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Utilization of New Communication Technologies by Women and how this assists in their participation in the democratic process.

By Aasha Mehreen Amin

Before we begin to talk about how new communication technologies help women to participate in the democratic process we should be clear about what these technologies are, more specifically in the context of the particular country. Bangladesh, being a developing nation, is still in its infancy when it comes to technological advance compared to say, countries of south-east Asia. Thus communication technologies in the global sense may be quite different from those of Bangladesh.

In the Bangladesh context new communication technologies would include the telephone, Fax and the computer (including e-mail and the internet).

Let us first take the telephone, in particular the cellular phone, a technology that promises to bring about a revolutionary impact on the socio-economic status of women in the rural areas. This very year Grameen Bank has introduced a project through its Grameen Phone programme that will enable Grameen Bank borrowers who are all women, to buy cellular phones in order to generate income.

How? Each Grameen Cellular phone borrower can acquire a cell phone set with the help of a loan, in the same way that she would get a loan for a cow or to set up a poultry business. She pays off the loan in installments, with the income she generates by providing this essential service to the village people. Thus she works as a Village Telephone Operator. If the call costs 3 taka (Grameen Phone), she will charge the customer 3.50 taka. In this way she can earn a living. In addition, her job as a telephone operator gives her a new status in her village.

Women Users of this service also benefit. Many rural women are engaged in poultry farming, fisheries, selling various produce etc. With the help of the cellular phone service they can now know exactly what the current market rate is, what the demand is, thus eliminating the possibility of being exploited by middlemen. Thus the cell phone gives her the information she needs without her having to go anywhere.
This is one of the breakthroughs of new communication technologies in that they have broken the barriers that had in the past prevented many women from engaging in certain occupations.

Since we are talking of new communication technologies we have to turn to the urban areas where these are available. Here we are talking about women from middle and upper middle class backgrounds who have a minimum of Intermediate level education. For these women, communication technologies help them in two ways. One is that by acquiring the skills women have more choices in the job market. The other way is that these technologies help women directly in their work by providing the information that they need.

Here we must take into account many of the constraints that women face because of their sex. In Bangladesh, over the last decade, more and more women have come into the work force and the numbers are increasing. But they still have to deal with many constraints. One of the major dilemmas women have to contend with is that they lead 'double lives'—they are homemakers (i.e., wives and mothers) as well as career women or free lance workers. One of the biggest obstacles they face is 'time'. Doing two jobs (at home and outside) involves a lot of time. More often than not, it means physically going to the work place where the work itself may involve a lot of running around to get information.

Let us take for example, women journalists. Of course in this line of work there is no escaping from going into the field to dig up the facts but apart from this, a lot of time is wasted just trying to get basic information for say, research. With the help of new technologies, namely Fax and the computer women journalists can save a lot of time and money while writing their reports.

Computer Word Processing helps women journalists to write, rewrite, edit reports very easily and quickly. Previously a copy would be typed and then given to the composing section to be composed on the computer and then the white prints would be sent back to be corrected. Now most journalists have access to a computer either at home or at work so they can write on the computer, have the copy edited and send the copy to the press, all through the same computer. Tools such as Spell Check, Encyclopedia etc. are very helpful during editing. The word processor can also help in transferring files and customizing templates to suit
styles.

Networking between computers enables us to share documents, save time, transfer files and get hard copies using fewer printers. The result is lower costs, less time and greater efficiency. Filing saves storage space, access to office databases and save costs (paper, pens etc.)

With the advent of the internet and e-mail services women can now have access to a world of information. E-mail can be used to get information from sources within the country or outside. In The Daily Star’s Magazine Section, for example, we use the internet to get the latest reports on health, science and technology as well as entertainment—music and films. So on the one hand you save a lot of time, time that can be utilized elsewhere and on the other hand you have access to latest information.

Many women journalists also use fax and e-mail services to send in their reports when they can’t come to the office eg. late at night. A lot of editing can also be done at home with the help of the computer and fax or e-mail. Thus you see more and more women doing freelance writing as well as consultancy work.

The increased use of computers has increased the demand for computer trained people. Women are now taking lessons in word processing, programming etc ultimately finding jobs in various industries that need these skills. New technologies being women friendly, have created jobs for them.

There are other areas where computers have created jobs or made jobs easier for women.

Development Work

There are a large number of women engage in development work in NGOs and international organizations such as The World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF etc. Being computer literate is essential for research work, writing reports, filing documents, making spreadsheets, graphs, pie charts etc. A woman who has these skills, therefore, is in great demand in these organizations which in any case encourage female employment.
E-mail and internet services are widely used for networking and correspondence with other organizations, exchanging information and getting the latest information on a particular subject.

**Graphic Designing**

Computer Graphic Designing is becoming the norm in the advertising industry because of the variety and high quality of software it offers, cutting costs and saving labour and time.

Colour publishing has entered a new era with the advent of cutting edge graphics and software like COREL DRAW 7 and PHOTO SHOP. Ready to film output files can now give whole publications a new improved, attractive look. This gives a lot of scope for creativity. In Bangladesh there are several centres where training in these specialized programmes is given and women can easily acquire these skills. I know of one company which has been single handedly set up and run by a young woman. The company is 100% computer oriented and uses sophisticated latest software. They design newspaper and magazine advertisements, brochures, specialized reports etc. Photography and animation are also included in their list of services. Although there are very few women in this field it is an area where there is plenty of opportunities for women. By getting training in these kinds of software women can ensure very well paid jobs for themselves.

**Potential uses of new communication technologies for women**

**Medicine**

Women doctors and medical students can greatly benefit through information accessed from the Internet. All the latest know-how, developments in medicine can be at the tip of their fingers. Since acquiring computers and internet services may be too expensive for many individuals this could be solved by setting up computers in educational institutions and hospitals. This means that even if
women doctors do not have the means to go to international conferences, they can easily get all the recommendations and findings via the internet.

Education through the Internet

This applies to all disciplines. Perhaps correspondence courses could be designed so that students can get degrees through the internet. This would reduce the costs and ensure that papers reach both sides on time. More than anything it would allow many women to increase their knowledge and qualifications and hence opportunities.

Therefore what new communication technologies have done for women is that it has given women the ability to choose from a wider range of occupations. Since training in computers is relatively easy and less time consuming, women can acquire the necessary skills to pursue different career paths.

If it is participation in the democratic process that we are talking about then we must recognize the fact that women can only be empowered through education and financial solvency. New communication technologies can give them the ability and means to be a part of the democratic process.