
Role of Information Technology in Women Empowerment

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ABSTRACT *This article explores the role of information Technology in women empowerment. India has become a dominant player in the information technology industry globally. In the past decades industrial scenario in India was dominated by agriculture and manufacturing sector growth. But in the last 10 years especially after 1995 information technology industry has started contributing significantly in economic growth of India. Information Technology now is a robust industry worth \$60 billion. Information Technology industry is unique with regard to participation of women in the workforce. Every second fresh recruit in IT industry now is a woman. E-governance initiative of government has also opened an opportunity for women empowerment by increasing access to information for women. IT provides access to same information to women as it is available to men. This information flow is uncensored and without any distortions. The major players in IT industry are now offering an environment that will retain the talented women workforce. To develop women friendly work environment leading companies are now offering benefits like lactation centers, extra maternity leave, work from home policies, creches, and option to relocate to city of their choice in case of transfer of the husband. Not just a good human resource practice, but it has become a matter of survival for companies facing talent crunch. Gender diversity has become a business need. Educated Women have had significant breakthrough by breaking the traditional household, child rearing, socially oppressed life style, because of access to IT. IT reduces the impact of barriers of time and distance in organizing and managing the service delivery of businesses. A large part of jobs outsourced*

are going to women. The freedom to work from anywhere and anytime can become a catalyst for financial independence and empowerment of women by enhancing their extra income. According to a report released by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), since 2004-05, women internet users increased from 28% in 2004-05 to 32% in 2005-06 [12.32 million]. India shop, an e-commerce website in Tamilnadu, has been designed to sell products made by rural women's co-operatives and NGOs. The Dhan Foundation and Swayam Krishi Sangam are using ICTs such as handheld devices and smart cards, to improve microfinance projects to empower poor women since 2004. Anita Borg Institute of Women and Technology is the outcome of her sustained efforts which was founded in the year of 1997. She demonstrated the risk taking ability of women. Women entrepreneurs like Sarada Ramani of Computer International, Sangeeta Patni of Extensio Software, are setting the trend of entrepreneurship which will foster a new era of women empowerment, where women will get financial independence, respect, honor, and self actualization that they deserve. The article discusses the strengths, opportunities of information technology and the role it can play for women empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Entrepreneurship, Microfinance, E-governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every second recruit entering the \$60 billion Indian IT industry is a woman. Currently, Infosys employs the largest percentage of women at 33.4%, followed by TCS 30% and Wipro 29%. The major players in IT industry are now offering an environment that will

retain the talented women workforce. To develop women friendly work environment leading companies are now offering benefits like lactation centers, extra maternity leave, work from home policies, creches, and option to relocate to city of their choice in case of transfer of the husband. IBM has also launched a diversity drive in the campuses specially to attract women in their workforce. In IBM the percentage of women has climbed up to 26%. (Singh Harsimran & Singh Shelley, 2009)

2. ROLE OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

Various organizations including NGO's, government, and private institutions have led to improvement in status of women through ICT.

2.1 ROLE OF NGO'S Smile (Savitri Marketing Institution for Ladies Empowerment) organizes IT seminars in collaboration with IT companies. NIIT has launched SWIFT JYOTI programme for IT education of women. The programme is designed to provide computer literacy to females from six years to sixty years. It provides functional literacy on the one hand and benefits women in seeking and receiving information useful in their daily life. The duration of SWIFT JYOTI programme is 18 hours. SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) has launched IT programme to increase efficiency of rural micro enterprises. Ujjas Innovation: It is an initiative to empower women by bringing out their own newsletter called "Ujjas". The newsletter went on air on All India Radio Bhuj Station in Gujarat. The newsletter provides a medium to express views against female infanticide, dowry, and other relevant issues.

2.2 ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Yeshaswini Nagara Hagu Grameena Abhivruddi Parishat in association with Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (KSWDC) has launched e-mahile project to women's drawn from over 200 villages in 11 districts of the State. Then, each trained woman who is called village service provider, will be given a laptop, printer, UPS, soil testing kit, LCD projector, digital camera, e-mahile dual language software and educational CDs, Internet connection, IRTC currency for booking rail and air tickets at a cost of Rs. 1,80,000. Nationalized banks will support these women by providing loans. Apart from loans, the government will give Rs. 10,000 as subsidy to each woman under the Asare programme. This is besides the Rs. 25,000 margin money. Personality development courses and Yoga classes are the added benefits. Many women with their newborns are attending the training camp and the organizers have set up a creche and appointed women to take care of the children. Gyandoot: Gyandoot is an e-government project started by the state government of MP (India) that won the prestigious Stockholm Challenge award in 2000. The project provides a network of computers connecting the rural areas and fulfilling the everyday, information related needs of the rural people. M.S. Research Project in Pondicherry is providing internet connectivity to create information villages. The project has developed a "hub and spokes" distribution model where Web-based data is downloaded in a community with an Internet connection and subsequently relayed through a local voice/data network to community Village Knowledge Centre's (VKCs) in six nearby villages. Datamation foundation in collaboration with the UNESCO has set up a community media centre in a madarasa in extremely backward Seelampur-Zaffrabad in New Delhi. The project aims to empower girls

with the basic computer skills for their better future.

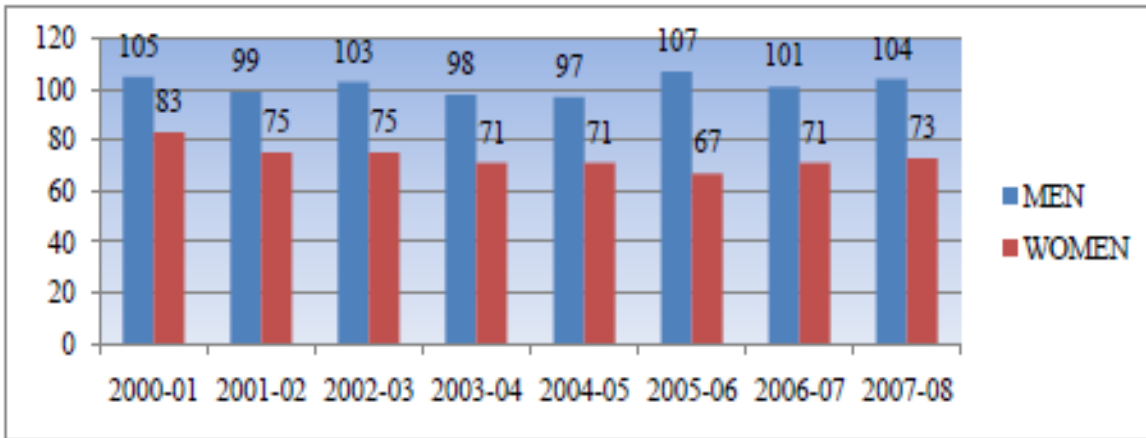
Dairy Information System Kiosk (DISK) is a project in Gujarat which provides Internet connectivity and a portal at the district level serving transactional and information needs of all members. DISK has improved efficiency of milk buying process at 2,500 rural milk collection societies. Software called AkashGanga has been developed with special features to enable speedier collection of milk and faster disbursement of payments to dairy farmers.

2.3 ROLE OF PRIVATE SECTOR

Project Shakti launched by Hindustan Unilever promotes internet penetration among rural women. The project now provides services to 135000 villages, across 15 states and has developed 45000 women entrepreneurs. Project Shiksha of Microsoft and Internet Bus of Google are also contributing to increase internet awareness. E-choupal initiative of ITC has reached 40,000 villages covering 4 million farmers through 6500 kiosks. NASSCOM: National Association of Software and Service Companies provide mentoring and empowering women managers across junior,

middle and senior level from the IT Industry through various workshops, activities and training sessions. India Shop, an e-commerce website in TamilNadu, has been designed to sell rural women's cooperatives and NGO's. Swayam Krishi Sangam (SKS) is using ICT's such as smart cards and hand held devices to improve microfinance projects to empower poor women. NABANNA: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge, a UNESCO sponsored project in NABANNA, India was launched to empower women through use of intranet portals, databases, and web based applications. Through the NABANNA network women share local indigenous information and information obtained at group meetings and newsletter. Women gained more respect in their local community. Younger women were more confident to approach job market. Women became more creative after learning programs like paintbrush. Women developed a sense of unity among them and bringing forth leadership qualities. Employment opportunities in the ICT sector: Women friendly environment is creating opportunities for women employment. The gender distribution of employment in ICT manufacturing sector is given in table1.

TABLE 1: NO. OF PERSONS ENGAGED IN ICT MANUFACTURING SECTOR-GENDER WISE (IN '000)



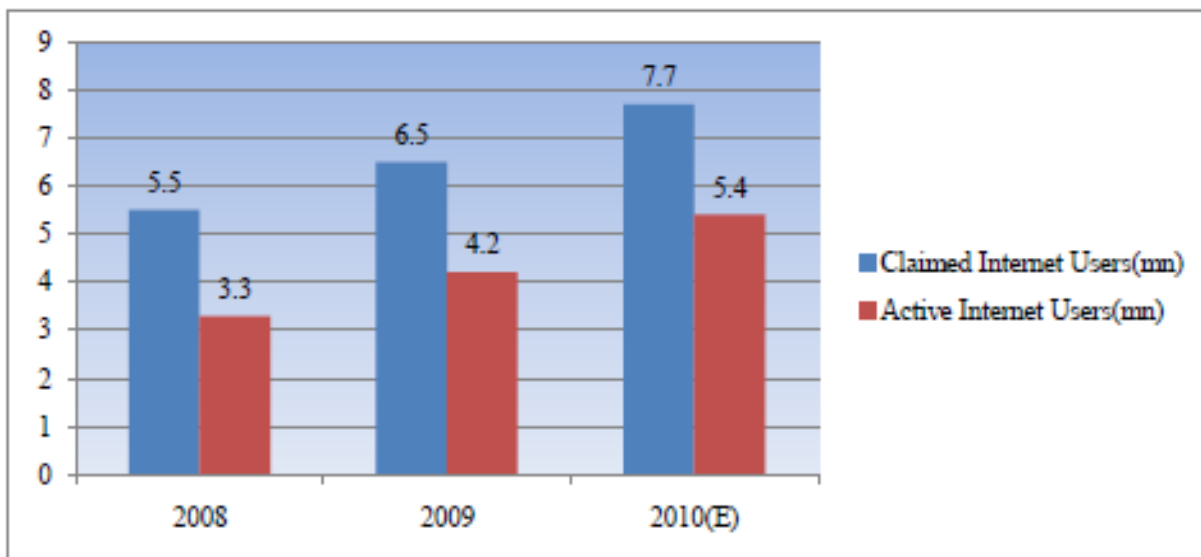
Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation

3. INCREASING INTERNET PENETRATION IN RURAL INDIA

Survey done by Internet and Mobile Association of India in 2009 reveals that there are 6.5 million claimed internet users, 4.18 million active internet users. The table shows

the growth rate of internet penetration in rural India. “Claimed” internet users are those who claim to have accessed the medium at least once at some point in time. “Active” users, pegged at 52 million, are those who access the medium at least once a month.

TABLE2: RURAL INTERNET PENETRATION



Source: Internet and Mobile Association of India

4. CHALLENGES

The Women employees have to face challenges of long work hours, constant travelling and juggling different time zones of international clients, Social issues on account of working during night. As a result the industry is losing women employees at the middle and senior management level. In Infosys top management has less than 2% women employees. In a study conducted to assess the status of women in technical education and employment in Karnataka state by Sequeira A.H. (2005) self employment among degree and diploma holders was as low as 1% of the total number of pass outs. Access to technology and internet connectivity in the remote villages is a great challenge in India. To capitalize on the opportunities for women empowerment provided by Information Technology it is important to increase internet connectivity in remote villages. The other challenges are:

1. Poor regulation, and support for women working in informal sector.
2. Poor awareness of ICT for women.
3. Lack of e-commerce related infrastructure in developing countries.
4. Language barriers for the use of ICT for non English speakers.
5. Paternal set up of Indian society.
6. Poor Internet Usage: Women form a very small part of the internet population in the country, with working and non-working women accounting for only 8 per cent and 7 per cent of the internet users" universe.
7. Conservative outlook for working women.

8. Challenges of managing career and family.

5. OPPORTUNITIES

Nasscom estimates that the male: female ratio in IT industry has improved from 70:24 in 2005 to 70:30 now. IT reduces the impact of barriers of time and distance in organizing and managing the service delivery of businesses. A large part of jobs outsourced are going to women. The freedom to work from anywhere and anytime can become a catalyst for financial independence and empowerment of women by enhancing their extra income. A women entrepreneurship cell should be set up to handle the various problems of women entrepreneurs in all states at the college level.

5.1 PROMOTING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN IT

Sarada Ramani started Computer International with six employees. Now the firm has transformed into an outsourced product development company with 150 employees. Sangeeta Patni at Extensio Software builds technology in India and sells it to the rest of the world. The ten employee company has now MNC"s like SAP, IBM, and ACC as its major clients. Rakhee Nagpal started Dynamic Vertical Solutions (DVS), an ERP solution provider for retail and hospitality industry in 2006. Its list of major clients includes D"damas, Lilliput, Devyani Group among others. Anu Lall, CEO of SNARTAK IT Solutions started the business with a mere Rs.12000. Now the firm has reputed corporate like Siemens, Satyam, Ranbaxy, Apollo Tyres and others as their client. These women entrepreneurs will become the role models and inspire many more to become entrepreneurs.

Apart from entrepreneurship other opportunities are:

1. Flexibility for women to work from home.
2. Women friendly working environment in IT companies.
3. Enhanced access of women to distance learning.
4. Access to information through e-governance initiatives of government.
5. Better market access for micro enterprises through e-commerce.
6. Regulatory support by government to support microfinance and mobile banking for women empowerment.

6. STRENGTHS

Abilities to learn quickly, their persuasiveness, open style of problem solving, willingness to take risk and chances, ability to motivate people, knowing how to win and lose gracefully are the qualities that shine Indian women personality.

6.1 ROLE MODELS

Women who have achieved commanding position in the industry will inspire more women to follow their footsteps.

Neelam Dhawan, Managing Director of Hewlett-Packard India. She has countrywide responsibility for revenues and profitability and ensuring the greatest leverage from HP's Services, Personal Systems and Imaging & Printing businesses. With a portfolio that extends to offshore activities, BPO, Software

Engineering, Research and IT Services, Neelam is focused on shaping the company's overall business agenda and leading its strategy and corporate development efforts to make HP the most admired company in India.

Chandra Prabhakar, Vice President-On Demand Solutions, Ramco Systems. She was an important contributor in the mainframe, client server, and e-commerce projects.

Kalyani Narayanan, CEO of Allfon Systems: She was able to independently manage large critical applications. At the age of 22, she designed developed and deployed applications.

Dr. M. Revathy Sriram, Director of M/s Tejas Brainware Systems (P) Ltd, has 40 years of IT experience.

Mrs. Sumitra Seshan is COO of Fifth Generation Technologies India Ltd.

Sudha Jagadish, COO of Dax Networks: She had excelled in service, purchase, credit control and HR, and the major departments of the organization.

Pamela Ramalingam, COO of Thales Group India: She has rich experience of working in leading American, British and Indian companies.

Sadhana Somasekhar, Joint M.D Future Focus Infotech. She is the global head for the organization's business operations. She is also the founder chairman of Platinum Infosystems

Gayatri Viswanathan, founder and VP Delivery. She has rich experience of software development, project management, and solutions delivery.



CONCLUSION There is growing recognition of role played by ICT industry in women empowerment. Industry norms are undergoing metamorphosis to attract and retain talented women employees. The need to balance work family balance is creating a talent crunch in the middle and top management. These talented women can utilize their experience and talent to become entrepreneurs. Women at the top of ICT industry are setting a role model for the young generation. Women have to maintain a balance between professional and personal life to capitalize on the opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technology. Family members should support the women to utilize their talent and skills to establish their unique identity and for the economic welfare of the family

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