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ROLE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL AWARENESS - INDIA

PAPER PRESENTED BY Dr (Mrs) SARALA GOPALAN, Formerly Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development.

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ROLE OF NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL AWARENESS - INDIA

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Three very significant events in the very recent past have impacted on women's status in India very emphatically.

2. The first is the amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1993 for the 73rd and 74th times, laying down a process of democratic decentralization with a third of membership and chairpersonship of Panchayats at the village, block and district levels, and a third of the representation at the Municipalities and Corporations both as members and chairpersons, reserved for women.

3. The second is the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995 and the thirty months of preparation for it. India was the first country to adopt the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action without any reservation.

4. The third is the post Beijing effort to bring out a national policy for the empowerment of women through a process of cascading discussions ranging between the national and grass-root levels.
5. The National Policy for Empowerment of Women currently under consideration of the Government of India has identified empowerment of women and role of women in decision making as two of the nineteen major issues for gender equality and elimination of discrimination against women.

6. It states:

"Empowerment of Women: A synergy of development measures should be effected and affirmative action designed for the holistic empowerment of women. Women should be given complete and equal access to and control over factors contributing to such empowerment, particularly, health, education, information, life long learning for self-development, vocational skills, income earning opportunities, technical services, land and other forms of property, including through inheritance, common property resources, credit technology and markets, etc.

Women in Decision Making: Women's active participation in decision making should be ensured for the achievement of the goals of equality, development and empowerment. All measures should be taken to guarantee women equal access to and full participation in decision making bodies at every level, in the private and public sectors, including the legislative, executive, judicial, local, corporate, statutory bodies, as also advisory Commissions, Committees, Boards,
Trusts, etc. Affirmative action, including reservation should be effected wherever necessary."

7. The draft policy document further identifies the importance of sensitisation to women's issues through specially designed sensitisation programmes targetted at the functionaries of the State in the executive, legislative and judicial wings and all developmental agencies - governmental and non-governmental.

8. It also stipulates that media should be used to portray a positive image of girls and women and not demeaning, degrading, stereo-typical images of women. Legislation, media policies and regulatory mechanisms, including codes of conduct, etc., should be put in place to address these aspects.

9. Doordarshan, the National Television Service, established in 1959 has grown into a giant structure, and in the process, has become one of the major transmitting networks in the world. Currently, Doordarshan serves 85.8 per cent of the population living in 68.8% area of the country. The service is provided through 19 channels with a network of 41 programme production centres and 834 transmitting stations of varying powers. Programmes on all the 19 channels are disseminated through INSAT Satellites
(presently 1D, 2A, 2B and 2C Satellites are in operation). Uplinking facilities for the purpose have been established at various Doordarshan stations in the country. The international channel programmes are disseminated through PAS-4 satellite. The National network telecasts 80 hours of programmes on education, information and entertainment in the proportion of 30:40:30. Information is given a slightly larger share of time than others. A large number of topical events are covered live in the National Programmes. The regional centres originate 25 hours of programmes each week while other Kendras generate programmes between one to ten hours.

10. All India Radio (AIR) operates through 187 radio stations in the country. 97.3% of the population spread over 90.1% of the area of the country are covered by AIR. AIR programmes cover different sections of audience with special programmes, like children, youth, women, farmers, etc. The broadcast includes general informative programmes on health, family welfare, agriculture, environment, income generation.

11. The coverage of the innumerable regional meetings for the preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women and subsequently the meetings for the formulation of the National Policy on Empowerment of women by the Doordarshan and All India Radio have served
to inform men and women very widely on gender issues and the need for social transformation. The Doordarshan and the All India Radio are powerful communication channels that have to be harnessed more diligently for creating political awareness and greater political participation of the people for social transformation.

12, The mainstream media have yet a long way to go before their representation of women becomes fair and egalitarian. In the recent debate in the country on the reservation of a third of the seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, editorials and opinions by male journalists have not been very favourable. They have still carried a view that women are not yet capable or ready for this responsibility. The matter is still before Parliament awaiting detailed political consideration.

13. At the same time, a great deal of opinion mobilised at the grass root level through women’s groups, special contributions in several national dailies on their gender pages, is in favour of reserving seats for women in the Parliament. There have been very critically analysed situation reports through research, interviews, reviews of participation in Conferences on the positive impact of the reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj system by the 73rd and 74th Amendment of the Constitution.
14. The core activity in creating an environment for women's participation in decision making has been training. The demands of training have led to the creation of training material in a multi-media mode. Training manuals in print, audio and video modes, success as well as failure stories through news letters, features, presentations at workshops and group discussions, exchange of important circulars and development news through e-mail has become common. While at one level, literacy and numeracy is being promoted to help women members understand the business of Governance, at another level high-tech activity involving creation of data base, documentation, access to web sites are also gaining momentum.

15. The information technology revolution has thrown up a new vista, where many invisible things have become visible, unheard of things are being heard. Seeing and hearing unknown or unheard of things have highlighted many social attitudes that are not fair, discriminations that suppress human rights and development, ignorance that had deprived progress of sections of people. The new technology has shrunk distances and eliminated communication barriers. This is very clearly evident wherever an effort has been made to reach a section of people; new knowledge is becoming available.
16. Along with the introduction of modern technology, the communication network of the radio and television, song and drama division of the Information Ministry have become active with discussions on women's participation in the political process. Street plays, puppet shows and various other art forms that enlighten men and women have adopted these themes on social transformation that is imminent. Women are also learning to bring their perspectives into Government. They are grasping the art of bargaining to achieve their goals. I have a brief video cassette that explains this whole process, of political awareness that is developing among women.

17. The excerpts on the video have been taken from interview, recorded by the Women's Feature Service (WFS), a media organisation specialising on development issues. With its news features, video and radio broadcasting, it has contributed greatly to informing public policy. The products of WFS have become available to varied audiences.

18. WFS has been serving as an institutional base for a national media monitoring project, the Media Advocacy Group (MAG). It has undertaken the training of journalists, indeed a noteworthy contribution at this juncture, when processes of sensitisation are important. With this a greatly needed intervention in the generally gender insensitive media
by mobilising opinions in favour of a variety of gender issues has become possible.

19. WFS besides its contributions to the various media, has promoted networking for women's empowerment and full participation in development. The documentation centre maintains selected and processed information for rapid retrieval and repackaging to satisfy demands for information. The WFS dossiers cover a variety of topics including rights, environment, health, community organisations, migration, violence, children, political participation, foreign debt and credit, organisation, population. WFS has become an important support service for conferences, workshops and projects in India.

20. India has also started using the distance education mode to disseminate information to large number of small groups of people in different parts of the country simultaneously on common issues. The hardware required for such tele-conferencing is already in place for the study centres of the Indira Gandhi National Open University. This channel was used to communicate with large number of women representatives on various development matters. It could serve as a very powerful channel for training them in political participation. The elected members of the Panchayati Raj are estimated at 3 million, of which one million would be women. Training this large number is a
massive effort and requires innovative methods and relevant and appropriate software.

21. All the efforts for better communication are still inadequate as many of them are in their nascent stage. What is clear is the potential. Investment in adequate measure to expand and maintain them is essential at this stage, considering the massive tasks that still remain to be performed.

22. Having brought about Constitutional amendments and a variety of laws, we are sadly aware that writing statutes are only the first few comparatively easier steps. Changing mind sets and behaviour patterns to realise the social objectives of the statutes require careful and intelligent handling. They are more difficult. The media which has the greatest potential to do this as an opinion maker has to pull out all its tools to usher an egalitarian society with social justice and enlightened governance.

23. Women have understood that "information" is the real key to power. There is a thirst for information -- Information that would make them understand Government programmes, budgets, application of resources, needs of people and their priorities. Most of all, they need to know the art of governance, technologies and skills that will build
capabilities in them and make them persons of substance. If this happens, society can no longer take women or their opinions lightly. Women would have to be accepted as change agents to bring about the social transformation.