Chapter 4
Gender, Culture, and ICT Use

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) hold great promise in the drive for development and poverty reduction in the global south under the globalization processes (Best & Maier, 2007)

The advent of the new technology was originally seen as a positive development for women's work. India is one of the largest providers of off- shored BPO activities such as Call Centres services and others which have become emerging workspaces. To a large extent, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) hold great promise in the drive for development and poverty reeducation in the global south under the globalization process. It has been dubbed "the great equalizer," and the spread of IT – enabled services are beneficial for both men and women, those who have limited skills, or a lack of resources. In spite of gender discrimination and gender bias, employees of ICT companies are facing various challenges in their day to day life such as work family interface, health status, mobility in odd hours, and decision making levels. Especially Call Centre jobs have a direct impact on people's health, interpersonal relationships, and stress on the work environment; they may suffer from loneliness, depression, and anxiety related problems. Therefore, urgent attention should be given towards the increased rate of mental disorders, suicides, and family distortions. Initiation of family counseling centres and other coping and intervention strategies should be implemented for the empowerment of women workers in ICTs.

INTRODUCTION

Gender empowerment and economic development go hand in hand (Boserup, 1970; Elson 1995, Government of India, 2001). United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (2005) called the empowerment of Women 'The most effective development tool'. There is a general notion that society that discriminates by gender pay a high price in terms of their ability to develop and reduce poverty. The introduction of technologies has often implicitly been designed to meet the needs of men, not of women (Basu 2000; Elson 1995; Hafkin 2000). Only after the breakthrough by liberal feminist

Esther Boser up of the classic 'women's Role in Economic Development (1970) did awareness emerge of a 'like' between gender and development in the development community. Until then, development programs followed a 'Western, almost Victorian, home-economic model' (Hafkin 2008:8) that considered women primarily in their role as mothers and care givers. Programs were designed to improve the physical wellbeing of women, often through well-intentioned modernization projects that replaced manual field labour with artificial fertilizers, tractors, and thrashers, and put women in the role of dependent welfare recipients, because the programs planned for the training of men, not women, in the use of these new technologies. However women in India are the passive beneficiaries of development programmes till today due to gender bias and gender discrimination.

Indeed the Annual UNDP Human development reports of 2003-2005 show a direct correlation between the level of gender empowerment in a society, measured on the basis of Women's literacy and education rates, access to health care, capital, means of production, and degree of Women's participation in public and professional life and that country's level of economic, social and political development.

The reasons are clear as follows:

- Countries that effectively exclude Women from learning, health care and public sphere 'deprive themselves of the creativity and productivity of half its citizens' and will find it nearly impossible to close the economic gap with advanced developed nations.
- ICTS have been identified as one of the most effective tools to bring about gender and economic development almost simultaneously.
- IT has been dubbed 'the great equalizer' and the spread of IT – enabled services has been immensely beneficial to both women

and men, especially those who have limited skills or lack of resources to invest in higher education.
- Despite encouraging success stories, profound gender differences remain in the IT sector all over the world.
- Women continue to face barriers in using ICTs,
- Mostly lack of training, lack of access, the high costs of equipment and connection as well as software and hardware applications and designs that do not reflect the needs of women.

On the whole, the IT and ICTs enabled services enhanced the income levels of women. The growth in IT sector has created numerous opportunities for employment and the so-called 'new age work spaces' for both men and women. Under globalization processes, ICTS have been identified as one of the most effective tools to bring about gender and economic development almost simultaneously. IT has been dubbed 'the great equalizer' (Drucker 2001), and Keelkar and Nathan (2002) optimistically argue that 'the spread of IT-enabled services has been immensely beneficial to both women and men, especially those who have limited skills or lack of resources to invest in higher education' (p.433; see also Everts 1998; Friedman 2005; Goyal 2005; Hafkin and Huyer 2006; Mitter 2005; Nath 2001).

Therefore ICT has opened up a direct window for women to the outside world. Information flows to them without distortion or any form of censoring, and they have access to the same information as their counterparts. This leads to broadening of perspectives, building up of greater understanding of their current situation and causes of poverty, and initiation of interactive processes for information exchange. Furthermore, such forms of networking open up alternate forms of communication (Sharma 2003: 1). However, despite encouraging success stories, profound gender differences remain in the IT sector all

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