Chapter 4.11
Gender and Information Technology in Rural Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) is transforming our personal, social, cultural, economic and political lives. But women in developing countries do not have equal access to knowledge, due to the fact that they do not have access to the new technologies at the same level as western European women. They need to understand the significance of new technologies and use them in relevant fields. IT can offer immense opportunities for virtually all girls and women in developing countries, including poor women living in rural areas.

Developing countries like Bangladesh are usually seen as problematic hosts for ITs because most developing regions of the country lack economic resources and indigenous techno-scientific capabilities to develop and deploy IT infrastructures. The regions also tend not to make the best use of opportunities of technology transfer.

The wider adoption of IT in the 1990s promised a globally connected community of equal participants in electronic networks. The Internet has enabled people to communicate regardless of race, sex, physical ability, location and social background (GVU, 1998). IT now offers access to a huge pool of information. The Internet enables worldwide communication that is cheaper, faster and more flexible than older media like e-mail, telephone, telex or fax.

BACKGROUND

In early 2000, an initiative was taken to develop a small river island (char) of Bangladesh through

establishment of a resource centre named Indigenous Science and Technology at Ikrail (ISTI), and using IT as the main vehicle for development. IT is a livelihood to many women of the developed countries but is almost unknown to the women and girls of the river island.

Women in Bangladesh are seen in the frontlines to fight against hunger, poverty and environmental degradation. Because of lack of awareness about the benefits of IT, they cannot raise their problems for solution to the proper authority. IT can benefit women in various ways and can facilitate their participation in different sectors and regions. It can provide information women need to improve their own well-being and that of their families. The introduction of computers in offices can improve the quality of work and scope for women in data entry, analysis, programming, clerical and administrative occupations in Bangladesh. IT could allow them to exchange views, opinions and information with women of other regions and countries.

The situation for rural populations in many regions of the world is characterized by geographical distance from urban centres that offer employment and income, education, cultural events and public services. IT bears the potential to improve the situation of rural people in several ways. For example, it is agreed that early diagnosis of medical issues can prevent many casualties. Once a patient comes to the health centre, using various sensors, information can be collected and communicated to an expert at hospitals in the district headquarters. The primary healthcare centre could be located in a rural area or in a mobile centre installed in a van.

IT offers access to information and extension, to education and training communication and networking in online discussions. IT also offers access to employment and income.

Infrastructural Problems

Poor healthcare can result from a lack of good information. Establishing reliable communications may be one of the most important priorities for improving healthcare and education. Many rural areas in the globe have no or outdated telephone lines that can transmit Internet-based data. The lack of infrastructure can be overcome by wireless technology (e.g., radio modems). Mobile telecentres can be a solution for the target group.

HEALTHCARE IT PROJECT

A significant number of women scientists, researchers and technologists work in rural Bangladesh. They are disadvantaged and traditionally underrepresented in most respects. Their knowledge and skills are unrecognized, underused and under valued. As such, they are in greater need of upgrading their skills, especially in the fast advancing world of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which might enable them to connect their global colleagues, sources of information and global knowledge wherever they may be located.

A survey conducted in early 2000 among 515 women professionals of various disciplines spanning life sciences, social sciences, physical sciences, mineral sciences, engineering, technologies and medical sciences identified that they are almost illiterate in IT, although they are well qualified and experienced in their respective fields. At the first step, the survey was conducted over the senior professors of the public and private universities, scientists of the Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), researchers of institutes of forest research, housing research, fuel research, jute research and water resource and geological research.

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