



Comments on National Policy of Women 2016

Digital Empowerment Foundation



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The Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) wishes to thank the Hon'ble Authority for the opportunity to submit our counter-comments on the draft National Policy for Women 2016.

Digital Empowerment Foundation is a New Delhi-based not-for-profit organisation. It was born out of the deep understanding that marginalised communities living in socio-economic backwardness and information poverty can be empowered to improve their lives almost on their own, simply by providing them uniform access to information and knowledge using digital tools.

General Comments

The National Policy for Women 2016 (the Policy hereafter) recognises a wide range of cross-cutting rights that women are entitled to, together with rampant human rights violations faced by them. The Policy's vision to create an enabling and empowering environment for women to be able to realise their full potential and exercise greater freedoms is welcomed. However, the policy lacks language of urgency towards addressing the mentioned issues. The implementation of last mile delivery for the proposed measures does not figure in the entire document, for example immediate need to addressing lack of access and restrictions to Information and Communication Tools (ICTs) for women or access points for women through mechanisms like Women Information & Resource Centres (WIRCs). It has also been limited in extending the same vision to women belonging to alternative sexual identities, non – heteronormative persons, transgender individuals and women sex workers. In addition, the policy does not give any direction to budget allocation for the envisioned measures.

Specific Comments

- 1.1 Eliminating structured inequalities that create a gender gap in usage, availability and access to ICTs have not been addressed in the policy. For example, there is little to no mention of patriarchy as an inhibitor, especially at panchayat level; where there are cases of women being barred from accessing ICT tools¹. Therefore, we recommend having Gender ICT policy along with this policy to encourage the participation of women in the ICT arena, and in particular, adopt legislation in ICT-specific sectoral areas to address gender equality and create monitoring frameworks and capacity to ensure implementation of these frameworks.
- 1.2 The policy document does not consider the grassroots reality of invisibility of infrastructure resulting in access to technology for women. Data collection through mobile phones for feeding in policy prescriptions has been mentioned but it lacks focus on research and data analysis, along with its implementation mechanisms.
- 1.3 Reiterating the lack of access, the data collection should not solely rely on mobile phones at this stage. Data collected through this channel should be made machine readable, multi-lingual anonymised, accessible to differently abled women and available on open government data platforms. This would enable greater transparency and oversight by civil society and academia. Additionally, if the government envisages that women will proactively provide data using mobiles, it should also address the excessive control of women's access to technology and the surveillance for those that do have access to ICTs.
- 1.4 Mere capacity building activities and dissemination of information through ICTs will not result in employment opportunities for women. Specific marketable skill development avenues specifically meant for women must be provided, based on the data collection and data analysis, as mentioned in the above paragraphs. There is also need to push basic communications services (and by extension, markets) into the rural regions of the country. Therefore, we recommend, women-centric organisations need to be engaged in decision making concerning the development of new technologies in order to participate in their growth and impact.
- 1.5 The policy is limited in recognising the issue of intersectionality and multiple marginalisation. For example, analysis of inhibitors that creates a digital divide for women with disabilities and Dalit and tribal women. There is no mention of Dalit and tribal women in the entire document. It is recommended that Dalit and tribal women should be focused on with special emphasis on the policy.
- 1.6 Specific mention of how ICTs enable women towards greater control of their every-day lives must be mentioned. For example, The Mother and Child Health Tracking System, launched under the

¹ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/gujarat-village-bans-mobile-phones-for-unmarried-women/story-iziKwjYckgmOOP8ZRBn3K.html>

National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), which has created a web-enabled system that will enable effective tracking of ante-natal care, post-natal care and immunisation of pregnant women and nursing mothers.

- 1.7 The emphasis on private entities to enable better educational infrastructure and opportunities through ICTs must be eliminated. This particular model is driven and eventually led by commercial interests. It also leads to burdening the parents to arrange resources. Government must allot adequate resources to integrate ICTs in school education rather than relying on Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) for the same. Additionally, to strengthen the ICT access and usage and information empowerment of women, dedicated community infrastructure creation like Women Information Resource Centres (WIRCs) on social entrepreneurial mode by the women, for the women and of the women would make lot of difference in availing government schemes information, resources, training, skill building etc. within the community ecosystem.
- 1.8 The policy document does not suggest enabling and safe models for women to access the internet. Alternative government funded public access spaces must be created and promoted at the village, block and district level for women to come online as well as use ICTs. For example, ensure affordability of mobile phones for rural women, establish community digital libraries etc.
- 1.9 The language to address violence against women online must be stronger and must emphasise upon ensuring safety of women to access the web as well as speedy redressal mechanisms for victims, considering that occurrence of violence against women in physical spaces is mirrored in digital spaces. Reiterating the fact that women of alternative sexualities, transgenders, dalit, tribal and in conflict areas are more vulnerable than others, special measures must be suggested to make internet a safe space for them supported through wider research initiatives.
- 10.10 Growing instances of rape videos being circulated over messaging applications and social media have been reported in the recent past². The production and distribution of rape videos are, like rape itself, crimes that violate an individual's ability to consent. They must be legally recognized as such, rather than primarily as 'obscene' images. There is a legal section in the IT Act– 66E – to address non-consensual sexual images, but this is grossly underused. Specific mention to strengthening the usage of section 66E could be made in the document.
- 10.11 The document pays no attention to the right of women to exercise freedom of speech and expression through ICTs and the internet, in addition to violence against women in digital spaces.
- 10.12 A concentrated focus would require in the policy to emphasise the need to create and deliver need based, localised digital content for women's needs cutting across community, economic, social and cultural diversity to strengthen their political, economic, social status. With increasing spread

² <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/muzaffarnagar-on-boil-again-as-rape-video-goes-public-bjp-leader-jumps-in/>

of digital devices, what will drive real empowerment is the content ecosystem for women which is available, affordable and accessible.

10.13 There should be greater and clarity based emphasis of having digital component in each of the women centric programmes and schemes. At state level, there is need and with greater visibility and action for a Women ICT cell or Division in each of the State Department for Women and Child Development. Further, dedicated programmes at national and state level on ICT for women empowerment could go a long way in digital inclusion and empowerment of women. For instance, having a specific programme on – Women Digital Literacy Mission (WDLM) programme at the office of the Ministry of Women and Child Development / National Mission for Empowerment of Women would mean a lot in specific and dedicated focus on women empowerment with ICTs. Similarly, having a National Mission on ICT for Women Empowerment would mean a lot in terms aligning with the Digital India Initiative of the Government and making women participate in the ICT for development mainstreaming process.

Please contact Ms Ritu Srivastava for more information. We will be happy to extend any further support to Ministry of Women and Child Development.

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