

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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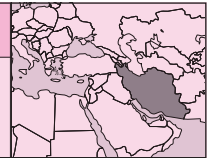
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IRAN

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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Introduction

The influences of information and communications technology (ICTs) on culture, politics, the economy and daily lives have caused contradictory reactions amongst decision makers in Iran. While drastic changes brought about by technology – including in business and IT services – have not been prevented by those in power, the negative outlook of the government suggests its fear and anxiety over how these technologies might be used in the hands of people.

For many years the widespread use of satellite TV channels among the Iranian population has been prohibited, giving the police and militiamen a justification to break into people's houses to seize equipment and to create a legal context for questioning. At the same time, legislation has been passed to limit the use of bandwidth and services such as MMS and WiMAX in order to create stricter control over the internet and mobile services.

Even though the major infrastructures in the country are affected by international sanctions and the ICT sector has not been a major priority in macro planning, the misuse of existing communications facilities is evident. During and after the 2009 presidential election, the rulers' fear and panic over the use of ICTs by the people intensified. Bandwidth and speed were lowered, and the interception of mobile services – such as SMS – became common practice, as well as surveillance of landline calls. Internet outages at certain times, widespread filtering of internet sites, and noise transmission to the Persian news satellite channel increased. In the meantime, the presence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and related entities connected to the supreme leader and other leaders in major telecom infrastructural projects was strengthened.

Based on the mindset of the Iranian regime, especially regarding women's issues, and with an insecure atmosphere dominating the web, the communications environment in the country has worsened. The lack of reliable statistics and indicators on gender is a serious obstacle to developing a gender-based analysis of ICT use. This is a matter of concern.

ICT penetration rates in Iran

According to a World Economic Forum report and remarks from the general director of the Department of Economic Surveys at the Ministry of Communications and Information, by 2012 Iran ranked 16th among 20 countries in the region on the Networked Readiness Index, and 104th in the world. According to the same report, in the ICT social and economic impact sub-criteria, Iran ranks 17th in the region, and 14th in the ICT applications sub-criteria.

Official statistics show a growth in the internet penetration rate in the country in recent years: according to data from the last official census in 2010, approved by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), penetration in urban areas was 18.9% while in rural areas it was only 4%, which indicates a wide digital gap between these two areas. Penetration is 16.6% among men and 12.7% among women.

But conflicting data regarding the official definition of "internet users" in Iran hampers the analysis:¹ The National Internet Development Management Centre reports 59.50% penetration² for spring and summer 2012, with most web connections being mobile.³ If the documents submitted to the ITU are true, the development of mobile networks can be expected to narrow the digital divide between urban and rural areas, although the limited speed of GPRS is a considerable issue.

Taking on gender-based studies of ICTs

The unfavourable conditions in the ICT industry have resulted in lost potential to empower women through the development of equal work opportunities. The lack of proper statistics, which include gender indicators, in most ICT research, and a lack of awareness amongst women's rights activists of ICT issues and challenges such as electronic violence against women, suggest the need for more studies in this area.

Women's use of ICTs

The role of the internet and social networks, their influence on women's lifestyle and the scale of women's legal needs online undoubtedly require research.

1 www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/240263

2 www.matma.ir/matma/mnu-internet-penetration.html

3 iraneconomist.com

However, non-official surveys indicate that blogs and social networks such as Facebook have provided women an opportunity to express their experiences as women, as well as a chance to expose particular experiences which are less talked about in public. For instance, we are witnessing the disclosure of experiences that women used to keep in silence, due to a sense of “modesty”. The internet is providing more and more women with a place to express feelings of love in a public space, or to talk openly about motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth, and loneliness, for instance.

The internet has also been an effective tool for women’s rights activists to make progress in claiming their rights. For example, email and internet were used as an effective networking tool for the “One Million Signatures for Equality” campaigners in the past years. The internet was also used effectively to gather support for political prisoners, including women, in 2009.

The “Say No to Compulsory Hijab” campaign is another example of network activism in which campaigners, including thousands of women, actively disclosed their personal experiences and points of view about the veil, and many of them posted their pictures with the logo objecting to the compulsory use of the hijab. Another blog was created discussing the chador – the black robe that covers the body from head to toe – from a personal point of view.⁴ Although these discussions had no tangible influence on changing the present situation, they created the opportunity to talk about such controversial subjects as the hijab through the personal points of views of women.

Education and information literacy

A gender-based rationing and localisation policy has been adopted for admission in Iranian universities. This has limited access to admittance exams for a vast majority of young women, particularly in some cities and in many engineering branches, which is a matter of concern. Except for this, the presence of women in IT studies and communications is officially accepted, and women can continue their education through to high academic levels if they are interested. However, the quality of education and the failure of educational systems have resulted in a reduction in digital literacy, which is another issue to be considered.

In some disadvantaged provinces, professional and advanced training courses in ICT fields are almost impossible, at both the university level and in institutes, due to a scarcity of facilities, while a lack of proper infrastructure does not allow local people to take advantage of internet-based distance education programmes.

As of 2008, unofficial statistics indicated a very low proportion of women in Master’s level technology-related engineering courses and technical education. In Bachelor’s level engineering branches, 10.9% of the students are women. In ICT-related Master’s classes, the proportion of women is also lower than men: 19.51% in electronics engineering, 38.71% in IT, and 27.64% in the field of computer sciences.

Women’s employment in the ICT field

According to the experiences of experts in the ICT industry, although obstacles limit the academic presence of women, especially in rural areas, many women finish their education and receive a degree. But because of the dominance of men in this industry, women have serious difficulties finding a proper occupation. In fact, besides inadequate educational facilities, the biggest obstacle that undermines women’s progress in this field consists of a set of cultural beliefs that exclude women.⁵

Regarding employment, the approach of decision makers towards female labour is devastating: they manage to promote gender-segregated rules and practices in different work fields instead of protecting women through supportive laws and services.

The high speed of the evolution of technology is an obvious reason for the need for continuous training and education of employees in ICT subjects. At present most experts acquire their knowledge through experiences at work. While the number of women remains scant in professional and engineering positions, women have less experience and therefore earn lower incomes, in both the governmental and private sectors.

Most women find themselves having to take a job as an assistant, or in logistical services, system administration, sales, or other lower-paid jobs, since the chances of finding a professional occupation consistent with their education are narrow.

Due to the traditional religious attitude that permeates governmental organisations and the official hypocritical conservatism, gender segregation is actively practiced. For example, jobs in fields such as engineering, which require frequent trips, are considered improper for “ladies”, and women are rarely chosen for the trips or excluded outright. In the private sector, where economic profitability is the main concern, companies usually prefer not to invest in women. The general gender-based approach often shows up in avoiding employing women.

Women are still few in management occupations. Most of the boards of directors of governmental and semi-governmental telecom companies are made

4 khaterechador.blogfa.com

5 www.itna.ir/vdce1do.w6dtmagiiv.html

up by men and few women hold management or entrepreneurial positions. Only 6% of 65 science and technology parks in Iran are headed by women. However, because of self-motivation and a hard-working attitude amongst women, the number of them as senior experts and coordinators at middle-management levels is increasing.

Men in urban societies enjoy better educational opportunities and resources than women. But women in rural and tribal societies are the most oppressed, with the least availability of educational resources.

Given the economic difficulties and high unemployment rate among rural women, the need to provide them with ICT facilities is not a matter of doubt. But poor infrastructure and a low educational base should be taken into consideration when implementing an international model adapted to the context of rural society in Iran.

In recent years, some governmental organisations launched teleworking plans. This brought hope to female employees who thought they would be able to continue their job responsibilities at home using ICTs, while being mothers. Pregnant women especially counted on this scheme as a method of empowerment that would mean a quicker re-entry into their careers. Unfortunately, mismanagement and the administration mentality caused these plans to fail by forcing a majority of women to turn their work schedules into part-time employment, with a drastic income reduction.

Electronic violence against women and judicial/security measures

Virtual violence against women is a malfunction of the internet. Filming women's private relations without their permission and uploading them on the web, posting personal pictures of them on social network pages, publishing nude pictures after retouching a normal photo, etc., are evident violations of personal rights which have victimised a lot of women in recent years.

According to statistics, "desecration" is the second most common internet crime.⁶ Humiliation and disrespect, often through mobile phone text messages, threatening women with publishing their private photos on the net, and blackmailing them or their families are some prevalent methods. Although most of the statistical reports do not include gender indicators, the number of cases of desecration opened in the judicial system indicates this is an expanding problem.

Security organisations such as the Iranian Cyber Police, known as the FTA, have started to confront

cyber crimes. A list of internet crimes was published,⁷ but the approach to cyber security has resulted in more censorship for women.

Moreover, the composition of the members of institutions and organisations such as the FTA, the Supreme Council of Virtual Spaces and the Council of Litigation on Cybercrimes reflects a male dominance which insists on male structures.

ICTs and threats to cultural identity

Discussion about women's identity and Iranian culture when it comes to ICTs is diverse: it ranges from the effects of ICTs on secularisation, to the topic of "soft war", which has been recently introduced into political literature, with an emphasis on stabilising Islamic norms. The different points of view have sparked considerable debate. The main discussion usually involves women, public morals and chastity.

One of the latest controversial topics among religious leaders and state groups is that of 3G technology and its influences. Some of the leaders confronted the question by prohibiting 3G, arguing that it endangered public and family chastity because of its visual capabilities.⁸ Some governmental experts, magnifying its effects, even compared this technology to nuclear bombs. Its more positive effects are often ignored: it can at least provide parents and especially mothers with psychological comfort at work by allowing them to "telewatch" their children. Such confrontations are not new: technologies are often challenged by hardliners and then accepted, under pressure from the public and businesses. In this context, cultural activities are necessary to prevent a new trend of violence against women.

Action steps

Regarding the potential of ICTs, as well as solid indicators on the information society, the following steps are necessary to protect the role of women:

- Technical and infrastructural issues and how women can access infrastructure need to be addressed.
- Problems created by legal limitations on women, based upon cultural matters, need to be solved.
- Targeted projects to empower women through ICTs are necessary. Further research is also needed in this regard, and ICT-related occupations and virtual violence might be considered as the main priorities of study. ■

6 www.hamshahrionline.ir/details/193606

7 www.itna.ir/vdcexv8w.jh8nfigbbj.html

8 www.itna.ir/vdcccioqi.2bqpx8laa2.html