ROLE OF DIGITIZATION DURING COVID -19 IN BRIDGING UP THE GENDER DISCRIMINATION

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ABSTRACT

The Worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 is affecting every part of the human lives. The restricted interactions of human with nature have adversely affected the physical world. During lockdown period, the tools of digital technology have greatly strengthened as through this technique the information can be converted from physical to digital format. Now the people are able to get education through online technology. But still gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. The observation concludes that an access to the education and employment are only the enabling factors to the empowerment. The achievement of goals however largely depends on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.

This study outlines the possible ways to achieve the effect of digitization during COVID-19. The females who were not allowed to step out of their houses to get education now they are also able to get education with digital technology. Thus they can engage themselves in some online job or business and give their contribution in economy. To put in different version the pandemic has created many new routes for women to participate which further gave rise to the narrowing down of the widened gap between men and women. Out of these new avenues, digital technology is one that brings women on a pat with men. There is drastic decrease in the gap between the number of males and females online because participation of women is more in the field of digital technology as a mode of communication.

KEYWORDS: Digitization, COVID-19, Gender discrimination

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, there were many issues and problems of Indian women although they play a vital role in the development of our society. Therefore for this resolution, the government has taken concrete steps for the progress of females especially girl child. Most emphasis was given on education as education is the key to success in every walk of life. With an aim to make education setup more feasible and accessible, the use of digital technology has been promoted. That is why the use of computers and the Internet in our everyday social interactions has become a pre-eminent part of our communal life. Apart from that, the present education infrastructure is also aimed to include the use of Internet and technology as its vital tool to enrich and sharpen the intellect of students in more amiable form (Kirkwood and Price 2005).

However, various laws, policies and programmes were formulated and implemented such as right of children to free and compulsory education (RTE) Act 2009, the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy (2013), Sarvshiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao- Beti Padhao etc.

Some absurd customs and misconceptions attached with culture of restrictions of women from participating in economical activities and higher education also hampered the growth of women. Taking opinion of one-fifth women in India into deep consideration, it has been observed in a survey that they had been under the cultural influences that restricted them to use the Internet for no valid reason. It has been further highlighted that 12 percent of women were apprehensive because of the negative perception attached with the use of Internet services. To add more, family restrictions in a society largely dominated by patriarchal norms could not be overlooked as 8 percent women fall into this category. Furthermore, in case the families who gave a go ahead to their female members to use the digital platform, the number of female internet users come to be three times more than the six times female users who could not stand up to their families members (Intel and Dalberg, 2012). Despite the diversification of a number of measures and guidelines constituted by the law and other enforcement agencies, the gap still persists between men and women in

every field across the nation. After all these, the struggling part through the patriarchal setup of the society for getting education is still going on. Some of the discriminatory practices still widen the gaps between the opportunities provided to men and women.

Restricted interactions of human with the nature during lockdown period of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted into its harmful and beneficial effects on the environment. During lockdown period online services have been provided to the people. Keeping this thing in mind, the present paper focuses on the role of digitization during COVID-19 in bridging up the gender discrimination.

OBJECTIVE

The focus of this paper is certainly not on gender differences but on the shrinking gap between males and females jobs opportunities. It goes without much to claim that the Corona virus has knocked a very large part of population out of line on the globe. However, its onset has also resulted in bringing about some opportunities for women in India. Hence, the objective of this study is to extract the influence of digitization during COVID-19 in bridging up the gender discrimination.

METHODOLOGY

To meet the objective, the present study has been carried forward relying on appropriate methodology and taking into account related material and the collection of data from secondary sources in the form of variety of books, journals and research papers. The use of internet resources has also been availed in order to make results more authentic and vibrant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A deep investigation into the given statement brings to light that women have excelled in further reducing the wide gap of gender based discrimination during long bout of pandemic as they found out more opportunities to using the Internet, digital platforms, mobile phones and digital financial services so on and so forth. It not only brought them on a par with men but also gave them the possibility to live on their own in financial matters and increased employment opportunities and access knowledge and general information. Therefore, this trend supported women long with their families, thus enhancing the lives and well-being of people and of society as a whole.

Another glorious aspect observed as a part of this study is that Women have much to gain from boosting their use of digital tools as a result of opportunities brought in out by COVID- 19. In

other words, the increased use of digital services could further postulate that there is important scope for women to extract more value from the use of digital tools. It could be put down to the fact that men outnumber women in using services supported by the Internet because women are reluctant to go for those services owing to lack of confidence. For example, using account and transferring money to different account provide ample degree of women participation in the financial processes. Therefore, the solution to this problem lies in educating women so that they could come over their state of hesitation through online instructions and awareness videos.

In addition to that, lockdowns imposed to cope up with pandemic resulted rising number of women's participation in meaningful activities which not only put them at more comfortable position but also come out as an additional advantage in terms of stronger economic growth and enhanced societal well-being. It gave credence to the idea that increased number of women participation further brought about wider technological advancements and relatively higher impact from a technological view point than those in which only men are involved.

It goes without saying that women, who have been exposed to discrimination and disproportion all along, constitute around half of the world's population still they have been marginalized. As far as India is concerned, there has been unbalanced sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. But that reason is not valid as only reason to discrimination. As contrary to women belonging to Western society who enjoys absolute rights and freedom to work and exploit the available opportunities on a par men, the Indian society by and large is paralyzed with evil of discrimination where there are different codes are fixed for them as compared to men.

Unfortunately, the onset of the pandemic has resulted in damaging the normal course of life and its repercussion could be witnessed in the form of uncertainties, gaps in technology, and most importantly, further disruptions to the existing lacunae in our systems. The abysmal period of lockdown that lasted for months really highlighted a wide cleavage between males and females. Their state of privation was as much haunting for them as the imminent risks of Corona

itself. Having said that, women have incredibly shown to a large extent courage to stand against the COVID-19 as whole. This makes Junaid Ahmad, World Bank Country Director in India, to praise Indian women saying that "Women at the center of development have been an important story in South Asia. In these extraordinary times, when we are all united in our fight against the

COVID-19, these women's groups are playing a critical role". Indian women went out of their ways to explore different possible avenues to cope up with harmful impacts of pandemic. Their enthusiasm to narrow down the gender gap as well as to stand on their own in financial matter, they exploited options in digital technology as the relevance of digital technology has set itself as supporting pillars in every walk of life. That is why there is no denying the fact that the use of computers and the Internet in our every day social interactions have been in the vogue these days.

Technology not only emerged as a key tool in the response to the global crisis as a result of COVID-19 but also attempted to contain the severity of it. The countries equipped with internet and technologies were quick to innovate and emerge as digital pioneers, aiming to revolutionize processes across education, health and employability solutions to define a new normal. Initial beliefs that the Internet was a democratic and equal medium for communication have been challenged (Gunn *et al*. 2003).

Significantly enough, the related statistics flash out vital information about scores of women who lost their jobs during the pandemic who were employed in the services sector. Strangely enough, those women belonged to digital illiteracy area and the prolonged period of lockdown pressed them to surrender to their fate. However, the flip side of lockdown period has some beneficial effects as well because frequent lockdown gave rise to multifarious opportunities when it paved the way for women to join online courses so that they could equip themselves with basic and advanced skills of digital technologies. Needless to say, the frequent use of technological skills led them to transitional phase and growing e-commerce space. This can be observed from a survey published in The Economic Times conducted by the National Female Health Survey which said that only forty two percent of women in India have used the internet ever. A survey carried out by the National Sample Survey Office brings it out that during 2017-18 that only 8.5 percent women did have access to the Internet. The low percentage of women using online technologies spells out gravity of the matter. Yet another survey did by National Family Health Services published in The Economic Times, Dec 15, 2020 states that only 42 percent Indian women have ever used the internet. Used as a measure to control the gravity of pandemic, the uses of telemedicine have been brought into frequent service. Therefore, a sudden rise in digital services such as telemedicine and consultation can be seen. Hence, services

provided by Telemedicine have provided women with the scores of opportunity so that they manage to earn not only for their own but also for their families to support. This transformation generated an awakening that facilitated them to cope up with their health problems and pregnancy concerns without risking physical visits to clinics during the pandemic.

The discussion gives rise to another aspect which promotes the use of technology to generate awareness among school children not to consider for the gender sensitive issues and encourage the equal distribution of e-resources for male and female students. In order to pace up the awakening process, tools such as Video, Telephony, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet might be considered to level out the gender gap because information delivered out through such platform could outreach even in the remotest areas.

However, women's efforts to bridging the gender gap through digitization have been supplemented by the governmental policies and programmes. In fact in the recent past, the governments floated the 3.0 version Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana containing several provisions like offering online courses in phases for classes 9th to 12th in form of vocational study. It needs special mention that most of these professional courses are designed for girl students only. There are strong reasons behind this initiative and one of them is that the government has really realized the forceful potential of digital technology as the only branch that really was gaining profit during the lockdown period.

Bridging up the Digital Gender Gap

Keeping the gist of present argument in view, it is strongly asserted that the one of the most feasible solution to fixing the gender gap is the inclusion of extreme strength of women in the mainstream process. The social distancing has been accepted as one of the easiest way to prevent COVID infection. In this regard, digital tools can be used to keep work and other business activities in progress. Most of Indian women stay home so they are in better position to work from home by using digital technology. Certainly, this would bring them into the mainstream process. Hardly any other

realistic explanation seems required than to content with that the Internet and associated technology is an area supposed to be designed out for men only and women are just to discharge their domestic responsibilities and other insignificant jobs (Wolf 1998). This has given rise to concerns about equality in education, particularly for women. A

gender gap currently exists in digital literacy and access. However, closing the digital gender gap has the potential to reduce inequalities, empower women, and maximize their skills notably in rural areas because digital gap appears wider in such areas as compared to the urban. Findings of the survey throw light on the rural women who constitute 27 percent and they tend not to have their own basic mobile phones. This data could be compared with 14 percent women belonging to the urban areas who have been reported as not having the basic mobile phones. Surprisingly enough, this gap further widens to an alarming degrees in case of the use of smart phones. It has been reported that 72 percent women in India belonging to the rural area are less likely to possess a smart phone. However, this decrease in number drops in to 63 percent in case of women living in the urban areas (GSMA, 2018a).

It is not that the Internet technology results in brings out the best of female workers' skills, but it has an ability to strengthen women's awareness and capacity in upcoming years also. In more specifics terms it might also be argued that in post COVID era when the situation comes back to normal and economical activities return to their pace, this would further lead women in working rather more flexible hours and conducive atmosphere. In this way, women would attain better chances at their work place so that they could strive to attain comfortable balance in their roles as working professionals and house makers.

However, this is worth to mention that equipping women with latest digital technology and provoking them to go digital in their professional life are not adequate. They have to be educated to break the barriers of strong tradition which prevent them from participating in the digital supply chain. Nonetheless, COVID-19 worked as the catalyst and attempted to move the power of balance from male to female in the digital world. But this is a prolonged process and its full effect will appear in long run.

E- Learning and its Relevance in Future

Taking into account preceding argument and available statistics, it has been observed that a large section of women aspirant has openly posed a challenge to existing stereotypical pattern that they are not well efficient in using the digital technology to advance their career in the middle of Corona pandemic and afterward. However, their success has been acknowledged by the findings of various surveys that they are confident independent aspirants who are

academically gaining new heights and glory to outperform their male counterparts in digital world. At present, women do have full access to computer and the Internet as compared with men. They are also equally inclined to get higher study in computer technology. The gender debate needs to move on from access and performance. Further research needs to examine the differences and similarities in the degree of importance. Men and women working in the same digital platform must engage themselves in different interactions and coming out with encouraging women to excel in their respective fields. Therefore, working in the same digital place as a team, they would easily achieve the targets.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum and substance, the study comes up with glorious reasons to assert that the process of digitization during COVID-19 gives rise to a bunch of opportunities in field of digital world to women and they have indeed made the most of it by rising above their distressing circumstances. As for now, they have come into their full potential and successfully delivered financial services, acquired knowledge, and created networks nationally and worldwide as well. Unquestionably, they are now equipped with digital skills that grant them financial independence resulting in bridging up the gender gap in steady manner by innovating the right way forward into the future.

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