to interact in the digital world. Wikipedia defines Information and communication technology (ICT) as "an extended term for information technology (IT) which stresses the role of unified communications and the integration of telecommunications (telephone lines and wireless signals), computers as well as necessary enterprise software, middleware, storage, and audio-visual systems, which enable users to access, store, transmit, and manipulate information." (Web)

Wikipedia defines women empowerment as, "Women's empowerment refers to the ability of women to enjoy their rights to control and benefit from resources, assets, income and their own time, as well as the ability to manage risk and improve their economic status and wellbeing." (Web) The recent times showcase increase in women entrepreneurship in India wherein women are exploiting their capacities as entrepreneurs and business executives. They are holding the financial resources and power of decision making.

**Scope of the Study:**

Information and communication technology are the key role performers in empowering women. They are equal beneficiaries to the advantages of technology, and the product and processes, which are by product of the technology use. At the same time, it is not limited to elite



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group of society alone. The study aims to know about the role of ICT in empowering women from almost all segments of society.

**Objectives of the Study:**

1. To assess the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in women empowerment.
2. To study how ICTs are helpful for the enhancement of living standard of women.
3. To asses accessibility of ICTs for women empowerment.
4. To make suggestions and recommendations for the effective implementation of further ICTs based programmes for women empowerment.

The growing access of the web in the late 20th century has allowed women to empower themselves by using various tools on the Internet. With the introduction of the World Wide Web, women have begun to use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter for online activism. Through these, women are able to organize campaigns and voicing their opinions for equality rights without feeling oppressed by members of society. On May 29, 2013, for instance, an online campaign started by 100 female advocates forced the leading social networking website, Facebook, to take down various pages that spread hatred about women. Similarly, blogging has also become a powerful tool for the educational empowerment of women. By reading others' experiences, patients can better educate themselves and apply strategies that their fellow bloggers suggest. Consequently, with the easy accessibility and affordability of e-learning, women can now study from the comfort of their homes. By empowering themselves educationally through new technologies like e-learning, women are also learning new skills that will come in handy in today's advancing globalized world. There is a growing reality that women's engagement in ICTs is important for multiple forms of development, including social and political justice, as well as economic development.

Further, in the nations like India, where women are still in parochial constrains; ICTs facilitate them as a powerful tool for gender empowerment. The teledensity in India is increasing with a greater pace. Also, the number of internet accounts is growing at a rate of 50% per annum. By the year 2004, the ITES-BPO sector showcases 59% growth. Further, employment reached 106,000 by 2004. There is a strong digital segregation in society. According to the 2004 report by the Cisco Learning Institute women comprise only 23% of India's internet users. In 2005, Tamil Nadu introduced India Shop, an e-commerce website designed to sell products made by rural women's co-operatives and NGOs. Correspondingly, in 2004 Dhan Foundation and Swayam Krishi Sangam started using ICTs. These organizations intended to empower poor women through handheld devices and smart cards. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has several ICT projects for women, including community learning centers, a school of Science and Technology for self-employed women. Similarly, Telephone Project provides mobile phones to women in the informal sector.

In India more than 90% of females work in the informal sector and also in rural areas who are engaged in economic activities like handicrafts and sewing or rolling cigarettes, weaving of baskets and fabrics, working in cities as vendors – working without any contracts or benefits. ICT expose these women to telecommunication services, media and broadcast services which create markets for their products and services. Subsequently, the challenge will be to reach these women and provide them with ICT tools that they feel can make a difference in their income generation potential.

ICT plays a pivotal role in changing the concept of work and workplace. New areas of employment such as tele-working, i.e. working from a distance, are becoming feasible with new technology. As a result, women are getting more opportunities. Software services have opened up tremendous work opportunities for women in India.

These days ICTs are tending to be more useful and meaningful, particularly for rural and poor women as relevant information and tools are provided to women taking into consideration their needs and demands. Multimedia is providing information both in spoken and written language. One of the strategies adopted to increase access of remote areas and marginalized groups to ICT is the development of public access centers, such as public phones, telecenters, libraries, information centers or cybercafés. Telecenters can be part of existing institutions such as health centers, schools and community centers. The growth of cybercafés and booths has been very speedy in India, especially in the southern states where literacy is high. It is observed that approximately 63% non-working women access the net from cybercafés and 32% from home. Of course, the number of net users is on the hike.

ICT has become a major solution for comprehensive development starting from poverty eradication and empowerment of minority groups, such as women and minorities. Also, it has been observed that effective application of any technology is not gender neutral, neither in design nor in implementation. ICT establishes social, cultural and economic equality in India. Further, the urban-rural divide is wiped off as both cosmopolitan and marginal entrepreneurs are treated equally in the global market. This technology usage has benefitted the women in a large scale. Women are increasingly adopting ICT for various business related tasks like preparing letters and memos, producing report, data storage and retrieval, budgeting, planning and analyzing problems and alternatives. ICT has changed the way women entrepreneurs work. Women are found to be active and enthusiastic on computer training, computer repair work and e enabled businesses.

Women entrepreneurs are using modern and advanced ICT tools. Use of ICT fetches increased profits through business networking. IT increases productivity, improves job performance and enhances job effectiveness in women oriented businesses. ICTs allow women entrepreneurs to sell their products in the most profitable markets and determine the optimum timing of scale. Further, it has reduced transaction costs for businesses run by businesses and also enhanced market performance. Besides, women entrepreneurs can easily plan their product mix and input purchases in an efficient manner as information on prices are readily available. It also leads to reducing broker's exploitation. ICTs open new avenues for education, communication and information sharing and the marketable skills of women entrepreneurs are enhanced through training in emails, word processing and internet. Moreover, ICT reduces business costs, improves productivity and strengthens the firm in the competitive market. Government, therefore, should formulate special policies and schemes for financial support, infrastructural support and training facilities to promote and develop the usage of ICT among women entrepreneurs to make them self independent and self confident.

**New prospects of ICT for Women:**

ICT is empowering women from various dimensions, including education, employment and empowerment. According to the 2001 census, female literacy amounts to 54.16 % as against male literacy of 75.85 % in India. The enrolment of girls in Engineering/ Technology/ Architecture at the Bachelors level in 1998 is 57,968 as against 285,137 boys. The imbalance shows the prospects of women in the arena of ICT. Since the percentage of women enrolling for higher education is quite



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low, the benefit of ICT can go to a large section if more and more IT courses at 10+ or 12+ levels are introduced as vocational streams.

Government of India is providing special packages for rural women who are involved in home based or small-scale activities related to handloom, handicraft and sericulture. From identification of projects to the marketing of products, these packages are helping women entrepreneurs to a greater extent. Government of India has established Community Information Centres) at all block levels, designed as the prime movers of ICT in the most economically backward and geographically difficult terrains. This boosts their economic and social status. ICTs have created new types of work that favour women as it enables work to be brought to homes within work and family schedules. New ICT jobs for women in India are in the service industries in information processing, banking, insurance, printing and publishing. So far, the most promising potential for women is in the creation of new jobs at Call Centres and in work involving data processing.

**Success Stories from India:**

ICT has been empowering women through NGOs like Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which is establishing Technology Information Centers in 11 districts of Gujarat to provide computer awareness training for their "barefoot managers", build the capacity of women organizers and strengthen their members' micro-enterprises. Similarly, Community Radio in Andhra Pradesh has become popular due to development of Mana Radio, a community radio station run by members of the women's Self Help Groups (SHG) in Orvakal village, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh. Realizing the role that Community Media can play in development, empowerment and the right to information. Such programme orient women regarding their rights and assist them to earn their livelihood. Furthermore, Budhikote Cable Radio Network is run by 36 women's self-help groups in Budhikote, a cable radio network, first set up by UNESCO. With a contribution of 50 rupees every month from each woman, the network has grown to cover 250 of the 750 households of the village. The audio programs are narrowcast from the Budhikote Community Multi-media Center, where the women use computers to edit and produce the radio programmes on relevant issues, such as organic farming, sericulture, health, electricity and water problems.

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