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

By

Samina Ibrahim
Using new communication technologies to promote women's participation in the democratic process.

BY SAMINA IBRAHIM, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, NEWSLINE PAKISTAN

Women and modern technology can inhabit separate worlds in an underdeveloped country where even literacy is a luxury that cannot be taken for granted. Pakistan is such a country where efforts are being made to step into the 20th if not the 21st century, but where these efforts often leave the underprivileged rural population, and specially the women within this population behind. Mechanisms to involve the participation of women in modern technology itself thus come across many stumbling blocks, not the least of which is an ingrained resistance to women's autonomy. The participation of women in the democratic process in a country such as ours has become a reality on the ground but the quality of that participation has to be questioned if it is to become more than a token, mechanical process. Women are confined to their homes in much of the country, and remain largely illiterate. They do form a substantial part of the workforce, but much of their labour lies in the informal sector, in the invisible realm of unpaid work. In such a situation, reaching out to women may not be easy, but becomes all the more imperative, considering their situation.

Technologies are also products and it is important to see who the consumers are. Women are the poorest not to mention the most illiterate section of society in Pakistan and therefore, often they are not the target consumers. For instance in the province of Balochistan the literacy rate for women is an abysmal two percent. Can they afford modern communication technologies and more important do they have access to them? And in order to link these technologies with the democratisation process, we must ask who controls these technologies and what is the information that is packaged in these technologies. What role does gender play in the control of these technologies? To what extent is the information democratic, how is it targeted to a pluralistic society such as ours? Can both rural and urban societies avail of these technologies? Is the information packaged in these technologies sensitive to issues of women in the rural areas, or is it just for the women in the urban areas?
Most of the new technologies are addressed to the literate. In that case, do communication technologies marginalise the illiterate even further? In a society where 90 per cent of the women are not literate, where 70 per cent live and toil in the rural areas, where feudal and tribal societies coexist with urban 'civil' ones and where women's discrimination is ingrained in cultural codes, new communication technologies have had a mixed effect on women at best.

In a different more positive political atmosphere perhaps this would be an ideal time and scenario for a “communications revolution.” In Pakistan however, the deliberate policy by the feudal lords, who have a 70 percent majority in the National Assembly, of keeping their voters illiterate and therefore in their control, coupled with poverty and lack of technological infrastructure in the rural areas are serious inhibiting factors.

Many of Pakistan’s villages are yet to be electrified, while many have no access to potable water, primary education or basic health care. Can new communication technologies break through these barriers? Or what is more relevant, will they be allowed to?

Any effort that is undertaken to raise women’s awareness does come up with some resistance as it presents a threat to the status quo. In the context of the democratic process, the attitude of the male dominated political parties, in any case, leaves much to be desired. Women’s participation at any meaningful level, in spite of the fact that the country has a democratically elected woman prime minister, is still the exception rather than the rule. At best, the woman’s vote is seen as a commodity to be bargained for and delivered along with that of the menfolk of her tribe or area.

This is the point at which new communication technologies can step in to approach the woman in the democratic process directly, to present a side of the political picture that she may not have seen before. In our situation we have to start with the basics. We have faced situations where even the woman’s right to vote has been questioned by a fundamental minority or where women have either been kept away from the polling booth or told to make sure that they vote en masse for a candidate that the men of the family or social unit have adopted as their candidate.
A basic awareness campaign that can use new technology as its entry point would first of all motivate the woman not only to vote, but to vote for the candidate of her own choice, the candidate who best addresses her own concerns. Not just information about the candidates and their manifestos, but the nuts and bolts of the situation, where to go to find a polling booth, what to do when you get there, the fact that your vote is given in confidence and thus is nobody’s business but your own. These are the facts that can be communicated through the interactive technologies of today, couched in an idiom that the rural woman can grasp and relate to.

Gender and Communication

Society in Pakistan strictly defines male and female spaces and spells out codes of behavior. Therefore any access to technology for women, if at all, is almost always through the male, particularly in the rural areas. Something as ubiquitous as radio sets are surprisingly a male domain. In the rural areas radios are found in traditionally male spaces – autaq, hotels, anywhere where men gather. Still the most widespread symbol of technology, by and large, in Pakistan is the radio/cassette player. Many political parties in recent elections have extensively used audio-cassettes as part of their campaign and several songs have gone on to become popular hits. This is a direct example of technology (however basic) being utilised for the democratic process in general.

Perhaps the most widespread and woman-friendly technology we have is television. Based in the domestic sphere — which is a woman’s domain — television is the most popular form of communication technology among women. In the urban areas, women — generally confined to the domestic sphere — are regular viewers. In the rural areas, women from the low income groups seldom watch television because they do not have access to it. It is only the upper class rural women who are restricted to the four walls of their havelis who while away time by watching television.

Despite a few inroads, communication technologies are largely in the hands of men. Fax, computer, internet are largely male-controlled although,
professional women are learning to introduce them in their "workstyles." For greater participation by women there will have to be a sustained and deliberate effort by those who control these technologies to involve women, and the power relations between men and women will have to be redefined. Indoctrinated by year of male domination, women have internalised these controls, and therefore have many inhibitions while using these technologies. Most computer operators such as technicians in films, video etc. are men. Working women in the urban areas, however, are increasingly engaging in the use of new technologies, particularly computers.

Let us take a look at these technologies vis à vis women's participation and their growth potential.

Technologies and Women

Telecommunications

Faxes have a limited outreach. Fax machines are only widespread in the corporate sector and therefore women's use of them is limited. The only exception to this is the world of journalism and that too only in English. Within the print media in magazines and newspapers, where women are playing an increasingly active role, faxes fly fast and furious and play an important role in the field of news communication.

Telephones have played an interesting role in the involvement of women with the world outside their homes. For a large number of women in Pakistan, physical mobility is restricted. For these women the telephone is an important instrument of communication and information.

For local women political leaders, the mobile telephone has made a marked difference to political campaigning. It has increased their communication mobility. They keep in touch with their party representative, through the phone, covering distances which would otherwise be out of reach.

Sensing the vast potential of communication by telephone, many men in the rural areas see the phone as a threat to purdah codes and women in many
families are not allowed to use phones. In small towns and villages, many families will only install phones in the autaq or the male space of the house. And where there is a telephone inside the house, women may not use it - or even answer it. So to many women even access to the omnipresent phone is limited.

Computers

In the work place computers have revolutionised the role of women in the democratic process, albeit again mostly in the cities. Computers can now be seen almost everywhere, from desk top publishing, to the world of high finance, advertising, education, et al. Benazir Bhutto, as part of her literacy programme, has opened 40 computer learning centres in the country and many private urban schools have computer classes from the primary level. Access to databases are rapidly increasing and though the electronic newspaper has made its appearance, but Internet and E-mail are still very much elitist phenomena in the country. However there is a tremendous potential for growth in these fields.

In the same way that typewriters paved the way for women to enter offices in the west in huge numbers, the widespread use of computers in the work place has enabled Pakisatani women to increase their presence there. From word processing to computer programming, women have been quick to pick up computer related skills. Besides opening up new avenues for employment, computers could also go a long way in bringing those women into the workforce who face opposition to going out to work through traditional family pressures. In some ways ours is still a segregated society, and many women who felt hesitant to work in an environment where they had to mingle with men now have the option to work out of the house. Similarly the concept of flexitime becomes more of a viable reality when the woman has the option to work out of the home while she networks with a mainframe in the office. Thus women with small children to care for who could not keep up with a rigid time schedule now have the choice to follow a more flexible one. A computer coupled with a modem can really revolutionise the role of working women in traditional societies- once they have the access to it.
The last decade has seen women playing an increasingly active role in journalism. Newsline is “manned” mainly by women! And apart from the rapidly multiplying number of women’s magazines both in Urdu and English, daily newspapers too are turning to women to expand their workforce. So, in the fourth estate at least, women are increasingly exposed both to new communication technologies and the freedom thrown up by the democratic process. This is one field in which women are using both the new technologies and the democratic process to promote democracy and women’s participation in it.

However, compared with developed countries cruising the Cyber highway, Pakistan is still on the information dirt-track. The Sustainable Development Networking Programme set up by the United Nations only has 300 users, while Usenet — part of the Pakistan chapter of Internet — has only 3,000 networkers. Which is really not surprising given the existing poverty and illiteracy, not to mention the dearth of phone lines.

The government can do a lot to promote networking. Educational institutions could be connected by E-mail with one another and with foreign universities to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas, information and research. E-mail is now also available in Urdu, the language of the majority. PTV 2, the second government TV channel, has several vacant channels on Asiasat which can be used to provide live Internet access to Pakistan at very low rates.

Pakistan has the capability, the potential and the professional talent to develop an advanced telecommunications system, but without governmental support and vision we may never cruise the information highway.

Video

In India the Self Employed Women’s Association — SEWA — has used video extensively for development work. In fact illiterate women who had no formal training have acquired film making skills in the SEWA video workshops.

By contrast NGOS in Pakistan have only used the video to advertise their work, or to do short films on the status of women. However, the target audience is always the small intellectual circle which moves among the NGOs or tunes in
to foreign TV channels where images of oppressed women are sure shot sellers.

In urban areas there is a video cassette player in almost every home, and even the rural areas have seen the induction of video players. So there is an enormous potential through this medium to promote political awareness among women. But, unlike India, the NGOs in Pakistan have not even begun to tap this market. There is an urgent need for the private sector to use this technology to impart not only political awareness but also learning and vocational skills, which will over time generate a sense of democratic awareness among women.

In the public sector too, the enormous potential of video in development has not been exploited. The Social Action Programme a mega-project to alleviate poverty, has a large number of components for women’s development—both in the literacy and health fields. Thirty-three thousand community workers and lady health visitors have supposedly been trained, and the use of video documentaries could have had meaningful results in door-to-door campaigns. However, no attempt to do this has been made so far. In the Pakistani context, among the new communication technologies, video is by far the most important but unfortunately also the most ignored.

Television

Television has since its inception been an instrument of state policy. And the change in images and style from government to government are reflected on television. There was a time when every woman who appeared on Pakistan Television had to have her head covered. So that was the "politically correct" image beamed into every home. Now with a woman Prime Minister and or more liberal government in place, the images of women have also undergone some change.

Television covers over 75% of the country now and the increasing number of sets (as well as the practice of community viewing) mean that a whole new world of ideas is opening up for people country wide. A UNESCO study shows that women spend far more time watching television than men. So the potential of communication with women as members of a democratic society
exists within this medium.

However, in Pakistan, like in many countries of the region, the communications media need to be “democratised” first. Presently, they are state-owned and controlled. And while a woman heads Pakistan Television Corporation, in numbers the representation of women is very low in the electronic media. Women producers, it should be noted, have nevertheless put on air many programmes on women’s issues, often of a sensitive nature.

Teleplays are increasingly depicting hitherto taboo subjects such as the abuse of women in society and the subsequent rebellion of such women against the system, while recently human interest programmes have actually brought abused women in front of the camera and beamed their plight to the masses.

Cable Television and Satellite

The introduction of the satellite dish has revolutionised viewing habits and opened up a whole new world, though again this medium is targeted primarily towards urban women. In a random survey conducted among target groups, men preferred to watch either the very high tech MTV or the news channel BBC, while women preferred Zee TV which was the closest to them culturally. The primary reason why women prefer Zee TV is the use of a language they understand. Glamour and entertainment apart, women are also exposed to an education of sorts through programmes dealing with women from a similar background and culture, who also face similar social problems.

Zee TV has also made the Pakistani women aware of the overwhelming participation of women in every field in a neighbouring country despite similar social taboos. These programmes are bound to have an impact on the Pakistan woman’s psyche.

The spread of satellite television, even though limited mostly to urban areas, is exposing viewers (the majority of whom are women) to diverse cultures and issues and while some of the influences of entertainment channels (such as Star & Zee) are, by and large, considered “undesirable,” the opening up has its own dynamics. More and more young women have been inspired to go into
television production through small independent studios and though they may not only be covering issues of democracy or women's rights, the sheer increase in their numbers (both before and behind the camera) has initiated a process of change that cannot be rolled back.

Mobile film units could be extensively used in Pakistan, both by the government and NGOs. These could combine education with entertainment to reach women in the rural areas with messages related to health, population planning, the environment, women's rights, etc.

**Who controls information?**

As media and computer tycoons race for technological supremacy the question of who controls information becomes very relevant. Is democratisation possible when the information business is confined to a few multi-nationals and subject to government controls? Whether it is cable television and satellite or computer technology, the trend to build techno-empires is evident.

What is the quality of information that women will receive? Will it promote a certain world-view or a certain ideology? Will it promote only what sells?

Even though diversity is visible in cable television and has caused much excitement and controversy, the quality of some of these programmes is questionable.

**Women’s participation and Technology**

New communication technologies can be used particularly in the public sector to usher in an era of public debate, opinion polls and participation of people at all levels. Were this to happen, there would be a revolution of sorts in the country.

What is, however, more germane to Pakistani women is poverty and illiteracy. Till these issues are effectively addressed participation in the democratic process can never be a reality. Since it is in the interest of those who control our destiny that literacy, awareness and independent thought remain out of reach for
With such supporting data, there is no doubt that if political education is taken as a priority option to increase women's participation in democratic process, it could be made easily accessible to the targetted population particularly through the existing communication technology facilities that already exist.

All the major ingredients required for the launching of political education as a means to increase women's effective participation in politics are available. The only remaining, yet vital item, which is still not transparent, is the political will of the government to involve more women in the democratic process.

**Conclusion**

Promotion of women's participation in the democratic process is not an easy task, particularly when the prevalent societal attitude particularly that of women, is that politics is the business of men. Awareness-raising among all concerned parties – the government political parties and the public through gender information, in spite of the favourable impact it has created, provides a necessary but not sufficient condition for greater involvement of women in politics. Political education is required for both women and men. The priority however is on women, taking into account that on the whole, men have, up to now, been more politically active. Communication technologies from basic personal computers to more advanced equipment will play a pivotal role in democraticizing political development. More importantly, communication technologies can serve as very important strategic tool for greater involvement of women in democratic processes.

Success should not be too far fetched if a deliberate effort is intensified by all parties to increase and improve women's participation through optimally utilizing all the available resources which could facilitate such efforts. The government's policy in this regard needs to be translated into practice and progress in its implementation needs to be closely monitored by all the advocates for women's political involvement. Women's networks, regarded as a means to provide women with the kind of contacts that form the basis of political power, constitute one very significant component of the successful drive towards full and equal participation of women in the democratic process.
An essential precondition for a democratic society for Thai citizens, made up of women and men, is an increase in qualitative and quantitative participation of women in politics.