

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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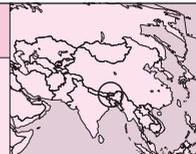
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On 15 April 2013, International Girls in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Day was celebrated for the first time in Nepal.¹ It was a joint effort by the Ministry of Information and Communication, the Nepal Telecom Authority (NTA) and Equal Access International Nepal, with support from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

Though the International Girls in ICT Day was celebrated for the first time, it was not the first event mainstreaming ICT for development (ICT4D) for women in Nepal, or for women in ICTs. There were several efforts in the past to make use of ICTs for women and development, some of them concerned with building women's capacity in ICTs by providing training and creating networks.

More than a decade ago, led by three women's organisations, Sancharika Samuha (SAS), Saathi and the Centre for Legal Research and Services (CLRS), an electronic network called MahilaWeb was started with a nine-month start-up grant from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). The initial goal of MahilaWeb was to produce and share information about women and gender in Nepal, locally and globally. MahilaWeb developed an electronic repository of information collected from government, non-governmental organisations, media and the private sector based on the 12 critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as other gender issues confronting Nepal.² The MahilaWeb website was launched in July 2000, but the website is no longer available at the URL www.mahilaweb.org.

Women and ICT policies

Until the late 1990s, Nepal did not have policies related to new ICTs such as the internet. The Nepal Information Technology (IT) Policy was formulated in 2000 and paved the way for applying ICTs in various sectors in Nepal, such as the economy,

education, governance and the overall development of the country. It also enabled the formation of governmental institutions to promote ICTs in Nepal, like the Nepal Information Technology Centre.

After the Nepal IT Policy 2000³ was implemented, which included varied application of ICTs in different sectors and the need to regulate the use (and abuse) of ICTs, there was a need for new regulations to reinforce it, and so the Nepal Electronic Transactions Act was enacted in 2008.⁴

However, neither the ICT policy nor the act distinctly addresses issues related to gender, especially for women. The IT Policy 2000 has provisions for developing human resources in the ICT sector in general by developing ICT educational institutions, encouraging both private and public investments in the development of ICT industries and businesses, and providing training and scholarships. But given that women make up more than half of Nepal's population, the policy remains silent about what would be the role of women in ICTs and development in Nepal – or what specific provision there would be to develop the capacity of Nepali women in ICTs. In brief: the policy does not safeguard women's rights in line with the provisions made in the current interim constitution of Nepal.

Although it does not directly address gender-related issues, the Electronic Transactions Act 2008 takes a step towards being gender-sensitive as it makes provisions for liability, not exceeding about USD 1,000, or imprisonment, not exceeding five years, or both, in case of the publication of illegal materials in electronic form. The ban on such publications includes damage to a person's privacy and character assassination, which to some extent indirectly prevents online violence against women such as online harassment and cyber stalking. Earlier this year, a woman politician in Nepal suffered character assassination on Facebook; the victim was able to file a case and the perpetrators were brought to justice.⁵

1 girlsiniict.org/girls-in-ict-day-events/girls-ict-day-nepal

2 unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan007116.pdf

3 nta.gov.np/en/.../Policies/IT%20Policy%202005%202000.pdf/download

4 www.tepc.gov.np/uploads/files/12the-electronic-transaction-act55.pdf

5 www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=56973

TABLE 1.					
Women employed in NT: 2009-2013					
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Total employees	5733	5659	5542	5529	5493
Male employees	5036	4976	4856	4842	4811
Female employees	697 (12%)	683 (12%)	686 (12%)	687 (12%)	682 (12%)

Source: www.nta.gov.np/files/GirlsInICT2013/ICT_Career_for_Women_Nepal_Telecom_Prospect.pdf

Situation and efforts

The latest data available from sources like the ITU indicates that internet penetration in Nepal is more than 20% of the total population of about 26 million. There has been rapid growth in internet access primarily due to phenomenal growth in access to mobile phones.

According to Nepal Telecom Authority statistics, almost 70% of the Nepali population has access to mobile phones with 3G, GPRS and CDMA facilities. The internet is accessed primarily through the use of mobile phone internet facilities.⁶ However, gender-disaggregated data on internet and mobile phone use in Nepal is not available. It is not known exactly how many Nepali women have access to the internet and mobile phones.

Similarly, there is no available data on how many people in Nepal have a degree, certificate or training in ICTs. This means there is no data on how many Nepali women have ICT educational qualifications.

If we look at the employment of women in the ICT sector, national level statistics are not available. But taking the case of Nepal Telecom (NT), the state-owned telecom service provider, gender-disaggregated data for the past five years (2009-2013) is presented in Tables 1 and 2. While Table 1 illustrates the percentage of NT employees who are women, in Table 2 the data is further disaggregated to consider women's employment in technical positions specifically.

The five-year data shows that although women have been employed in the ICT sector in Nepal, the trend has not been encouraging. The employment of women in NT has remained static over five years. And even when there are more women employed in NT, they have not been able to occupy significant senior and decision-making positions.

Putting aside the unavailability of national gender-disaggregated data, and low employment of women in ICT sectors like NT, in the past few years there have been several efforts made by the

government, non-governmental organisations and the private sector to recognise the importance of women in ICTs and to build women's capacity in terms of access, training and participation.

As already mentioned, the government of Nepal celebrated International Girls in ICT Day for the first time this year. On this occasion, the director and acting chief of the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) expressed his commitment to continue encouraging women and girls to pursue ICT careers. The secretary of the Ministry of Information and Communication (MOIC) repeated the government's commitment to the empowerment of girls and women by mainstreaming gender through extensive use of ICTs, and said that the government has made a number of targeted interventions through several initiatives.

The NTA made the public aware of International Girls in ICT Day through a public notice published on 4 April 2013. The NTA also made a request to ICT-related companies, government agencies, academic institutions, NGOs working in the field of women's empowerment and other interested organisations to hold local or national events for International Girls in ICT Day on 25 April 2013, targeting teenage girls and university students. The NTA additionally organised an essay competition on that day on the theme "The Role of ICT in Empowering Girls and Women".

A workshop was held on 25 April by MOIC and NTA in collaboration with Equal Access Nepal and promoted by SPARROW (a private SMS mobile marketing solution company),⁷ on ICT careers, the status of women's participation in ICTs, the use of ICT tools and techniques in personal empowerment, etc. Likewise, the Sambriddhi Nepal Foundation, a social entrepreneur NGO, organised a half-day motivational programme at the Chundevi Higher Secondary School on the outskirts of Kathmandu in Thankot. Similarly, WikiWomen in Nepal organised a programme called Wiki Editathon, primarily targeting college students, on how to create accounts and

6 www.nta.gov.np

7 www.sparrowsms.com

TABLE 2.					
Women in technical positions in NT					
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Manager	2	2	3	3	3
Deputy manager	8	8	7	7	7
Senior engineer	3	3	7	7	8
Engineer	16	21	21	36	35

Source: www.nta.gov.np/files/GirlsInICT2013/ICT_Career_for_Women_Nepal_Telecom_Prospect.pdf

add/edit contents on Wikipedia. Telecom operators in Nepal also provided promotional offers targeting female students.

Later this year on 16 June, in an event held by the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, Young Innovations and the Computer Association of Nepal, experts and technologists came together to address the challenges of violence against women by finding innovative technological solutions to issues surrounding prevention, response and awareness at the Violence Against Women (VAW) “Hackathon”.⁸

In November 2011, Yuwa,⁹ a youth NGO in Nepal, teamed up with SPARROW SMS (as part of its corporate social responsibility) and launched a campaign intended to hear and act upon voices being raised against VAW in Nepal. The team has launched a Facebook group named “Voice Heard” which allows people to post their views or report VAW issues online, including by email, by submitting a form, and real-time SMS. This project allows the public to report VAW incidents and issues openly and anonymously by posting directly on the Facebook group’s timeline, or by SMS or email.¹⁰

In 2011 the Computer Association of Nepal (CAN) formed a Women in ICT Sub-Committee as a result of persistent lobbying by its women members.¹¹ The CAN sub-committee on women has been raising awareness on the participation of women in the ICT sector in Nepal, as well as trying to carry out research to generate data on women in ICTs.

Earlier this year in January the sub-committee undertook an online survey on the role of ICT for women in the media and organised a workshop on “The Role of ICT for Women in Journalism: Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Media”. The workshop was attended by more than 30 participants from different media groups and ICT sectors in Nepal and its aim was to share best practices as

well as the challenges of using ICT for women engaged in the media sector.¹²

There have been commendable efforts by the CAN Women in ICT Sub-Committee to understand and mainstream gender issues in the ICT sector. A member of the sub-committee remarked, “First the gender sensitivity has to develop within CAN as an institution, before it can effectively work on women in ICT issues in Nepal.”¹³

While in the past few years there have been positive developments as far as women’s ICT issues are concerned, the demise of MahilaWeb raises questions about the sustainability of women and ICT issues in Nepal. There is a need to assess what worked, what did not work and what may work. There is a need to learn from past efforts and move into the future.

Conclusion

The MahilaWeb effort, started more than a decade ago, was already having sustainability problems after its nine-month pilot period, according to the paper “Using ICT in Development: Perspectives on Nepali Experiences”.¹⁴ It faced difficulties in collecting information from various organisations. Training on using the internet, email and web page design were given to women from partner development organisations, with the expectation that trainees would share their organisation’s information. But the contribution of information to MahilaWeb by the partner organisations did not happen. When funding ended, MahilaWeb staff members kept working voluntarily for a time but eventually the project was discontinued.

What we can conclude from the MahilaWeb experience is that the initiative was ahead of its time. More than a decade ago, access to ICTs such as the internet and email in Nepal was limited to a select

8 www.vawhack.org/about-hackathon

9 www.yuwa.org.np

10 www.data.yuwa.org.np

11 www.can.org.np/content/women-in-ict.html

12 Based on information provided by a member of the CAN Women in ICT Sub-Committee.

13 Quoted from a personal conversation with a member of the CAN Women in ICT Sub-Committee

14 unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan007116.pdf

group of users. At the same time, the culture of sharing information in Nepali society and organisations and working collectively on a common issue was a distant vision.

The situation has changed now. More and more Nepali people and organisations have access to ICTs and social media. Though there is no official data, from general observation it can be said that every woman, whether working outside the home or at home, has access to mobile phones and SMS and is familiar with social media. With growing access to ICTs Nepali women and men alike are more open to sharing information and their public sphere has grown. However, at the same time, the open space provided by advances in ICTs has been turned upside down, as women and men alike have become subject to online harassment. It is time to review ICT-related policy and laws in Nepal in the context of massive growth in access and the advancement of social media and networks like Facebook.

The perspectives of Nepali women in ICTs have their own share of highs and lows. While projects like MahilaWeb completed their cycle more than a decade ago, the ultimate outcomes of recent initiatives like Voice Heard and the VAW Hackathon deserve a grace period before conclusions are drawn.

Action steps

- First, the IT Policy and Cyber Law in Nepal need to be revised and amended to make them gender-sensitive and inclusive.
- The IT Policy should also be revised to incorporate clear gender-specific provisions such as scholarships for women to pursue IT education; employable ICT skills development and training for women; and quotas for women in IT sector employment.
- The Cyber Law in Nepal needs to be developed differently in the context of rapidly changing uses and abuses of social media, with specific safety and security measures provided for women users.
- Women's leadership in the ICT sector, their inclusion and their rights need to be developed as in any other developing sector.
- Rights for women have been provided for in most of the laws of Nepal, but there is a need for more concerted efforts for women to be aware of and claim their rights.
- Over more than a decade of experience, a majority of ICT and ICT4D programmes or initiatives have not been able to sustain their work. Multi-stakeholder partnerships that include the private sector, especially IT companies, can ensure some degree of sustainability of ICT4D initiatives. ■