



Women in the Digital Era: Gender, Culture and Technology

**Technology, Social Process and Gender
in the Information Society**

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1. State of Women Workers in Information Technology

- Through out Asia there has been a shift of women workers from the status of unpaid family workers to that of employees, though in the case of India it is to that of casual, home-based rather than regular employees
- Present development discourse emphasizes building women's agency for industry and higher productivity. The real issue before us is not simply a question of giving women access to technological development but also of how they are enabled to carry forward their responsibility for industry and society.

State of Women Workers in Information Technology

- Technological change can facilitate social change, turning patriarchy into a contested domain, rather than a sphere of cultural reproduction, leading to redefinition of gender relations and social, cultural norms.
- Is women's agency (the capacity for autonomous action) limited by cultural ceilings, the confines of the masculine order and the domesticity?

2. Indian Information Technology Industry

- The Indian Information Technology (IT) industry in 2003-04 is a US\$15.9 billion enterprise that has developed from scratch in less than three decades.
- Software industry develop an annual export growth rate of 42 per cent from 1990 to 2000. At the same time, IT-enabled services (ITES) such as call centers, customer interaction, back office operations, insurance claims processing, medical transcription, database management, digital content, and online education also developed in the country.

IT Professionals in India

- In a recent study undertaken for UNDP (2004) of nine Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam), the authors noted that despite the absence of gender disaggregated data at national levels, the role of IT in industry in promoting gender equality was positive.
- On an average, of the IT professionals, there is one woman employee for every seven men employed in the IT industry in India. Women professionals constitute 12.5 percent of the IT industry, with NIIT having the highest proportion of women employees (29 percent), and Rolta the lowest (4 percent).
- The networking of capacities required by information technology increase women's individual capability to take decisions on their own and construct greater space to enhance their agency, though within the limited terms of the socially sanctioned structural inequalities of women.

3. Software Industry

- Software accounts for 65 percent of the Indian IT industry in terms of revenue. Interviews conducted in some of the top 20 IT companies in India – Satyam, Infosys, Wipro, NIIT, IBM – as well as other smaller companies showed that women contribute significantly to this 65 percent. However, their benefits from the industry are not in any way equitable with the benefits men draw, though the number of women employees have increased significantly during the last 10 years.
- A DQ-JobsAhead study conducted among 150,000 Indian IT professionals found that women constitute over 19 percent of the total workforce at lower levels (up to three years experience). The percentage drops to 6 in the senior workforce (10 years experience).
- A common factor across all the workplaces we studied was the large number of women at lower levels and the gradually decreasing presence of women at higher levels. We noted a large number of women in human resource management, marketing, quality control, finance, and training departments.

Software Industry

- Marketing is a women-dominated sector because women are considered better at building a rapport with a client, to possess better communication skills, more sincere, thorough, and so on. The women have to travel more, but they are expected to balance both home and work.
- Finance is another sector with a large number of women as they are seen as more honest, less demanding, cheaper and hard working. In addition, men with the same qualifications demand a lot more remuneration.
- Common factors across all these work places was the large number of women at lower levels and the gradually decreasing presence of women at higher levels, especially in decision-making positions.

4. IT Enabled Services

- In many ways, the spread of IT-enabled services has been immensely beneficial to both women and men, especially to those who have limited skills and lack the resources to invest in higher education.
- Interviewees in Bangalore and Delhi said the work is repetitive and boring and also quite stressful if the team leaders or production managers are not very good. However, they were happy to be away from the housework (i.e. away from everyday drudgery of housework at least for a few hours). Women in particular discussed the unfair burden of work, household in particular, they have to shoulder.

5. Change in Gender Relations

- While employment in the IT industry has decreased the time available to women for house work, their responsibility for these tasks has not diminished.
- There is, an undeniable improvement in the social mobility and work participation rate of women in the IT industry. . IT does, therefore, constitute the basis of the redefinition of traditional gender norms and supports a medium of information, understanding and knowledge in which women's interests, opinions and rights are taken into account.

Change in Gender Relations

Mobility: Seclusion norms and controls on mobility effectively cut women off from many spheres of knowledge, interaction, and activity, thereby curbing their agency. However, this has been changing in India as a consequence of women's entry into the IT industry.

- During the last 10 years, women's participation in ITES has been increasing. Many women have moved from the IT industry, sales, fashion designing, teaching and so on to ITES.
- Gender differences operate in how women and men are differentially placed in availing these opportunities. Men, for example, move from one company to another as they find better opportunities. However, the percentage of women who move from one company to another for better opportunities is very small.
- Several women also stressed that the money they earned, gave them a voice in the decision-making process within the family.

Change in Gender Relations

- Gender inequality is embedded in the history and political economy of the Asian region, including India. Yet, women are not silent observers of the male appropriation of traditional and technological knowledge, power and resources.
- Conceding that there is power and gender inequality in the market, many women prefer to work outside the home, in an attempt to improve their social position thus increasing the opportunity cost of their work rather than be subject to family-based dependency and coercion.
- The two aspects of technological development and cultural ceiling are interrelated. Women may also share the common attitude that certain jobs and knowledge are more 'appropriate' for them as they are enshrined in traditional culture.

6. Telecommunications and Culture

- The combination of IT with telecommunications, particularly satellite communications, has transformed the world of communication.
- Significantly, the new medium does make it possible for the small groups and people's movements (the women's ecology and other movements) to put forward their position more effectively in various discourses, for example:
 - the women's anti – liquor movement in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India,
 - the struggle against the forced relocation of Akha villagers in Huay Mahk village in northern Thailand in 2000.
 - protests against large dams
- Women's groups in various parts of Asia are able to keep in touch with each other and with groups in other parts of the world through email and other such communication systems.

Telecommunications and Culture

- The discourse on community is very much a non-western contribution to the discussion on rights and development. But it should not be assumed that these communities are homogenous. Women and men form two obvious groups within these communities.
- Cultures are not static, something given for all time. They change and the sources of change may be varied. Many changes originate in ideas gained from other cultures, from inter-cultural discussion and communication. Changing cultural practice, resulting from intra-cultural critique and inter-cultural exchange that forms the basis for the recognition of women's rights.
- Power is factor in all communications. While new technology enable the weaker sections, women and other groups, to put forward their positions in the world flow of culture and human values, they have not yet ended the asymmetry of the flows.

7. Beyond Cultural Ceilings

- New visions – and new technologies that enable them to be realized – can only be developed in an atmosphere that encourages non-conformity. Major innovations always start out small and in some individual's thinking.
- Technology is produced by human beings within a particular social, political and economic context.
- What questions will be addressed, what answers will be promoted, are all based on social structures. Technology does not merely have an effect on economy and society. It is the processes of the economy, polity and society that determine technology itself.

Beyond Cultural Ceilings

- The challenges to patriarchy are increasing and patriarchy is weakening. The gender-specific position of women is currently in the midst of a whirlwind of critical reflection in development and academic circles.
- While the new technologies, particularly the new information technologies, have great promise in terms of dissolving old bases of discrimination, the potential of these technologies for decentralized and more humane development, has yet to be realized because of continuing patriarchal relations and the domination of accumulation over development goals.