Digital Inclusion and the Advancement of Women: Wielding a Double-Edged Sword

Women globally have been among the worst hit by the social and economic catastrophe caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. On almost all development indicators, whether it be economic opportunities, education, health or nutrition, the adverse impact of the pandemic has been disproportionately borne by women. The pandemic has also exacerbated the structural and systemic factors inhibiting women's greater participation in economic and social processes. One of the most significant of these has been their relative lack of access to digital technology in a world that is being rapidly digitized. This is particularly challenging in India where only 14.9 % of women are reported to be using the internet.

This lack of access has adverse implications for a woman's prospects in life. Digital technologies today provide access to critical health services, government welfare schemes, opportunities for education, civic participation, employment, and financing. For women, the access to the internet has the potential to strengthen their sense of agency by allowing them to access and verify information, to connect with markets for their services or goods and to receive payment securely without having to go through an intermediary.

During the pandemic access to smartphones, a computer and an internet connection became a critical necessity for survival with crucial services related to health, vaccinations, livelihoods, education and security being offered mainly through digital means. This transitioning of many social and economic services to online platforms suggests that the post-Covid world is going to be much more reliant on digital technology making it all the more crucial to reduce the gender digital gap.

There are various structural factors that prevent women in India from accessing digital technologies. Owning smartphones and accessing the internet are relatively expensive. The majority of women in the country lack the means or the financially independence to buy a smartphone or pay for internet access. Levels of literacy continue to be lower for women than men. It has often been found in families that priority is given to male members when it comes to using smartphones or accessing the internet. Studies have found that families fear giving women access to the internet assuming that it may lead them to challenge patriarchal norms, expose them to unknown dangers or distract them from domestic work and care-giving which is still widely viewed as their primary duty. As a consequence of this deprivation, millions of women across urban and rural India remain deprived of the opportunities that the internet offers for bettering their lives.

While there is undoubtedly a need to greatly increase access to the internet among women in India, this process needs to be approached with thoughtful care to avoid reductionistic or naïve ways of thinking about technology in the context of development policy. The importance of access to the internet must be neither underestimated nor exaggerated. Providing digital connectivity to women is a small part of a much larger transformation that will need to happen in the social, economic, cultural and spiritual life of society to advance the equality of women and men. It is not a quick-fix to the complex and multifaceted challenge of ensuring gender equality as some technocratic prescriptions tend to view it. To bear their intended fruits, technological interventions must be accompanied by a range of capacity building measures among girls and women and also among institutions and communities at the grassroots to be able to draw on technology intelligently and with sensitivity to the social, economic and cultural context.

A related challenge is the tendency of being naïve about the role and impact of technology in the betterment of society and on the condition of women in particular. Digital technology, like technology in general, is a double-edged sword. While the benefits of digital access are readily apparent, it is also a fact that the internet as a social space has turned into an increasingly hostile and dangerous space for women with misogynistic attitudes and opinions being brazenly shared with little or no regulation. According to a survey conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation, more than half of the young women interviewed spoke of experiencing violence online, including sexual harassment.

Further, there is a self-reinforcing feedback loop at play between the patriarchal values in a society and the kind of technologies that the society develops. Technologies are developed by men, for men and they largely represent male perspectives, needs, tastes and sensibilities. Owing to the complex factors behind gender-based occupational segregation, too few women the world over enrol for educational programs related to engineering and technology and this results in the limited influence of women on the design of technology. This is one of the reasons why the technology that is developed usually does not reflect the needs and life experiences of women. In addition to this, artificial intelligence systems that undergird many popular websites and applications strengthen and amplify existing gender stereotypes. The algorithms that run these AI systems learn and draw patterns from data of users online. Considering that a majority of users online are men, male biases enter into what these systems learn thus reinforcing existing gender norms rather than serving as a force for change.

Thus, regardless of how enticing the prospects of rapid internet-driven change may seem, the fact remains that there are no shortcuts on the path of development. While increasing digital access for India's women is vital, to make good on the promise of technology calls for capacity building in girls and women, for greater participation of women in the fields of science and technology, for the conscious and deliberate inclusion of women's perspectives in the design of technologies and for greater efforts from the State, civil society and technology companies to make the internet a safe and wholesome space.

The Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development is organizing a webinar on the theme *Digital Inclusion and the Advancement of Women: Wielding a Double-Edged Sword.* This webinar seeks to bring together technology developers, feminist scholars, development practitioners and social scientists to explore the conditions under which the growing digitization of India can contribute to the greater empowerment of women.