

Gender, E-Commerce and Development

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This chapter discusses gender issues given the adoption and use of ICTs for developing countries. It asks questions like “Do women have equal access to the Net? Have business and career options increased for women through e-commerce? What are the major barriers to women’s participation in e-commerce in the developing countries?”

The chapter has been organized in 5 sections. The first section deals with the relevance of gender issues in e-commerce settings and reveals that due to socio-cultural factors, women experience more barriers in getting education or training. This is due to lower levels of access to educational resources and the preference of parents for males to receive education over females. This situation becomes more visible in case of ICT in developing countries, where moreover women have lower levels of access to ICTs in rural areas compared to urban areas. Consequently, women find it difficult either to pursue higher studies or maintain their career status and skills for these socio-familial reasons.

Section B of this report is worthy of special attention. It discusses opportunities for women in the digital medium. Due to the emergence of IT enabled services (ITeS) and the adoption of ICTs in education, health, finances and agriculture sector, etc., new career opportunities have arisen for women. We notice many women entrepreneurs looking after telecentres, call centres, internet cafes and telephone booths, in addition to computer related assignments in many developing countries. The famous example of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh befits the discussion, where rural women can acquire cell phones or have access to mobile pay phone. This helps them in performing their business transactions through lower capital and skills requirements. In some cases, even the middlemen could be avoided resulting in higher gains to women doing business. An illustrative example of this can be cited for e-chaupal experiment by ITC (Indian Tobacco Company) in Indian villages.

From the reports available, it is clear that business-to-consumer (B2C) transactions are catching up fast in South Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East Region. Examples include IndiaShop in India, selling of baking confectioneries in Peru, selling traditional costumes and food items over the Internet in Ethiopia or selling handmade products by women in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. But in spite of such examples of e-retailing, it is observed that still there is greater scope for spread of this movement in the poorer region of the world.

Regarding better opportunities for women, it has been found that B2B (Business-to-Business) sector is more promising. Most e-commerce activities require electronic transfer of data over networks. These activities can be performed by anyone who has basic skills in computing and knowledge of English (being the primary language of the Internet). Since such kind of cheap and English speaking computer literate workforce is easily available in Asian countries, the MNCs or companies in the developed world prefer BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) to Asian countries. Indeed, sometimes one developing economy may outsource some tasks to other developing economies (e.g. from India to Nepal). The ITeS and software development jobs can be export or

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domestic oriented. According to IDC, the demand for ITeS is expected to grow significantly and women in the workforce can play a significant role in this growth. It is very interesting to note that women predominate in those areas of business processing where the need pertains to requirement of basic or technical and problem solving skills, e.g., data processing, call centres, hotel or car rental reservations, mailing list management or remote secretarial services. The areas pertaining to accounting, electronic publishing, website design management, medical records management, and research and technical writing etc were found to be dominated by men.

Another interesting trend which has emerged is that of the home-based office for women. Since women have to perform dual jobs, taking care of official as well as domestic chores, many women can be seen to work from home. In this way, they feel they can effectively manage household affairs and can work as per their convenience. This home based teleworking empowers women to enhance their productivity and professional efficiency alongwith meeting the deadlines and some of the organizations (e.g. Datamatics, India) are promoting the concept. This concept is popular among mature aged women, housewives, doctors and lawyers, etc. who prefer to work either on a freelance basis or wish to utilize their time as per their needs. They are well equipped with relevant hardware and software and are connected to the net.

Interestingly, although home-based teleworking seems attractive for women, a survey in India and Malaysia indicated the preference of women towards institution-based teleworking (e.g. as in call centres) with the logic that such an environment allows them to acquire and improve their tacit skills and provides opportunities for further training in their field. The management bodies in Malaysia also opt for the face-to-face interaction instead of home-based teleworking, arguing easy monitoring and supervision of employees. The call centres have been found to be a great success story in the Asian Region and between 40 and 70 per cent of the workers are women in these call centres. Since these women are typically from the younger age group (20 to 25), the complaints of job stress, non-suitable working hours (late night staying), highly competitive environment and fluency of English speaking, etc. are found reported, and become a cause for changeover of the job for women whenever possible.

This chapter provides interesting and eye-opening insights into the gender issues and how digital economy is affected. The chapter has looked into various career opportunities for the women in the e-commerce sector and what constraints they have to face. The key recommendations for paying more attention to the IT education for girls, in-service training for women on ICT-related courses, and inculcation of appropriate IT skills in the women for development of national economy are important parts of this chapter. There has to be a strong need for providing greater access to the Internet in common (community) places like market places, health clinics, schools, post offices, etc. Home-based teleworking may be promoted providing free environment to the women who have family obligations to follow.

Overall these sections highlight the need and ways of ICT empowerment among women.

Author Bio

Ramesh Chandra Sharma holds a PhD in Education in the area of Educational Technology and has worked as Regional Director in Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) since 1996. Before joining IGNOU, Dr Sharma has been Senior Faculty in a Teacher Training College for nearly ten years and has taught Educational Technology, Educational Research and Statistics, Educational Measurement and Evaluation, Psychodynamics of Mental Health Courses for the B.Ed. and M.Ed. Programmes. He has conducted many training programmes for the in- and pre-service teachers on the use of Multimedia in teaching and instruction, and had established a Centre of ICT in the College he was working. His areas of specialization include ICT applications, computer networking, on-line learning, student support services in open and distance learning, and teacher education. He is on the Editorial Board of refereed and international Journals in distance education like Distance Education and IRRODL. He has co-authored one book on Distance Education Research and contributed articles to refereed journals.

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