

Digital Bangladesh and Gender Equality

Welcome to Protifolon, D.Net's new policy briefing series that highlights cutting edge thinking on the emerging issues affecting Bangladesh. This second edition examines plans and programmes for building a Digital Bangladesh from a gender perspective and in the context of citizenship, education, business and government. It summarises major recommendations for policy makers, ICT for Development activists and women rights activists.



Overview

The concept of Digital Bangladesh was coined during the last national election when political parties emphasised ICT-based economic and social development in their election manifestos. Various analyses reveal that the success of the elected party can be largely attributed to two factors: the pledge to try war criminals and the announcement of an economic programme leading towards Digital Bangladesh by 2021. The government is now trying to shape up how Digital Bangladesh should look and working on a national strategy. [8]

Globally, ICTs have enormous potential to transform societies. ICTs offer flexibility of time and space, a way out of isolation, and access to knowledge resources. Therefore Digital Bangladesh, if implemented correctly, could have a far reaching impact to many disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Equally Bangladesh as a country is in a time of

flux, with gender assumptions changing as a part of broader process of economic transition and social shifts. Within the context of such change, Digital Bangladesh, still in its early stages of design, could be used as powerful tool to create gender sensitive opportunities in business, education, citizenship and government.

ICTs transformative attributes are a valuable resource for women in developing countries who often suffer from limited availability of time, social isolation, and lack of access to knowledge and resources. [10] "Engendering ICTs" is the process of identifying and removing gender disparities in the access to, and use of, ICTs, as well as adapting ICTs to the special needs, constraints, and opportunities of women. [5]

The effective inclusion and empowerment of women through ICTs will not occur if the approaches and

technologies used are not gender sensitive. Creating equal opportunities and sustainable economic growth for women requires improved understanding and awareness of the challenges that women face. [5]

Major Issues in the conceptualisation of Digital Bangladesh

Digital Bangladesh has various components but the most significant in this context are:

Digital Citizenship, Digital Society

The digital citizen will have equitable access to information and knowledge for improving well being. Such improvement should not exclude anyone on the basis of gender, residence, age, physical ability, economic condition, race, or ethnicity.

By providing IT skills, training, tools and guidance, we should create

opportunities that can change lives, transform communities and strengthen local economies. The involvement and engagement of women in the Digital Bangladesh on an equal footing with men will directly contribute to improving the livelihood of people, making it more sustainable and thereby promoting the social and economic advancement of societies. [11]

Although people share the same geographic boundaries and social structures, men and women live in separate realities. [10] In other words, closing the information and communications divide could be seen as a means to closing the economic and social divide between men and women. The most basic gender equality issue in ICTs is access, which is linked to the availability of the necessary infrastructure. In view of this, a country-wide ICT infrastructure needs to be developed to ensure access to information by all citizens including women. [7] Consideration of the location, timing and operation of common access venue like telecentres, libraries facilities is important in order to to make them gender sensitive.

Unfortunately digital innovation and ICTs can also negatively impact society. Sexual exploitation of children and women is a grave and immediate issue for Bangladesh. Internet and off-line pornography is now being produced with Bangladeshi women and children. Research findings reveal a major portion of both school going and out-of-school children are exposed to pornography in the form of poster, picture card and porn CDs. [6] At present there is no consolidated or updated data on how many children are victims of this industry but there is little doubt that the high level of accessibility to pornography, in part enabled by ICTs, is making children both consumers and casualties of pornography. The ongoing challenge for digital

Bangladesh is how to use E-governance to build political will to stop sexual and economic exploitation of women and children. [6]

Digital Education

Digital education is the appropriate application of tools and technologies for equitable access to quality education content for both teachers and students. ICTs are used to ensure improvement of governance in education from the bottom to the top. ICTs can play a vital role in supporting teachers with appropriate skills development.

Beyond access, education is key to building women's capabilities and an important dimension for achieving gender equality and empowerment. At a non formal level, ICT carries many opportunities; at a formal level ICT education is generally concentrated at the tertiary stage. There is an optional course on computers in secondary schools, however the curriculum is



outdated and there is little opportunity for hands-on practice. The lack of local content is also a barrier to increased use of ICT in schools.

Distance education through ICTs and e-learning provides women with a great opportunity for learning at all levels but particularly in higher education. Women can undertake their studies at convenient times whilst continuing with their family responsibilities. The major challenge here though is steady and affordable accessibility to the Internet . [10] An

intensive and coordinated movement is needed to bring together all the players; government, NGOs and private sector on one platform to ensure broadband internet access. [5]

Digital Business

Digital business ensures efficient transaction and payment – opening markets and creating opportunity both nationally and globally.

In Bangladesh women are grossly under-represented in ICT-based occupations. Women have reduced access to ICT skills, training and development and participate less in science and technology education as a result of social and economic barriers. This results in them often missing the benefits offered by ICTs. Women are over-represented in part-time employment and in low-paid and insecure jobs or find they are unable to gain employment at all. Provision of fully funded scholarships, culturally appropriate facilities, female teachers and substitute schools with flexible schedules, which they can fit around their employment, have all proven effective in encouraging the sustained participation of women and girls in education. [10]

Technical and vocational training can redress the inequalities women experience with respect to skill inadequacies and ICT employment. It can provide access to resources and information on ventures such as small-enterprise development, income-generating activities, food processing and agriculture, as well as in more personal issues such as reproductive healthcare. [13]

A nation's ability to sustain competitiveness while ensuring the well-being of its citizens hinges on innovation. Women entrepreneurs not only create jobs but also provide different solutions to management, organisation and business problems. Moreover, supporting women will enable them to improve their incomes,

Case Study

Across the world, ICTs have created new possibilities of employment and helped overcome traditional barriers for many women to enter the formal market economy. More women are taking up new opportunities for economic and social development, with far-reaching implications for household, community and market relations. There are plenty of reasons for optimism about the development of ICTs and the benefits that may accrue especially for the poorest and most vulnerable [9] The example of the “Info lady” a technology based profession, is a concept developed by D.Net that champions the use of ICT for the economic development in Bangladesh. Anyone is able to become an info person, but women are strongly encouraged as it will be easier for them to enter homes and build relationships with the women who reside there.

An info lady possesses a laptop or classmate computer, Internet modem, headphone, webcam, digital camera, photo printer and a mobile phone giving her access to a whole host of livelihood information at a fast and cheap rate. D.Net found that with access to a bundle of services the lady will become a “telecentre” herself. Help line service (expert’s opinions), commercial phone service, photography service, livelihood information and knowledge service, international and local voice call service, video and animation service, and internet-based information service are amongst the tools provided by an info lady. Through analysis it has been found that the villagers who are interested in the technology and the services are more likely to better their livelihoods. By providing these services, some rural women are able to gain employment and the poor villagers, particularly women, are able to take advantage of new technologies, which are not accessible to them through more traditional delivery models. [4]

health and food production which will provide additional benefits to their families and communities overall. [1] As social attitudes change, more women are able to take advantage of new opportunities for economic and social development. At the same time ICTs have the potential to enable women to become equal stakeholders in the growing knowledge economy. [12]

Microfinance allows women to participate in economic activities. Despite some limitations it is a victory in the battle to increase the visibility and economic and social mobility of women. Improvement in social attitudes to women’s participation in economic activity have dramatically increased although these unfolding opportunities have exposed some entrenched patriarchal attitudes and issues around women’s secure access to public spaces. And whilst women’s economic participation has expanded, female labour productivity and their labour cost remains very poor. [3]

Digital Government

Digital government is a form of transparent government which aims to ensure the participation of citizens in decision making processes through ICTs and, ideally, converts government itself into a service delivery institution for its citizens. The transparent government upholds human rights for all citizens including women, poor, marginalised and indigenous groups.

However, in practice, implementation of digital government ideals has suffered from being insufficiently grounded in an understanding of the governance needs of the poor and vulnerable groups including women. Reliance on

Socioeconomic and political factors continue to frame the gender digital divide, including social and cultural barriers to technology use, education and skill levels, employment and income trends, media and content, privacy and security, and location/mode of access. [5]



For Digital Bangladesh, it is important that how much the country can be developed through application of new idea and how much people can share among themselves and the government in a digitalised way. Digital Bangladesh will make people’s life easier by communication and that should be equal for men and women both. Only then Digital Bangladesh can empower common mass.

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technical innovation has meant governance policies are sometimes formulated neglecting the small and simple solutions which can get started right away with much less of a challenge in policy innovation terms.[3]

Recommendations

Public policy has a defining role to play in ensuring ICT development programmes promote gender equity and create opportunities for women. The ways to integrate gender and poverty concerns need to be explored through undertaking specific programmes, which should be also pro-poor.

Major recommendations of the research highlighted in this briefing are presented below for consideration:

- Deploy public access to ICTs like telecentres to locations where women feel comfortable to visit and at a time which fits women’s work and family commitments;
- Undertake a programme for women so that women can access

ICT-based services at their door-step through innovations like info-lady;

- Identify and promote good practices and lessons learned about how women and girls are using ICTs;
- Promote incentives for girls to undertake science and technology education including provision for special scholarships;
- Introduce full-payment of off-site training, with child care provided;
- Introduce bonuses for women who attend and complete Internet training; [2]
- Create business and employment opportunities for women as owners and managers of ICT-based entrepreneurship;
- Undertake measures to protect children from child pornography through Internet and other media;

- Undertake effective measures to barrier in easy access to pornography by children; [6]

- Promote counseling services for adolescent girls and women on reproductive health through various ICT channels;

- Take effective measures to protect self-esteem and dignity of women which are undermined in the new media, particularly by representing women as a commodity;

- Develop e-learning facilities so that women can access to education opportunities through the power of new media;

- Mainstream gender sensitive monitoring and evaluation tools for programmes and projects.

To ensure the effectiveness of mainstreaming gender issues, it will be important to adopt gender evaluation methodologies that facilitate the integration of gender perspectives into the planning phase and enable the gender analysis of Digital Bangladesh programmes. [12]

Whilst various international agencies have already been supporting partners to develop gender specific budgets in national programmes it is equally important that Government makes lump sum budgets available on gender issues without detailing specific allocations. Any subsequent gender sensitive budgeting exercises should then be 'owned' by a wide assortment of civil society groups to ensure a diverse range of needs are represented. [10]

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