Women and Technology
Gender Equality in the Digital Ecosystem

11 November 2020 Wednesday

11:30 am - 01:00 pm
(Indian Standard Time)

Brief Report

Top Row (from left to right) – Reema Nanavaty, Bishakha Datta, Shubhangi Heda
Middle Row (from left to right) – N.S. Nappinai, Mia Mikic, Anja Kovacs
Bottom Row – Alka Singh

1. Objective of the webinar

1.1 In the wake of increasing use of technology in everyday lives, CUTS International took an initiative to publish series of policy brief on technology and society interaction in the field of Fintech, Edtech, Healthtech and Women and Tech.[1] The webinar was organised by CUTS International in collaboration with Cyber Saathi in line with the policy brief series to further the discourse on women and technology interactions, striving to achieve more inclusive and fair digital space.

1.2 The webinar aimed to explore issues relating to digital gender divide, cybersecurity concerns and women's participation in digital spaces to achieve

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[1] https://cuts-ccier.org/policy-briefs-consumer-protection/

the target of Sustainable Development Goal 5, for attaining gender equality and empowerment of women.

1.3 The webinar began with opening remarks by Alka Singh, Director, CUTS International followed by a brief presentation by Shubhangi Heda, Assistant Policy Analyst at CUTS International on the policy brief **Women and Tech Bringing Gender Equality in the Digital Ecosystem** to form the basis for panel discussion.

1.4 The discussion was moderated by N.S. Nappinai, Supreme Court Advocate and Founder of Cyber Saathi. The panelists were –
- Mia Mikic, Director of Trade, Investment and Innovation Division, United Nations ESCAP.
- Anja Kovacs, Director of Internet Democracy Project
- Bishakha Datta, Executive Director, Point of View
- Reema Nanavaty, Head of Self Employed Women's Association of India

1.5 The webinar witnessed participation from close to 45 participants from across the world, representing different stakeholder groups, including, policymakers and influencers, industry, academia, think tanks, civil society, and media.

2. Summary of the Panel Discussion

2.1. Interlinkages of Access and Women's Role in Digital Spaces

- It was highlighted that underlying problem hindering evolution of inclusive digital space stem from limited access to the internet and internet-enabled devices leading to digital gender divide. This divide exists due to cultural barriers and notions of technology affecting women's moral values and standards. In this regard, while we have been aware of these problems and we also know that solution exists, the implementation of these solutions is missing. To address this gap, it is important to dispel myths around incapacity of women's to stand up for themselves through increasing their role as policymakers, influencers and regulators.

- It is equally important for policymakers to learn from the experiences of women on-the-ground to ensure beneficial access to technology. During the pandemic, innovation has become a survival or a coping strategy for women which has motivated them to utilise technology in unique ways to expand and find new livelihood opportunities. Thus, if we put technology into the hands of women, they know how to best use it to their advantage.

- Little attention has been given to the resource needs of women. This is evident in various stimulus policies in COVID times which have given little

consideration to specific needs of women to access technology for education and healthcare etc.

- Thus, the policies should make note of the ground realities and should focus on uplifting women through equipping and enabling them to use technology at grass root level especially in the informal sector.

2.2. <u>Privacy and Cybersecurity Concerns</u>

- The challenge in the current situation with measures or solutions formulated to tackle the problem of cybercrimes is that they mainly focus on the women to fight back and to learn to lodge a complaint etc. This leads to a protectionist approach wherein the burden of being cautious or taking an action is put on women, resulting in women to withdraw from such situations. This puts the onus on women to ensure their own own privacy and puts more responsibility on them rather than it flowing as a right to them

- It was suggested that we need to identify structural factors (such as technical design of the systems, consent mechanisms, complaint mechnisms) which can make online spaces safer for women. For this, data should be looked at not just as a resource, but it should be recognised that our body and data are closely entangled. How women looks at data is different, they don't recognise privacy breaches as data protection concerns but they consider it as sexual assault, thus closely linking to data with bodies.

- The COVID situation has made us lead a Phygital (Physical + Digital) life, which is not about 'ORs' (physical or digital) any longer, it's more of 'ANDs' and fused, and hence it is important to make that flip in our minds. In this context, it should be recognised that the safety of women online is partly dealing with patriarchy and gender discrimination offline and partly online and if we want women to occupy online spaces freely and fearlessly we need to work on both, Patriarchy + Gender.

- It was also observed that in cases of cybercrimes against women it is the victim who ends up being alone and stigmatised rather than the perpetrator. The victims also feel they don't have remedies or they are inaccessible to them. It is also important to ensure that crime against the safety of one is a crime against all.

2.3. <u>Key messages</u>

- The education system should teach everyone the contribution of women in science and technology (computer programming, coding, etc.) and uplift their confidence.

- Online spaces are becoming new public spaces and it is important to ensure that women know how to navigate these spaces, have access to their data and have fair bargaining power.

- One needs to look at investment in terms of collateral or products available at Self Help Groups (how women have access to finance when they want to access technology) and the private sector should work in building up the partnerships in risk-taking as well as in sharing the advantages.

- There should be an ongoing effort to explore affirmative actions such as data fellowships or smartphone scholarships, which can effectively incentivise women's uptake of technology.

- We may also need to explore civil remedies in the form of damages and economic penalties. It is important to signal messages within the existing campaign of Digital India to address the societal attitudes and cultural barriers.