

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT ACROSS COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of digital media, especially social media platforms, in the role of building women's economic and financial image as well as providing them the grip of their dependance in a particular community or a society. Alternative media is turning into a big hub for the empowerment of society on a bigger picture. Women have got their way to share their views in this generation of social media. The virtual space is being more supportive to women and their power by segregating from the real space which irritates women by providing real challenges such as eve-teasing, discrimination in the workplace, harassment, stalking etc. The research paper by uplifting different scenarios of a different community in a different country focuses on providing crucial information related to alternative media whether it is helping in women empowerment where she chooses to be free to share anything she wants or even feel restricted with the remaining social boundaries. Further, this study concludes how women make use of social media as a reliable source of their empowerment in different aspects of their lives.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, India, Nigeria, MENA, Small enterprises, Egypt, Social Media Platforms, Entrepreneurship, Socio-cultural, Political, Economic.

Introduction

In recent times, social media which was once created leisurely to monitor a close form of communication among friends and family members, now has been directed to different usage. Social media can easily be turned into a useful platform for political, economic, religious, health, societal and other purposes where a bunch of online based broadcast technology is ready to authorize the democratization of content, enhancing people with the ability to become content publishers as well as content consumers. The first changing tools and modes of social media are being processed in a way where these change perceptions weren't even in the scenario a few months ago.

The ABC in 2011 explained that social media abbreviates those digital tools and activities which enable communication and spreading across the net world. Social media is wonderfully used by all the arenas of society, business, advertising, politics, media, police and emergency services. It is to note that it has also transformed into a key medium for stimulating thought, dialogue and action around a definite social issue.

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According to the studies revealed by Kaplan & Haenlein, social media is categorized in several different types:

- **Collaborative projects** include the adjoined and simultaneous content creation by many users. Examples include Wikipedia, Slack, Google Drive etc. Some of these sites allow their users to add, remove or change content. With this, they allow the group-based collection adhering to the internet links of media content.
- **Blogs** - are considered to be one of the earliest forms of social media. It grew from personal web pages and usually show date-mentioned entries in reverse chronological order. The blogs are still very popular due to its varieties of text based approaches.
- **Social networking sites** are those platforms which enable their users to connect by creating personal profiles, adding their information and inviting friends, family members, colleagues and other acquaintances to have access to their profiles, to send emails and instant messages. Examples include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc. Profiles usually contain photographs, video files, audio files, blogs etc.
- **Content communities** revolve around their main purpose of sharing media content between users, including text, videos, PowerPoint presentations etc. Examples of these communities include YouTube, Flickr, Slideshare, Dropbox etc. Here users don't have to create their personal profiles.
- **Virtual game worlds** are the platforms which provide a three-dimensional environment in which users take the form of their personalized avatars and interact with each other according to the rules of game software. These platforms are garnering fame through the support of the devices like Sony's PlayStation, Microsoft's Xbox etc. Minecraft, World of Warcraft etc are the giant examples.
- **Online job portals or job boards or job websites** are those one of the most utilized platforms or websites which enable their users to advertise jobs and search for resumes. It is one of the most useful income generating sources which saves both money and time by physically applying and interviewing for jobs. They are now an integral part of all the hiring process and using them effectively makes users free of any hazardous methods. Examples include, Indeed, LinkedIn, Naukri.com, Glassdoor etc.

'Empowerment' is one of the critical factors that social media has touched to be in its Territories. Empowerment means the process of internal change and having the ability and rights to make decisions. It consists of change, choice and power. It is methodized with change by individuals with tiny or no power who are able to gain the right to make choices which affect their lives. The structuration of power directly impacts the women and their ability to go for a choice in their lives. According to Malhotra, et. al in 2002, the viewpoint of women empowerment emphasizes on the occurrence of change in multiple dimensions, such as economic, familial, interpersonal, political, physiological and socio-cultural changes. Each of these dimensions are entitled to cover up a broad range of factors in which women must be empowered in one of the sub-branches. For example, the socio-cultural dimension covers up a lot of aspects or branches, such as the marriage system, rules and regulations regarding women's physical mobility, social support system excluding her familial connections and other available modes of influence which are available to a woman.

The role of social media in women empowerment is one of the deepest research factors which need our concentrated attention and serious observation. Different studies, surveys, case studies, analysis etc till date have suggested that women are very prone to social media in numerous ways, such as from women entrepreneurs growing their businesses in social media platforms, women discussing and advocating different complicated problems related to them, trying to opine against dogmatized communal culture or voicing against some unjustifying behaviors related to women-centric stigmas to women teachers or trainers taking classes online through ed-tech based firms etc have been transformed into a weapon of their abilities. These unnumbered ways are making women reach their goals quickly. The goal of the digital platform here is to offer a detailed framework for understanding the key relationships which lead to the empowerment of women through different directions of entrepreneurship, economic enabling, social justification, equality, self-efficacy, time management and so on. Capital generation of entrepreneurs has been added lately as a part of digital media exploration but it definitely is giving significant results where women across the world are upgrading their social media use to something fruitful. Also, any controversial topics posted in social media are gearing its speed like fire by getting viral when pushed by supporters irrespective of their genders. Therefore, women have been economically, socio-culturally and advocately getting empowered by social media.

Methodology

The focal purpose of the present research was to scrutinize developments in the social media from the emergence of social media as controlling different modes of use to the new era of virtual access and practice to ascertain and address women's issues and provide them the aspects of empowerment.

The research is basically processed by implicating secondary research resources including, books, online materials, articles of journals, research papers, magazine research contents and studies etc which in nature is descriptive and exploratory.

The present research attempted to address what basic differences women face in their own societies belonging from completely different countries and how social media is being their associate of change and empowerment. Here we will demonstrate the situations faced by women in their own countries and have an integral focal point of social media helping them to achieve their status.

Literature Review

Definition of Empowerment

The definition of 'empowerment' is highly debatable. This could be due to the different interpretations of power and the problematic conceptualizations on the focal point being the power for the development procedure (Gigler, 2004). Narayan (2005, pg.3) defines empowerment as a procedure which enhances "*self-confidence, self-direction, autonomy, and self-worth*". Here let's check the Kabeer's (2001, pg. 19) definition of empowerment as '*the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them*'. Sen (1999, pg.18) also uplifts the notion of empowerment by stating that "*greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world, these matters are central to the process of development*". In his authored book, "*Development as Freedom*", Sen defined that the "*extensive reach of women's agency is one of the more neglected areas of development studies, and most urgently in need of correction*".

According to Wallerstein and Bernstein, it is a process that supports the participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and society. According to several studies, empowerment is a very critical concept to define and is more easily understood by its absence than its presence.

However, according to Mason and Smith, female empowerment is a completely different phenomenon which is perceived differently across communities, but it is solidly workable when women are better educated and having more opportunities to flourish and thus, for being empowered. They stated , "*considering that there is a directly proportional relationship between social and economic status of women and economic growth and development, the improvement of the social and economic statuses of women is imperative, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries. The empowerment of women concerning education, healthcare, labor participation, and political rights will increase the role they will play in growth and development by increasing their contribution to the economy.*"

Women in India on the Verge of Women Empowerment and Social Media Emergence

Gender sensitization has always been a prime issue in India, where patriarchal society still exists. Women are always prone to risks when they want to move out in society freely. Sexual-harassment, eve-teasing and stalking have become a common phenomenon which a woman needs to face on an everyday basis. Cherry on the cake, she is always advised to have proper dressing to avoid any kind of mishaps, to change their manner of conversation or to have restricted communication with males in her surroundings. Now that the women have learnt to live with it, it is better to say they have taken it as a part of their common life.

Again, violence against women is hardly found in the national media. Women issues and crimes are shown in a completely different way than it should be. The game behind all of this is gaining TRP. There are hardly any special programmes which raise the problems of women and offer solutions.

"Delhi gangrape ", or "Nirbhaya", or "Gang-rape victim" were such phrases on the critical time of Delhi gang-rape case which got viral in alternative media aka social media and after reaching a peak on the neighbouring states and even breaking the barriers of countries, it reached to the world masses, becoming a global concern. This is how 'Nirbhaya' got its support worldwide towards its way to justice. Thus, social media became one of the strongest platforms to uplift one concern across the globe.

Among the virtual spaces, facebook, instagram, twitter, flickr, pinterestetc have garnered much popularity among Indian users. The most popular site is still entitled to facebook, being a home to 100+ million users in India.

In a blog, The new media and the global women's empowerment movement in 2011 by Jammie Victoria Abdulai, it has been discussed that women are interested to be a part of the social media because it's a global information sharing process, in which they are also included to air their voice without any constraint. There is no way to deny that social media has helped women a lot to reach their voices from one corner to another corner of the globe.

According to a paper by Dr. Ehtesham Ahmad Khan & Arif Moin in 2013, the online platforms are turning into a powerful source of mobilizing popular support among masses. India being no exception is facing the fact that the support Indian users have gathered by posting one mishap is phenomenally amazing and Indian youth users are no longer willing to accept any kind of societal injustice.

It is important to mention that on facebook, almost 90% of females have blocked someone for various different reasons. Contact details on their personal profiles are not given and it shows they don't have virtual freedom due to the rise of the problems, discomfort and fear among the female users. There are harassments too. Many surveys in college or universities have revealed how women users feel insecure with the men sliding into their personal texts with abusive texts and women are bound to block them due to their harassment attitude. On the other hand, women can post about their uncomfortable incidents among her friends where she might be seeking support. Thus, she got one way for her rescue.

As a result, from all of the above matter, it can be described that social media space has provided women freedom and she feels empowered where she shares her feelings, emotions, problems, or her thoughts and is given more attention than in real space. In this virtual set up, she is empowering her freedom with her choice of friends, communication with preferable friends or even she has the right to block the people causing her nuisance.

Social Media, ICTs and Economic Empowerment in Nigerian Women

Information system (IS) research has mentioned that an engagement exists between ICT (information communication technologies) and human empowerment. Some researchers have counterattacked with the statement that ICTs are sharing a direct relationship with empowerment and thus, contributes in making people able through different ICT tools (Badran, 2015 ; ITU, 2005; Maier and Nair- Reichart, 2007). Whereas Dasuki, Abbott and Azerikatoa (2014) have stated against the technology based approach of empowerment telling that there exists no direct relationship between ICTs and the empowerment of the poor but again, mentioned that an unique relationship exists between ICTs and the social, economic, cultural and political context which sustains it.

Within the African continent, women are gradually participating in the information society and are functioning in various ways, and the ICTs have caused a lot of social changes which are slowly becoming prominent to be visible all over (Buskens and Webb, 2009, 2014). Also, we believe that the phenomenon of ICTs and women empowerment are very promising in the context of socio-cultural aspects. Using theoretical approaches, this paper focuses on how ICTs can enhance the freedoms of women to dictate their own development as they do the implications of these technologies into their daily lives.

According to Odejide (1996, pg.43), "*the media often depicts women as being influential in the domestic sphere*". Based on this statement, it's been transparent that the inequality in the sexual portrayal by the media always exists.

According to Carter (2010), "*It turns out that sociolinguists have found women to be innovators when it comes to communication, especially with new forms of languages. The shift from "ye" to "you" in 15th century England? Women were behind it. Common phrases such as, "like, oh my god," known as Valley Girl uptalk, were started by young women from California. And in the mid 20th century a group of young women from Oberwart, Austria shifted the primary language of a bilingual community from Hungarian to German, which was a powerful move in a community that had resisted the influence of the German language for close to 400 years.*"

According to Oyesomi (2011), the Beijing conference in 1995 on women articulated some areas which were defined as very essential for women empowerment. These include poverty, education, violence against women, healthcare, effects of conflict on women, decision making mechanisms to enhance the women's emergence as a power of societal infrastructure. He stated about Nigerian women that they have come a long way in terms of political prospect and leadership viewpoint. They have proved themselves when opportunities have been given to them. There is no doubt in the present scenario that women are shining with glory and self-advancement.

According to the research studies of Naima Hafiz Abukabar and Salihalbrahim Dasuki in 2017, the prospect revolves around how a particular region named Kano in Nigeria has emerged as a significant city by weaponizing social media to emancipate different clogged situations and empower themselves by the renewal of their personal wellbeing and autonomy towards social, economic and political freedom. The northern city of Kano in Nigeria, poverty has further been elevated due to the prevailing culture which tells women not to work but stay indoors and denies them from availing political and educational opportunities to leave them in a helpless condition of poverty. Many of these women have been exposed to begging, drug peddling and prostitution which engulfed themselves to remain in poverty. This could be among one of the many background reasons why HIV/ AIDS are becoming a ruler among the women in that city. While a women led group in the Dorayi area of Kano, have decided to take up all these through social media and gathered help among their neighbors.

Similarly, many WhatsApp group forums have helped women to operate business sales by marketing their products and services. The women entrepreneurs usually promote their products by serving photos, videos along with details to their prospective clients and then the clients are sent payment mode upon confirmation of purchase. These businesswomen in the African region have also used this kind of forum to reach out to many new clients through the changes in prices.

Posting about jobs, vacancies and work opportunities are also becoming a part of many job related forums from where women are getting chances to avail household jobs, different events, catering etc. Those who are interested usually contact the employers and interviews are arranged in a genuine way through WhatsApp video and voice calls. Even a few of the WhatsApp forums were involved around discussing security situations across the communities of the country.

Overall Whatsapp served as an important tool of ICT as well as a social media platform to emerge as an instrument of freedom for women to engage themselves in social, economic and political activities. Also, many factors like online fraudulence, poor network connectivity, lack of government censorship and monitoring, scarcity of free speech provided a scenario of setback in terms of elevating women empowerment. Though, ICTs alone can't cover the ultimate help to human empowerment unless enthusiasm towards enhancing the ICT tools don't come into the scenario to smoothen the roads for women's engaging participation in societal, economic and political activities.

The Role of Social Media in Female Entrepreneurship & Socio-Cultural Advancement for Women in Middle East & North African Region:

MENA countries consist of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

In 2010-2011, The Arab Spring in the MENA region has elevated the indispensable challenges of the area. The challenges include lack of government accountability and transparency, lack of support to the development of small enterprises, corruption, unemployment rates etc. According to the report of the World Bank in 2013, 4 million jobs per year were needed per year to keep the unemployment rate away from the scenario. Additionally, the unemployment rate among women in the MENA region is high, reaching more than 40% in many countries. The female unemployment rate is about four times higher than the male unemployment rate in UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen and Egypt (O' Sullivan et al, 2011).

Given importance to this unemployment rate, in January 2013, the Arab Leaders' economic summit was held Royadh to look after the issues of unemployment, to support the emerging small business enterprises, and to analyze the untouched potential of increasingly educated, eager and enthusiastic Arab women who are very much interested to make their contribution to the economic sphere of the region. In order to accomplish the goal of economic growth, the focus point should remain on the growth of small and medium enterprises and encouraging female entrepreneurship.

A few contextual issues also can downgrade the rates of entrepreneurial activities. This is clearly evident that the MENA region has a lower female labor engagement rate than the other parts of the world (De Vita et al, 2013) because of its social, political and religious dominance of men. Thus, women face struggles and many hurdles to establish themselves. In a close analysis of the status of women entrepreneurs across eight countries across the MENA region (Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, West Bank, Gaza Strip and Yemen), a deep rooted social attitude exists where women are expected to lead the household and men to run the businesses (Hattab, 2012). It is also very weird for women in the Middle East to open 'female-centric' businesses such as businesses related to weddings or parenting support. In a study of Iranian women entrepreneurs, such 'female-centric' businesses further increased the negative stereotyping (Javadian& Singh, 2012).

Moreover, limited access to internet usage in the MENA region due to governmental rules and regulations are enhancing the problems in fostering innovation and acquiring financial resources. The regions of UAE, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain and Syria are the worst affected as their women entrepreneurs lacked support in financing their businesses.

Hence comes the pivotal role of social media. Social media networking sites have enabled immediate connections to new markets, suppliers, financial investors, and customers in many different ways which previously were impossible. This has benefited numerous businesses. Social media by its prompt actions have helped small and medium enterprises to get desired advantage in cost-effective and easy ways.

Again, the power of technology when applied by women entrepreneurs has enhanced their lives. According to the report of Constantinidis in 2011, the women entrepreneurs used Facebook as a wonderful tool to balance between family and networking life. While social networking platforms helped women entrepreneurs gather more support from other women entrepreneurs than the male or mixed entrepreneurs. Women helped women with new clients, associations, suppliers etc through weaponizing Facebook connections. It is a clear indication how women were offered help and tremendous amounts of economic upliftment in low-income countries by using social media tools. By analyzing different studies on social media, it is transparent that through social media, female entrepreneurs have gained more scope to explore entrepreneurship in smoother and better ways than ever.

Findings and Conclusions

The study investigates the efficiency of using social media as an exceptional tool to reach and engage women through different activities. The findings include women taking responsibility to use the social media tools and information to establish their voice, be heard about their opinions, create a network and help other women to enjoy empowerment, success and economic enability. The results of the study could be very applicable in different areas of the ongoing discussion about the psychological attitudes to social media and their tools as well as mitigating the gender differences through social and digital media interactions.

The studies also elevate the issues that the pursuit of national development is not a selective prospect, but it is all inclusive, by giving every citizen the equal opportunities to flourish irrespective of their gender. It is only when women stop having discrimination against them, they will seek education, opportunities for growth, aspire to seek responsibility and perform their duties and thus, a country will see growth in different dimensions of socio-cultural, political, economic growth.

Above all, women must be highly engaged in acquiring knowledge for technological skills to have full advantage of social media platforms and their functions, especially of facebook, youtube and other job portals which are beneficial for growth. They must be well-acquainted with the devices such as smartphones, notepads, laptops, tabloids, computers, desktops etc to prosper in the field of economic growth these days.

Overall, this research study has uplifted a positive approach for utilizing social media platforms as an entrepreneurial device. The study suggests that it will be an effective eradication of the gender gap if such virtual forums or communities work on educating their good agenda through different studies or workshops. It will be a good example setting for the educational as well as the entrepreneurial sectors across the countries.

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