Gender and ICT Policies and Programmes in an Indian State

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INTRODUCTION

The development and use of information and communication technologies have stimulated huge changes in the life of people globally, leading to a process of transition from the industrial to the information society. The ultimate aim of the information society should be the empowerment and development of all its citizens through equal access to and use of information (Goulding & Spacey, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Unfortunately, despite the potential ability of information to empower disadvantaged groups and the massive investments in information and communication technologies, the information society has remained largely silent on gender issues (Jansen, 1989). There is evidence of a gender imbalance in the use of ICT that threatens to restrict women from being equal partners and beneficiaries of the emerging information society, thus creating a gender-based digital divide. Decades of experiences have shown that without explicit attention to gender in policy, gender issues are not considered for implementation (Hafkin, 2002). Policy making in technological fields often ignores the needs, requirements, and aspirations of women unless gender analysis is included (Marcelle, 2002). If gender issues are not articulated in ICT policy, it is unlikely that girls and women will reap the benefits of the information age (Hafkin). Closing one's eyes to this fact can entrench inequality and even enlarge the gender gap, making ICT a "gender-negative" technology (United Nation's Development Programme [UNDP], 2003).

Thus, the issue of mainstreaming gender into ICT policies and programmes in the context of India becomes important, as here the ICT policy and programmes have been viewed by national and state governments largely within neoliberal macroeconomic frameworks of gross domestic product (GDP), employment, and competitiveness (Gurumurthy, 2003) rather than as issues of development or empowerment as well. Moreover, as in most of the developing countries, ICT education in India is largely confined to cities as the institutions that offer ICT education are urban based. While there may be a marginally increased enrollment of women in technical institutes in the last two decades, this has not resulted in more women in ICT-related careers or at decision-making levels. Women are vastly underrepresented in government, business, and social and political institutions even in the urban context. Men still hold most of the management and control positions in ICT-related employment and policy-making bodies. In the ICT-related employment sector, males account for 70 to 75% of the workforce. It has been held that even in the urban context, in the period following education, mobility or a lack of it is a crucial factor that affects the access to ICT and networking capacities of women, which is reflected in the extent of the presence of women in this sector (Pichappan, 2001). Women in India are considered to be the most socially excluded group, and a lack of access to information is being identified as one of the most important reasons for their exclusion (Hooper, 2003). This lack of access to information has added to their alienation from mainstream development activities and empowerment, resulting in increased social exclusion and economic and political marginalization, especially of rural, tribal, and other socially disadvantaged women of India.

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A Brief Profile of the Indian State of Chattisgarh

Chattisgarh is a newly formed state of India that came into existence in the year 2000. It is a state richly endowed with natural resources but also marked with severe poverty, backwardness, illiteracy, and ignorance: 79% of the state population lives in rural areas, 32.55% of the population is of scheduled tribes (STs), and 12.22% is of scheduled castes (SCs). During 1999 to 2000, the state was third in share of the rural poor in India, with 11.35% of the total poor. Its low position in social and economic infrastructure and development is well documented (Dev, 2004; Kannan, 2004). The state has been ranked second to last in the list of all Indian states for telecommunications density (report of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, http://www.trai.gov.in/dld1.html).

Women in Chattisgarh

Women in Chattisgarh are visible in every walk of life, be it in agriculture, in the collection and processing of the state's rich forest wealth, or in construction and wage work in urban areas. Contrary to the situation in many parts of India, Chattisgarh enjoys a comparatively favorable position in terms of women's population as reflected in the sex ratio, which is 990 females to 1,000 males (census of India, 2001, http://www.censusindia.net/). However, in terms of infant mortality rates, its record is 97 girl deaths out of 1,000 infants, which is the highest in India (Rustogi, 2003). Furthermore, during 2000 to 2001, the school dropout rate (Class I-VIII, i.e., grade one to grade eight in schools in India) in Chattisgarh was 47.15%. This rate was higher among the SC (49.95%) and ST (63.68%) categories. Also, the female dropout rates were much higher than those of males (social infrastructure document, http://chhattisgarh.nic.in/opportunities/Social%20Infrastructure.pdf).

ICT Policies and Programmes

Nevertheless, with the formation of a separate state for its people, the state is aspiring for the prosperity and growth of its people (state vision document, http://chhattisgarh.nic.in/vision/new/Chp%205%20-%20Unlocking%20Natural%20Wealth.PDF). Expressing its commitment toward the development of its woman population, the state has envisaged a very ambitious and comprehensive women's policy (http://chhattisgarh.nic.in/wcd/womenpolicy.PDF). Realizing the importance of ICT, Chattisgarh also has a very comprehensive and ambitious IT policy (http://chhattisgarh.nic.in/policy/IT%20Policy.pdf). After its emergence in November 2000, the state government launched a number of ICT-related schemes and programmes for the benefit and development of its people, which are listed as follows:

1. **Bhuiyan:** All land records are computerized under this scheme. By paying only rupees, anyone can get a copy of the land records. Implemented in all Tehasil (Block) headquarters of the state, it is also planned to be extended to the villages at a future date.
2. **E-Sangwari:** This scheme is implemented with the objective of providing seven services to common citizens and was launched in the Bilaspur district only: (a) death certificates, (b) birth certificates, (c) caste certificates, (d) Form 16, pertaining to income tax, (e) khasaras (land records), (f) income certificates, and (g) domicile certificates.
3. **E-Kosh:** This scheme started in December 2004 to computerize all treasury transactions of the district headquarters.
4. **E-Panchayatas (Local Self-Government Units):** This programme was launched on January 26, 2005. It is executed through janpad panchayatas (local self-government units). Each janpad panchayata is given two computers that will be linked by satellite. The total cost of the project is over 9 million rupees, excluding the cost of software and satellite linking. It is sought to be an informative programme aimed at informing the rural people about the development and welfare schemes, and making available forms online. It is expected to be interactive in the future.
5. **Videoconferencing:** This programme was launched in January 2001. The heads of various government departments answer the ques-

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