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Using New Communication Technologies To Promote Women’s Participation In Democratic Process

By

Prabha Thacker
A casual overview of emerging media trends in the developed countries of the world presents a confusing and at times contradictory picture of what most of us want the media world to be like and what it is actually turning out to be. The zooming growth of information technologies with their amazing capabilities for retrieval and dissemination of information has led towards "the information explosion." The growth and development of information technologies makes it easier and cheaper to establish local media, especially local radio and TV stations. Access to communication has also meant easier access to both national and international information at a speed unheard of in the past. The information age of this century with its high technology consisting of microcomputers and laser optical storage technologies is witnessing low cost and affordability for many people all over the world.

We must however remember that technology is only the means to an end and not the end itself. Theoretically it allows possibilities and new horizons to meet the ultimate end, i.e. the information users' needs. This is the exciting part of it. Yet information technology is frustrating for like a moving target, it runs faster than one can possibly aim.

Looking back, we see that in the 1950s, two major revolutions namely TV and the electronic computer fundamentally altered communication systems of the world. The microprocessing industry with its microminiaturizing of computer power caused a shift in information storage, retrieval and dissemination systems from print to imagery. When we talk of "new technology" we are loosely referring to the wide range of techno innovations mainly in communications and computing areas.

Some trends in the "new technology" are that --

- World resources of the new computing power are doubling every two years. Conversely, personnel costs are decreasing annually. And future results could be more dramatic because of the widespread use of the new technology within such a small span of time. The estimated growth rate of on-line information retrieval systems since the mid 1970's has been estimated to be 20 to 30 percent per year.

Through the course of human history, the communication media has been a powerful agent of social influence. It has helped not only in recording and preserving human culture and history, but also in defining it and in informing people about its nature and its imperatives.

The power of new technology of the present times, has greatly amplified the communication media's power. Take the case of a simple story-teller. In the past, he could reach his audience of perhaps a few hundred, twentieth century satellite communication has suddenly allowed the same story teller to sit in front of the
video camera and tell his story to billions. The image of the story teller can cross cultural, national and international boundaries and his message can influence the perceptions and the behaviour of people.

Thanks to optical fibres, high memory, high speed computers and digital communication techniques, a tremendous growth in telecommunications and technology has occurred in the last few years. This has undoubtedly contributed to the advancement in "information technology" which is oriented to the dissemination of large volumes of data and information instantly and efficiently all over the world. This technology has led to the creation of the realm of the "information super highway."

The communication and exchange of data between computers has been one of the main means of achieving this. Such applications of computer networking are manifold. The most distinct use of this seems to be the internetwork or internet which is basically the interconnection of different WAN (Wide Area Network) and LAN (Local Area Network). The satellite renders it possible for the exchange of data across the world via the internet, which has grown phenomenally, doubling in size each year since 1988, and easily outstripping all other forms of communication. It is estimated that the number of Internet users by the start of 1995 was 24 million.

The tremendous growth in communications media indicates that it has always been used by those who control the media in order to influence the cultural, political and intellectual development of the people.

Women and Technology

Though we may say that technology is only the means and not the end, yet we see the overwhelming influence of technology and its spectacular capabilities in interpreting, communicating and disseminating information to people of all strata within the society. This is bringing about massive changes in the way we think, act and feel. The power of technology raises concerns that have led to a polarization of views about it.

One opinion is that it is a blessing for man and society. Technology is seen as the prime mover of all progress, as the solution to most of our social problems, as liberator of the individual and society from a complex society from rigidity to freedom and the source of permanent prosperity for mankind.

An opposite opinion considers it to be an unmitigated curse, that robs people of their jobs, their privacy and their participation in democracy. It fosters materialistic values and is a destructor of culture and religion. This opinion holds that in a technocratic society, the individual gets increasingly submerged and that technology will ultimately poison nature and blow up the world. This brings to one's mind the ongoing case of the Unibomber in the USA, whose identity
yet remains unknown.

New Technology and Social Change

Neither of these views perhaps stands up as valid under serious examination. Technology creates new opportunities and new problems for individuals and society. It is like a double edged sword with both positive and negative affects.

Industrial technology for example strengthens the economy but it also causes major dislocations of business and of people and their families. Similarly, new electronic and communication devices can be used advantageously in combating crime, but they can also create opportunities for new crimes and even make crime, a glamorous and adventurous proposition.

We saw for example the whole Gulf war scenario richly displayed in colour, action and sounds in our individual homes. This allowed us to watch in comfort the agony and pain of a real war. At the same time, it seemed like a war-game rather than a warfare. The accurate precision of target setting and destruction could easily have been an electronic computer game that children are seen to play! There was little space for human feelings such as anger or sympathy, allowing more for excitement, speculation and new found arm chair adventure.

This double edged effect of new technology is also evident when we see the advantages of mass communications technology and how it benefits education, journalism and commerce. At the same time it also aggravates social unrest by widening the gap between expectation and possibility. The discontent that we see amongst youth today is an example. They have access to information about many thing in the world through television. Information gained this way is faster than when they are told the same things at home or school. Yet the sense of what the world could be like and should be like is missing when they receive it via television. The value content or use value of information is missing in technology. Therefore, when information is ready at hand and expectations are high, the realities may be far-fetched. Or the facts are on hand, but the processes that lead to those facts with their value laden implications are missing.

We see for example an increasing trend in violence on the media, whereas the main concern should be on violence in society. Information technology has provided us with the ostentatious display of conspicuous consumption. This has contributed to unrealistic expectations. What we may ask may stem from these deprivations, frustrations, desperation?

Gender concerns

For centuries, while men made constitutions, ran governments and wrote political philosophy, the experiences of women had little influence on political processes, practice or thought.
Women form nearly half the population of the world and yet their voices are not heard in the corridors of power. When women are so marginalized and voiceless, can the policy and decision making processes be called democratic? International experience has shown that constitutional mandates often remain enshrined in rhetoric and do not ensure women's political participation. The Convention on the Political Rights of Women was adopted by the United Nations in 1952. Since the last 45 years or so, we have not seen great strides in the status of women. The recently concluded Beijing Conference – the Fourth World Conference on Women was testimony to the fact that women have come a long way in their struggle... and that the distance to be covered is yet very far.

Though most constitutions have no gender bias, women have only a symbolic presence in political parties. Women are shockingly under-represented in parliament, in the council of ministers and at political decision-making levels. They remain almost invisible in the power structure. They have no impact on policies and decision, not even in areas that affect the lives of women themselves.

A strategy to ameliorate the lot of women who are already inhibited by traditional gender role expectation requires an alternative developmental perspective. Male priorities and male concepts of the role of women in a patriarchal society, in South Asia particularly can only perpetuate negative attitudes about women as being weak, emotional and as agents of social welfare.

Since the International Decade for Women in 1975 up to the recent Beijing Conference in September 1995, which brought together women from all over the world in a common sisterhood for development, equality and peace, there has been growing concern for the slow pace of change in women's status. The vision yet remains far away.

The most recent publication of the United Nations, the Human Development Report 1995, echoes this growing concern about the existing gross gender inequalities. It calls for a people-centred approach to development with a gender focus. The report has for the first time come up with Gender Development Indicators (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) at attempts to measure those inequalities in the quality of life between men and women.

In addition to these measures, it incorporates the use of empowerment as a new concept of human development. The term "empowerment" however has entered into the documents of the UN only in recent times whereas the perspective of alternative development propounded by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been continuously calling for the empowerment of women and weak sections of the society. It has been the persistent efforts of NGOs to re-define "development" that has eventually made mainstream agencies, national machineries and international bodies finally accept the term "empowerment".

The most conspicuous feature of the term "empowerment" is that
it contains within it the word "power". So it is all about power, about powerful versus the powerless, both of which exist in every society. Power is exercised in social economic and political relations. Power is the question of race, ethnicity, class, caste and gender. It also implies control over resources and control of ideology. Information perhaps can be looked upon today as one of the most critical of resources over which the powerful have control. Technology, as hardware is also a weapon in the hands of powerful.

Information is an intellectual resource for it contains knowledge and ideas. It is also power for it has the capability of shaping and influencing the human mind. Technology is the physical resource which is in the hands of those with money. Both information and technology combined create a unique combination of intelligence, creativity self-esteem and confidence. The control of ideology means that this power determine beliefs, values, attitudes and virtual control over ways of thinking. Those with power thus control both material and knowledge resources, and the ideology.

Control over resources confers decision making power which is used to increase access to and control over resources. If we accept this definition of empowerment, then it is clear that women in general and poor women in particular are relatively powerless in terms of access to and control over information and technology. The outcome of empowerment would mean letting women have access to knowledge, information and to the means of interpreting and channelizing this information through the means of technology. Empowerment also means recognizing the systematic forces that oppress women and resist any change in power relationships.

Empowerment is therefore a process not a product. Its goal is to:

- challenge subordination and subjugation
- transform the structures, systems and institutions which support inequality. It means giving choices and enhancing women's ability to exercise informed choices. Right to information is a human right and the possibilities for choices are tremendous in the expanding framework of information and the information technologies.

Problems and Issues:

It is clear that if the goals of equality for women are to be achieved, the democratization of structures and control over the quality and content of the information as well as the control of communication technologies will be a pre-requisite. Women's groups and women's organizations in the Region have taken initiatives already in this direction by creating "alternative" media institutions to serve the communication needs unserved by mainstream media. But these efforts are only the beginning.

When we look back at history, we see that women who wielded
political power in their own right are so rare that they are accorded almost legendary status. With the rise of the modern state, the idea generally evolved that political participation was not an exclusive privilege but a universal right - for men.

Even as the concept of political and legal rights spread modern representative governments have excluded women in more systematic fashion than in mere traditional systems.

In Nepal, for example, local communities in the mountains had always accorded women space in community decision making regarding matters that were of local social, economic and political concern. We see today the gradual breaking down of these highly effective informal organizations that are being influenced by formal political units at the local level, dominated by men.

Political space is the right of all citizens. Yet men continue to monopolize it. It is estimated that women all over the world constitute half the electorate. Yet they hold only 10% of the seats in the world parliaments and 6% in national cabinets.

Any change in society is mainly the result of political change. In a democratic society, it is believed that there is opportunity for all, irrespective of gender. Women's lack of participation and absence of opportunities in political decisions even under democracy, is a serious problem. Gaining the right to vote does not automatically mean that women widely exercise it or that women get elected in large numbers. It takes generations to break away from gender stereotypes, where politics is still regarded the domain of men.

In recent times, with world wide concern for the rights of women, their advancement and participation in political institutions, women have gained the right to vote and to be elected to political office in almost all countries that have representative institutions. And 30% membership in political institutions is considered to be the critical mass that enables women to exert meaningful influence on policies.

There are encouraging signs of women mobilizing for political space. At the local level, there is a higher representation of women representatives than at national levels. In Nepal, for example, women at the grassroots are represented in Water Users Committees, Forest Users' Committees and other local bodies, where a one third representation of women is mandatory. The sphere of influence of these local committees covers the Village Development Committee, which is the first step in the rung of the political ladder at grassroots level. But women’s political representation at the highest level in the cabinet is not even in line with their weak representation in parliament or local bodies.

Data for women's representation in Nepalese politics at higher level indicates a weak situation with a mere 3% of seats occupied by women, in both the upper and lower chambers of
parliament. The share of women at ministerial level is nil. Though women's participation at local levels are visibly high, statistical averages may not necessarily reflect the contributions of Nepalese women at the lower echelons of political power. These invisible women who work as political volunteers unfortunately are not accounted for in macro-level data at national level.

Like elsewhere, women in Nepal are included in the ranks of political parties. Yet it is not uncommon for women to be isolated in women's divisions or branches that are far removed from policy making and public leadership. If they are not segregated officially women are still concentrated in the lower ranks of the party hierarchy.

Even with democratic systems of government, women play supporting roles for male politicians. It is they who contribute much of the basic labour for campaign work and fund raising. This pattern often is an excuse for the shortage of "qualified women".

Whatever their level of participation within male-dominated parties and political movements, women have always had their own organizations, and have actively sought political involvement. In Nepal, women's struggles have always basically existed incognito, under the feudalistic Rana regime and under the repressive one-party, Panchayat system. Women's organizations in Nepal in the early days of the Rana regime consisted mostly of the wives, mothers and daughters of political workers who were fighting against the Ranas. Many women were also influenced by the Gandhian Movement in India and worked for social reform, such as ending social malpractises like child marriage, the ill practises of caste system etc.

The legal reforms initiated in the last decade were mostly on women's property rights and family laws. In the 1970's, some gender specific institutions in the form of NGOs were set up. However, there was absolutely no place for political activism or political opposition or any academic political study. The mass movement for democracy in 1990 saw thousands of women, who belonged to politically affiliated parties as well as independent women come the forefront. One of the most distinguishing features of the 1990 democratic movement was the remarkable mass participation of women from all walks of life.

The current constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity, caste, religion or sex. It guarantees freedom of thought and expression and freedom of press. It makes it mandatory to have at least 5% women candidates in the Lower House and 5% in the Upper House.

Despite these provisions, there has been but a superficial change for social taboos that limit women's participation in democracy still continue to give women unequal rights. Gender discrimination in citizenship and inheritance rights are glaring. The unequal treatment of foreign spouses of male and
female citizens is one such inequality.

Conceptual gaps regarding women and technology continue to distance women from all forms of technological breakthroughs. It is perhaps only the world of information and communications technology that has witnessed a booming and fast expanding entry of the female work force.

In general however the notion of technology as being "male" oriented and requiring certain skills and aptitudes still holds true in most countries. The entry of women into the workplace of electronic computing and communications may be looked as a positive trend in women's participation.

On the other hand, if we examine the levels at which a majority of the women find work, it becomes clear that women mostly occupy places left by men who have moved up the ladder with women working for lower wages and often in exploitative conditions. The upward mobility of women in terms of career profession to decision making level is fraught with numerous hopes and fears that arise from the absence of gender sensitivity.

Opportunities for women in the world of information will become a reality only when:
- women rise to decision making levels
- women are able to interpret information on their own terms as equal partners in development
- men in spheres of power are willing to share power with women colleagues
- there is genuine commitment for the cause of gender sensitive values and their portrayal in the media
- those who wield power within politics and communications are committed to a rural information
- urban based highly sophisticated unrealistic TV programs are replaced by "ground truth" information and messages
- programs that are irrelevant to the lives of a majority of people in the region are considered an indication of serious social irresponsibility and a frivolous attitude towards life.
- women are no longer portrayed as inferior in their role as home-makers alone or as sex objects.

There are numerous manifestations of the exploitation of women through communications technology. The overwhelming influence of western media messages through TV networks have imbibed lopsided values amongst the public, especially the young. Housewives sit glued to soap operas and re-live lives of unrealistic drama and scandalistic content.

Advertising has become very much a part of the new communication technology. Privatization and liberalization policies in the Third World seems to have brought about a sharper divide between the haves and have-nots. Consumerism as promoted through aggressive advertising hardly respects the dignity of individuals. Advertising which presents the body and therefore the person as simply a sexual decoration, exploits the body by portraying it as a dehumanized object of...
sexual gratification. Such degradation of sexuality can encourage exploitation and abuse.

Such inferior portrayals of women create value judgments that regard women as unfit for political leadership. This biased image of women affects women's lives in several ways:
- it perpetuates inequality
- creates distorted self images and reinforces biases in developmental plans. Myth and misconceptions about women affect the thinking and attitudes of planners to further marginalize the role and contribution of women and of girl children.

Of all new communication technologies, it is the electronic media, particularly television that has maximum impact on the way people think. Its visual quality rules the mind at all levels. TV networks that have mushroomed have done so mainly as money-spinners and being privately owned has the freedom to project any image and message. The nexus between political groups, business houses and ownership creates a monopoly that is difficult to confront.

In Nepal, we are confronted with popular serials that reflect women's conventional roles. And there are also western serials (e.g. Star plus) that depicts women as modern and highly materialistic. There are hardly any presentations that depict the equal rights of women. The media capitalizes on consumer demands. In a society where women are not depicted as strong, that society cannot develop. The real Nepali woman who bends her back in the fields lies hidden. Advertisements for shoes are over-showered with nudity.

Fans, transformers, computers and other forms of technology have high value where young ravishing half-naked women promote the product. The demand for such typification of women is from male consumers which is called the market.

While democracy means freedom of the media, it is actually relegating women to role of slaves.

Information technology has the greatest potential for bringing about a positive change. Democracy allows an environment for that change. Technology is a tool. It is the content the human part of it or the software that needs to be properly utilized to bring about a better world.

But how much of this is a possibility will depend on those who hold the power to use communications technology. It calls for genuine commitment for democracy, social justice and peace, and the belief in the potential of women's contribution to democracy.
Recommendation and Conclusion:

New communication technologies should enhance women's role in democracy. Some measures are suggested:

- Increase the flow of gender sensitive information through the electronic media laying particular emphasis on women's role in society and women's rights in democracy, women legal rights and other basic human rights.

- Most women in the developing countries are found to be living under conditions of poverty. Drudgery and hard labour is their lot. Ill equipped with basic information, their lives and those of their children are trapped in helplessness and an acceptance of fatalism. Information technologies must be geared to meet the information needs of these women at the grassroots, through optimal utilization of existing media in the respective countries. And the introduction of modern, yet feasible technology should be able to bridge the gap between the knowledge rich and knowledge poor population. This would also maintain a balance in rural-urban linkages and priorities.

- Plan mass communication activities (using print media and electronic media) that link women in development with issues of political concern. For example, the growing incidence, yet little talked about "gender violence" and trafficking of women across international borders.

- Communicate effective messages that can influence male attitudes and behaviour towards women. This will remove cemented stereotypes about women's role as being centred around domesticity alone.

- Involve more women as information generators, disseminators and receivers.

- Undertake research or impact studies on the effectiveness of current media use in general and differential impact or men and women.

- Expand women's horizons through access to new information, knowledge and skills and equip women with skills for accessing information, knowledge and skills on their own.

- Strengthen women to identify and prioritize issues for political action, based on expanding awareness (including new information and knowledge) critical analysis and informed decision making.

- Inform both men and women about the role of institutions (e.g. family, workplace, political structures, financial institutions etc.) and power structures in the social construction of gender and the role of socialization in
perpetuating gender discrimination.

- Inform the public about the origin, history and impact of women's movements locally, nationally and globally.

- Inform women about human rights, women's rights, rights of the child, democracy/democratic rights, legal rights and laws affecting women. These should include laws regulation, marriage, divorce, inheritance, rape, sexual harassment, rights duties and functioning of the judicial and police, how to seek legal redress, legal aid etc.