
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: TRENDS AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Globalization and liberalization have made market forces predominant in liberal economies. The interaction of state actors and market forces are essential to destroy the imbalance between men and women as a drivers of economies. The service industries embraced Information and Communication Technology as a means to be relevant in the rapidly changing service ecosystem, this created a landscape for women to enter its workforce and disband patriarchal dominance. The women friendly environment of the IT and ITES sector ushered in structural changes in the societal interaction with the states. The rapid infusion of IT enabled devices deep within the fabric of the state, gave tremendous boost to women empowerment. India, being a knowledge hub of the world, readily adapted to the changes made relevant by IT revolution. Urban women with english education seamlessly integrated within the IT and ITES industries. The seemingly hospitable atmosphere in the industry provided amicable and consistent livelihood for the women and helped the industry to grow. Achieving equal parity with men, in terms of remuneration and status, IT and ITES industry is changing the way women are perceived in the society.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Information Technology, ITES, Employment.

Introduction: The gender debate throughout the world focus on the need for seeking balance in the workforce and livelihood between men and women. The feminist thinkers argue that the patriarchal system constantly desires to maintain status quo as regards to the subjugation of women in social, economic and political sphere. The advent of feminist movement during the 19th and 20th century, systematically disbanded the myth of weaker sex. The demand for workforce during the post industrial revolution in Europe propelled women to shun the traditional nuances and she actively participated in contributing for the economic wellbeing of the state. State create a system of interaction between the stakeholders and the markets. In the liberal economic system, it the the market forces that determine the way forward for the state. Therefore, it is imperative for the states to undergo changes to reflect the changes in the market systems.

The advent of information and communication technology during the 1990s combined with liberal economic policies and globalization helped the states to integrate, on a scale never seen before. These created level playing field where the traditional markets were destroyed and flattening of the world became a reality[1]. The supply and demand for technology enabled services created huge market for workforce that did not rely on gender. Women sitting in a cubicle in front of a computer could perform similar tasks that men performed. The less physical intensive work helped women to fill the demand gaps during the IT boom. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 23 percent computing workforce that were women in US[2]. The Indian agency NAASCOM

reveals that 20 to 25 percent of the women graduates in the country have science and engineering background. In India there are about 45 percent of women in IT sector[3]. The upward trend clearly shows that IT enabled services are empowering women. This paper argues that technology, especially related to IT and ITES, are leading women empowerment in India.

Internet Penetration in India: With a population of over 1.27 billion, India is still nascent when it comes to IT penetration. At present there are 243 million internet users in India and is expected to touch 500 million within the next 5 years[4]. Nearly 37 percent of all women in the world are online and in developed countries 74 percent of women are internet users[5]. Apart from traditional mode of communication using the personal computer, the rapid changes in technology has enabled mobile phones as a handheld computer device. Significantly the lower cost of mobile phones and its access to rural population has boosted internet penetration. In India, 75 percent of active internet users in rural area use mobile phones to go online[6].

Women and IT Sector: Technology can be seen as a great economic leveller in terms of gender parity. The post coldwar era provided a breeding ground for entrepreneurs who banked upon the liberal economic policies of their respective governments and the interlinking of states through globalization, to usher revolutionary communication technology to the masses. The growth of information technology during the 1990s brought in tectonic shift in service industries. These new developments affected banking, education, software development, medicine, media amongst others. The employment

opportunities in IT and IT enabled services (ITES) for women who equip themselves with English education are plenty. Apart from coding and writing software, which requires high level of skills, women at an entry level can perform various tasks such as data entry, medical transcription, business process outsourcing(BPO) etc.,

The spurt in IT sector has created enormous growth potential for women workforce. A large number of companies such as GE, American Express, Standard Chartered Bank, Citibank, British Airways, Microsoft and others have call centres where a sizeable number of women are employed ranging from 35 to 65%. GE capital had 40 to 55% women employees in their various centres. A study of an international call centre at Pune showed that 59% of employees were women[7]. Tata Consultancy Service (TCS) employs nearly 100,000 women who comprise 32.7% of the total workforce[8]. Similarly, Infosys Ltd and Wipro employs 34 percent and 32 percent women. In India, the IT sector employs about 1 million women of the total 3.1 million workforce[9]. These numbers indicate that women are utilizing the opportunity available to them and pushing the boundary to achieve parity with men by seeking employability in the IT, ITES and other sectors that are similar.

Women who are educated and have an urban background use the technology to fulfil various other activities. These activities include research, educational opportunities including prospects abroad, career advancement facilities, job and employment prospects in India and abroad, matrimonial, fashion and market values, health and child care facilities which includes sexual and reproduction activity, and other information [10].

The IT and ITES propel women to seek upgraded education even in rural areas. The social viability of advanced education and English medium which is concentrated in urban systems has gradually undergone rapid changes. The tier 2 cities and villages have attracted investment in social capital in the form of technology enabled classrooms and the penetration of technology in these areas. This will undoubtedly boost the technology transfer from urban to rural areas and help the women in

underdeveloped areas to seek the benefits of the IT and ITES.

The Role of State: The state plays an important role in uplifting women and provide a system which is conducive to her empowerment. The role of state actors as policy formulators helps bring changes at systemic level. The foremost aim being its role as a catalyst in bringing fine balance between men and women and creating a coherent society. The innovation and creation of a space in the workforce pattern for women, the state must make policies oriented towards emancipation of women. Without the will to bring about changes, the state might fail in its responsibility of creating a balance between men and women in the society. By making IT friendly policies and creating IT friendly society, the state is reinventing itself as a gender sensitive entity.

Conclusion: Evidence show that IT and ITES have created a new phase in economic empowerment of the state. The renewed vigour of this sectoral growth have boosted the demand of the workforce based, not on gender, but performance and deliverability. Hence it is imperative for the society and state to indulge in deliberations that would help further develop this industry. Though there are instances even in IT and ITES industry to marginalize women and usurp male chauvinism, the market forces will ultimately compel the industry and societies to create necessary infrastructure and atmosphere for women to streamline as an equal partner with her male counterpart to bring about balance in gender distribution of wealth and create synergy in thrusting the society as a gender sensitive and peaceful state.

What needs to be done is to unleash administrative reforms to enhance market reformation that encourage to invite private investment in the industry. The ability of the state to integrate market oriented reform in tier two cities and deep into the rural topography will be added advantage for women empowerment. The state need to enhance broadband penetration and provide opportunity for women to utilize the new communication technology. The propensity of internet growth might bring beneficial growth for the state in terms of qualitative improvement of the population.

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