

Digital Divide between Genders

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Abstract

The term "digital divide between genders" describes the qualitative and quantitative differences between men and women regarding the availability of modern forms of information and communication technology (ICT) [1][7]. In this era of modernization, many developed societies have been trying to inculcate such an attitude among its members that using the internet would cherish wellbeing in various spheres of life. However, women, despite forming a major part of the world's population, have been underrepresented in the ICT sector. They are deemed as technophobic and hence, late entrants in the realm of information technology (IT), which is thus taken as generally male-dominant [4][5]. This trend, however, needs to be revised and the women folks ought to be persuaded to make use of the internet in their life [5]. In this context, the problem of digital gender equality has emerged as a significant issue and faces considerable opposition in the community. I, therefore, decided to elaborate upon it to create awareness among the readers. The study, thus, reflects upon the impact of fast emerging ICT on socio-cultural perspectives of the global community and also upon the threat to the online security of females

Keywords: Gender digital divide, ICT, internet, Knowledge and usage gap, Global Community

Introduction

Women's role in this world is not based on a hypothesis, assumption, fantasy, unrealistic or unjustified grounds. It has been proved on many levels and a lot of spheres of life that women are exceptional human beings when it comes to performing a daunting role in the social, economic, religious, educational sector of this community. Since the beginning of life, women have faced numerous challenges concerning equality. Gender discrimination has been and still a hot and solution demanding challenge in this society. But as the world is evolving and growing rapidly in every domain, women are still encountering issues related to the gender divide. This study is about gender division in ICT. This study entails information, discussion and possible suggestions about the digital divide between genders.

Socio-Political Influence

The conservative approach of the cultural and political authorities has greatly contributed to this digital gender divide [7]. This biased attitude of society towards women makes them underestimate their potential to use IT [4]. Multiculturalism, as in Europe has led to social diversity. It has defined the role of men and women in the community, particularly in the field of application of ICT by female individuals. This cultural diversity in Europe has led some to view greater engagement of women in the field of IT as a means to enhance their empowerment whereas others presume that this would decrease patriarchal influence in the society [1]. Traditional family values, as framed by the rigid approach of gender stereotypes, have shaped how ICT is to be introduced. Likewise, the stereotypes also suggest how the prevalent use of ICT among the genders is to be regulated [1][4]. In India, for example, panchayats in Uttar Pradesh have prohibited the use of mobile phones by unmarried women as they feel it leads to loose morals [12]. Such an approach has required the traditional gender roles to be following the so-called "essentialism," thus discouraging women from going beyond it. GSMA Development Fund reported that only 28% of Indian women own mobile phones compared with 43% of men [11]. This approach adversely affects the development of traits like receptiveness and self-confidence in women [4]. A survey conducted by Intel revealed that one in five women in India and Egypt question the propriety of the use of the internet by the women [13]. They also smell reluctance on the part of their families to let them have free use of it. Furthermore, the low literacy rate among middle-income societies and poor communities tends its residents to perceive technology as 'toys for boys' as they fail to appreciate the use of the internet among women [11]. Therefore, despite the widespread availability of internet in rural areas of India, only 2% of women use it [3]. This, thus, demonstrates that gender bias regarding IT is strongly entrenched among the people.

Social Norms

The socially discriminatory environment has also been observed in the IT education and employment sector. Even teachers and parents show a differential attitude while advising students in career planning [1]. This is evident from the statistical data, presented by the European Commission engaged in the ICT sector, which shows 9.6% of women students in tertiary education study ICT related degrees, against 30.6% of men [1]. Additionally, the lack of female role models in science and technology serves as a deterrent for women in pursuing their careers in ICT [1]. In Germany, for example, only 20% of women are IT graduates [3]. In Peshawar, on the occasion of Digital Youth Summit, there were expressions of satisfaction, from the locals and lawmakers alike, at the availability of internet facility at home. It was felt that this access to the world from home would open up avenues of progress for women [15]. Moreover, the uneven gender divide is also witnessed in the ICT employment sector where fewer jobs are held by women than men and this discrepancy is on the rise. For instance, in European countries, the percentage of women at senior managerial posts in ICT is only 19.2%, in contrast to 42.5% in the non-ICT service sector. This deprivation of women from participation in serving as IT experts would lead to an increase in the women's dependency ratio and also stall their role in national affairs [1]. It is to be acknowledged that ICT competent women would be more effective in their role in gender awareness, e.g., "Solar Sisters" by Neha Misra [1][2]. Under-representation of women in ICT-related policy-making bodies is also observed in many parts of the world [1][7]. In Germany, the Federal Minister for family affairs, Manuela Schwesig, commented on the guidelines, presented by Digital Agenda, and declared them as 'genderless' and thus inadequate [3]. Greater involvement of women in IT would enable them to be politically more active through electronic polling, surveys and debate platforms [1]. The traditional social rigidity of norms of society has thus reinforced the digital divide.

Online Harassment

Online harassment also hinders women from acquiring IT knowledge [7]. With the introduction of IT, cybercrimes have also become a global phenomenon. Women, in particular, have become its soft target and victim. The Halt Abuse Cumulative revealed that 72% of the cases, reported to it, were by women [17]. Thus as women were getting engaged in IT concomitantly, signs of harassment towards them also grew visible. Studies from the European Union show 18% of women as victims of this maltreatment since adolescence [1]. However, society, at large, remained initially indifferent regarding this issue. No preemptive system was developed to forestall it. To counter cyber criminals involved in hacking and manipulating data, countries like India have accepted IT Act 2000 [18]. However, no efficient legal safeguards have been put into action to protect the honor and dignity of women as a distinct class. Brazilian born, Lorraine Porciuncula, stated that online victimization of women has emerged as a major issue in Brazil [3]. Some women have suffered trauma or even committed suicide to escape this violence. But the political authorities initially failed to realize the gravity of the situation. This thus shows that apathy of authorities to this social nuisance, in the beginning, encouraged the culprits which thus culminated in higher incidences of harassment. Even social media platforms, e.g. Twitter did not display any palpable signs of concern for this online menace [1][10]. In Arusha, Tanzania, locals believed that people are often unaware of how to safeguard their personal information [9]. This may facilitate blackmailing at the hands of unscrupulous elements. The amiable nature of women and their disposition towards an online discussion of personal life provided a chance for others, particularly men, to meddle. Association for Progressive Communications concluded, from the data of the UN, that 95% of abusive material online targets women [1]. As the field of IT has expanded so have cybercrimes online, including violations of moral code against women. This has dissuaded the latter from confidently embarking upon a professional career in IT [7].

Online violence against women has become so serious and widespread that a dire need is being felt to explore ways to combat this social evil. Among the remedial measures campaigning for mass awareness is of foremost importance, for example, 'Ready to Report,' campaign initiated by Amnesty International India [3]. Moreover, it is also of utmost urgency that the authorities concerned to attend to this issue and evolve strategies against it. In Pakistan, for instance, parliament passed the "Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act" (PECA) in 2016 to judicially prosecute such an offense [8][7]. Training personnel for conducting awareness campaigns would be an effective approach, as well [3].

Discussions

World Bank has estimated that women constitute 49.9% of the human population in the world. To enable them to be equipped with knowledge of a highly important science such as information technology is now obligatory [5]. This goal can be achieved by making some policy decisions such as the one taken by Estonia parliament in 2000 declaring ICT access as a fundamental human right [14][7]. We should enhance and protect women's rights online. Furthermore, the

secondary school curriculum must include digital skills and training for the youth, e.g., Barefoot College, Rajasthan, India [6] Women must be provided with equal access to tertiary opportunities as men. ICT centers in India, for instance, must be developed to provide cheap and free access to open web by females [4]. Useful content for women, for example, in fields of textile and handicrafts or free online health services, must be available on the internet [3]. A system should be developed that could allow the progressive narrowing down of gap in gender digital divide, such as the Digital Opportunity Index set up in 2005 [16]. Gender equality in terms of IT is a prerequisite for ensuring sustainable development of the world as a global community, e.g. action plan adopted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2016 [1].

In an interview, IT expert and educationist, Yasir Chaudhary talked about the inclination of girls in Pakistan towards IT subjects and the opposition they face from their parents in this regard. The study conducted by the European Union was recent and based on authoritative sources; however, it encompasses only limited areas of the human population and cannot be generalized. The data presented by the GSMA foundation provides relevant information, but it is motivated by vested commercial interests to promote mobile use. The report sponsored by W20 introduced me to multiple perspectives, thus confusing. Synopsis by Martin Hilbert provides credible information though female-biased.

Gazette of India (2000) promulgates authentic, official policy, though not so recent. Relevant and useful information has been compiled by the Digital Rights Foundation, but it is not comprehensive enough to be extrapolated. The conclusions derived by Global Partners Digital are based on data collected by renowned organizations, yet the trend of analysis is female prone. The website by Amnesty International collects information from worldwide sources on human rights, particularly females. However, their sources of information seem to be indirect.

Advanced societies recognize the importance of the internet and advocate its maximum use for the prosperity of mankind. Women, though constituting a major segment of the population, are considered not well represented in the field of IT [1]. Hence it is need of the hour to impart the knowledge of IT and bring them at par with their male counterparts. Socio-cultural influence, as identified by GSMA and Web Foundation reports, is a major issue that strongly affects the role of females in IT [7].

Conclusion

Analysis of the influence of socio-cultural nature on the issue of women's entry in IT has yielded evidence and arguments that have weighed upon the issue of the digital gender divide. The degree of confidence in this conclusion may, nevertheless, vary with more studies. Socio-cultural practices, e.g., in India, play a significant part in the gender divide. Public awareness of the issue and involvement of an official establishment would also contribute to bridging this divide. As we proceeded in research we feel that there is a need to motivate the masses for resolution of the issue. There should be more gender awareness campaigns and I will now participate in them and promote the use of IT for women at the local level. Human behaviors have also played a crucial part in shaping the prevailing situation, so there is a dire need to change human behavior. The claimed, human behavior, change is not only for males of this society but as well as for females. We as a female, face a raging demand to change our thinking perspective related to many aspects like the use of the internet, the study of ICT and job in ICT fields, etc. The study was quite fascinating; it broadened my vision and strengthened my focus. The two issues, online harassment and socio-political influence, related to the digital gender divide, based on the scope of research, could be further expanded making the report more comprehensive.

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