The Role of ICT in Empowering Women: a case study of Pakistan

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Abstract: This study examines the economic and technological challenges faced by women in developing countries like Pakistan. Recently, United Nations are giving priority to women's equality. Majority of women do not have access to the internet. Only an effective government structure and a fair economic system can make a difference. However, economic growth will not necessarily reduce inequality and poverty. Some government policies have negative impact on women's empowerment such as immediate effect of the consumable items price hike is enormous. In the same way, the creeping growth of private school and health service is contributing to an increasing inequality and poverty. In this situation, Information and Communication and Technologies (ICTs) have become a very sensitive factor to uplift the social and economic situation of people. Gender inequality exists in Pakistan, therefore, the gender equality gap is measured by looking at education, employment, health, and politics. ICT can be used as tool for women empowerment, without it, there is little possibility for Pakistan to improve its ranking, as set by the United Nations eGovernment Index. Understanding the process by which ICT might foster socioeconomic development is challenging. Nevertheless, ICT can empower women, and this empowerment focus on the importance of increasing their control over decision-making and improving their living standards. In the end, this study provided the SWOT analysis to see the challenges of ICT initiatives for women empowerment in Pakistan.
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1. Introduction

In the last few years, many research papers have examined the impact of ICT in our societies and economies, and this literature has developed many new empirical and theoretical research. Most of the time, researchers have focused on the economic impact of ICT along with key productivity indicators at micro, meso and macro level from sector to regions and countries (Evengalista et al., 2007 and OECD 2004). This suggests that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be achieved without focusing on ICT and its impact on women empowerment.

The Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum ranks Pakistan in 143 place, out of 144 countries. Thus, it is a very alarming situation and an under-researched area in Pakistan. ICT is the only possible solution to make education accessible to women in developing countries like Pakistan. It can enable women and the whole society to derive benefits from e-Learning, e-Health, and e-Commerce. ICT includes computers, internet, radio, telephone, and television to store, process, exchange, and distribute information to form our world global village (United Nations, 2003). ICT can play a very important role in reducing poverty, improving literacy, and empowering disadvantaged groups, such as minorities and women in developing countries (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Friedman, 2005; Heeks, 2004; Bhatnagar & Schware, 2002; and Hafkin & Taggert, 2001). ICT is an essential tool to improve literacy, employment, and businesses and increased social networking (Badran, 2010). ICT has brought many opportunities for social networking and economic development. ICT facilitates the can access and reach at anytime and anywhere and everyone can access government information at their doorsteps (Melhem et al., 2009). Nowadays, social networking and economic development are not possible without ICT. Therefore, ICT empowers the women, and improves their living standards. It is essential to address gender issues and to come up with an action plan to empower women and provide maximum opportunities to them at their doorsteps.

The Ministry of IT Government of Pakistan mainly focused on the empowerment of women, who represent 49 percent of the total population in Pakistan. Government mainly focus upon girls and women access to ICT for supporting gender equality and reducing inequality. Also, the government of New Zealand, emphasized the role of women in ICT. In this connection, the government of New Zealand is providing many facilities to women in the field of ICT, so that it can overcome the shortage of IT skilled workforce.

Obstacles to Women's Access:

ICT can help women to improve their capability to make strategic life choices and empower them (Kapeer, 1999), and it is a fundamental human rights goal that has positive impact for their health. There are many factors, such as language, religion, time, cost, culture, and digital literacy create obstacle in women access to ICT. We cannot achieve sustainable economic growth, creation of wealth, and human development without providing ICT access to women (ITU, 2006). Women represent a very small educated and privileged class in under develop countries (Huyer & Mitter, 2003). After harassment and poverty, access to ICT is the most important problem women are facing globally, as stated by the United Nations (Hafkin & Taggard, 2001). Thus, we can consider that access to ICT is the solution of most problems for women and it can empower women to participate in their daily life in a better way.

Impact of ICT on Women's Work:

Women empowerment can improve their living standards and provide them better opportunities in their life. To understand the gender issue, it is essential to study the religion, cultural issues, and the contextual practices and economic account of countries (Geldof, 2011). Many women are getting jobs in ICT-related filed such as in the assembly of electronics, in the manufacturing sector, banking sector, service industries, and in media. Women should understand the importance of new emerging technologies and familiar themselves with them in order to participate in the development of their countries (Badran, 2010).

Women economic empowerment through ICT:

There is no doubt that ICT is playing very important role in women's empowerment and can add a new dimension in this area (Huyer & Sikoska, 2003). ICT is an important tool for women's empowerment and provides them all kind of basic information with one-click access at their fingertips. Women farmers can get maximum advantage of new emerging technologies, improve their production, and get access to wholesaler through the use of ICT. Older women can learn computer skills from the new generation, who has good command of new technologies.

Pakistan is not performing well on the eGovernment Development Index (EGDI) see Figure 1. In the same way, Pakistan e-Participation Index (EPART). Nevertheless, Pakistan can encourage women to participate in all spheres of life in order to improve its ranking and position in both indexes.
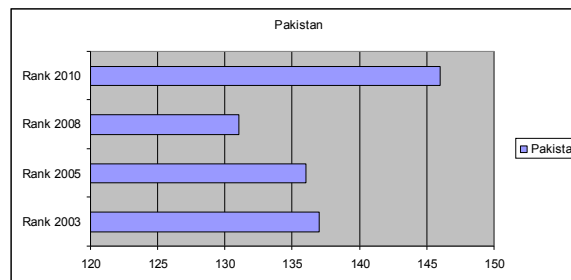

Figure 1: Pakistan e-Government ranking
Source: http://www.unpan.org/egovkb

Justification for the Research:

This research examines the key factors involved in the economic empowerment of women through the use of ICT. For this study, empowerment is used to provide political and social freedom to utilize ICT to enhance capability. In this connection, this study collects qualitative data to examine the empowerment and progress in daily life of women through the ICT. The study also provides policy implications and suggestions for further research.

Problem Statement:

"To what extent can ICT play a role through government initiatives for women empowerment ultimately to get the sustainable economic development in Pakistan".

2.   Literature review:

Nowadays, there is no sustainable development without the use of ICT. ITU (2005) emphasized that ICT can be considered a development enabler for the transformation of a country and for it to leapfrog the development process, as well as improve government efficiency and effectiveness (Karake-Shalhoub & Qasimi, 2007; & Heeks, 2004). Therefore, it is essential for every country to improve their economic condition by focusing on the use of ICT.

Recent literature is showing increasing impact of ICT on women empowerment and transform their knowledge into innovative services (Ambujam & Venkalakshmi, 2009; Levis, 2011). Moreover, ICT helps women to participate in different social activities from their home (Anitha & Sundharavadivel, 2012). Nevertheless, many ICT programs have been launched to improve women social networking and living standards.

An equal share of ICT has been promoted at the United Nations 4th Conference on Women in 1995, which was held in Beijing. In its strategic

objectives, the following is described: it is essential for us to improve women participation in decision-making through the use of ICT. In the same way, we need to allow equal participation of women in all UN organizations. Mostly women entrepreneurs are promoting their business through use of internet. Most of them have their own business websites to promote their businesses. In same way, World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) conference in Geneva 2003 identified that ICT development provides many opportunities for women empowerment, as well as helps them play a role of key actor in information society and create gender equality.

ICT improves women's participation and to have sustainable economic growth (Chen, 2004). The result provided evidence indicating that gender equality in education is an important contributor to gender equality in employment. ICT, in a relatively short period has had a major transformative impact across all strata of society.

This area is still under-researched and requires more gender-focused research on ICT and women's empowerment to examine if ICT really make an impact to bridge the "gender-divide", as asserted by Abbasi (2007). The study should also be conducted to find ICT diffusion, its impact to improve women living standards and roles in the community, and to their mode of thinking (Drucker, 2001). Many studies had called ICT "the great equalizer" and pioneer in the field of gender development, both in academia and advocacy (Huyer, 2005; Haflan, 2002; Hafkin & Taggert, 2001). Nowadays, women are getting better jobs in ICT industry.

ICT help women earn money from their home and they can work in a flexible environment (Badran, 2010). In developing countries, women do not have access to internet in their homes; most of the time, they access the internet through public, work-related or education institutions networks. Many studies have been conducted to establish the direct and causal relationship between ICT and women empowerment, but the relationship is being shaped by a multidimensional interrelationship between social context and ICT.

3. Research Methods

This section analysis the variables that effect ICT initiatives for women empowerment in Pakistan. In this regard, government departments will be the unit of observation and analysis. The perception of government about ICT initiatives to empower women has been collected through a survey. Thus, this study will concentrate on the latest ICT initiatives of the public sector for empowering women in Pakistan.

The study has been conducted after the analysis of primary and secondary data collected from government and private websites and ICT industries. With this data, a SWOT analysis has been conducted to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the ICT sector for empowering women.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses one dependent/outcome variable e.g. women empowerment is the dependent variable. Women can be more empowered if government initiatives use ICT to empower women. So, independent variable is "government initiatives", and "ICT" can be considered as a moderating variable (Figure 2).
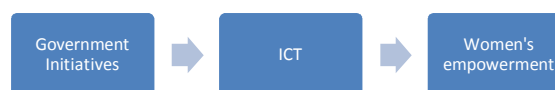

Figure 2: independent, moderating, and dependent variables.

4. Findings

A survey has been conducted to see the perception of government officials about the role of ICT to empower women. The response received from government officials on the question that ICT can play vital role to empower women. The answers are really astonishing because no one voted in opposition. Prior to this survey, it was anticipated that government officials are not in favor of equal participation of women, but the result reflects that government officials are very optimist and said that ICT can improve their comfort level and provide a flexible work environment. Now, it is a government duty to allocate funds and prepare an action plan for women to have an equal participation in government departments. Nevertheless, the government can set timelines to reach an equal women government participation in all government departments, from local to federal level.

SWOT Analysis

In this section, the challenges of ICT initiatives for women empowerment in a developing country like Pakistan is analyzed. Technological, social, economic, and political SWOT-analyses are presented (Table 1).

Table 1: SWOT Analyses

Social, Economic, Political, and Technological aspects	
Strengths	Weaknesses
-Women are eager to learn IT-related skills; -Skilled women can possibly have a better family living standard; -Women empowerment is an argument for external funding; -Combination with government reforms; -Modern image of the country; -Availability of employment for educated women from local to federal level.	-Poor women enrolment; -Low digital literacy; -Different languages; -Use for election campaign to get votes; -Social-cultural norms discouraging women; -High cost of internet; -Lack of micro-credits; -Lack of government support for women; -Lack of awareness of ICT benefits.
Opportunities	Threats
-Women get better employment opportunities through the use of ICT; -e-Learning provides education at the doorstep of each women; -Women are willing to work in government departments as compared to private organizations; -Raises external funding; -Reengineering government processes is not possible without women participation	-Women not practicing IT-related skills after training; -Women can be influenced by other cultures; -Pessimist mindsets to resist; -Use religion to restrict women; -Terrorism; -Bureaucracy should allow equal participation of women in government departments; -Political instability.

5.   Conclusion

ICT can be considered as a tool to empower women, create gender equality, and reduce poverty. Without its adoption, there is little chance to develop and empower women especially in developing countries like Pakistan. There is a need to study women access and use of ICT for more economic and social development of society.

Future Research

The study like women empowerment through ICT initiatives in developing countries like Pakistan, where women are sometime restricted upto homes because of religion, is really complicated to understand. There is a need to understand the barriers regarding the use of ICT by women.

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