

# Women with disability in inequality of ICT

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is no doubt that the 21st century is an era of information, when 'anyone without exception should participate in the information society at anytime and anywhere'. Thus, a right to having access to information by everyone should be ensured as a basic human right.

However, inequality of ICT called digital divide becomes ever increasing especially between haves and have-nots - especially, those isolated or alienated - in the global information society. Here, it is worth noting who has been experiencing more unequal

access to and utilization of ICT in our society. They include vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the disabled, the poor, children and women in comparison to men. In this regard, women with disability face most alienation from ICT.

Therefore taking this opportunity, I would like to share with you about our experience from the women with disability in the Republic of Korea(hereafter 'Korea') and in turn seek policy guidelines, which enable to improve unequal access to or digital divide in ICT especially for those women with disability.

## 2. IMPORTANCE OF ICT ON THE WOMEN WITH DISABILITY

Information - i.e., ICT - should be today a right of all human beings without excluding the women with disability on an equal base. ICT has indeed contributed to not only remarkable developments in various ranges of socio-economy, politics, science and culture, but also immense improvements in our quality of life. Its benefits have certainly extended to those mentally and physically disabled as a critical means of communications. ICT can be also a significant tool to the women with disability providing with enormous opportunities - for instance, diluting social and psychological isolation, interacting with various socio-economic activities through e-learning, e-

commerce, tele-medicine and so on at homes.

### 3. THE WOMEN WITH DISABILITY IN ICT; A CASE OF KOREA

#### 3-1 Variables of Inequality in Ict

Although ICT has improved quality of individuals' life though changing towards information society, not everyone is able to adapt such a rapid social transformation easily. As a result, a gap of inequality is ever widening between those who enjoy benefits of ICT evolution and those who fail digesting the changes in and through ICT *inter alia*. This digital divide leads to severe social issues. Some major factors enhancing the digital divide especially in case of the women with disability are as follows, but not limited to:

- a. Economic power or independence. The women with disability should be able to purchase various ICT hardware and software especially designed for the specific handicaps(e.g., deaf, blind etc.) requiring extra expenses as well as to pay for ICT services. However, they have relatively less economic power due to lower incomes in comparison to the men with disability and other people without

disability. For instance, according to some statistics in Korea, only 27.5% of the women with disability participated in labor markets, whilst the overall labor population was about 61.7% in 1995. While 43.5% of the men with disability were employed, only 19.5% of the women with disability were employed in 2000.

b. Knowledge and education. Education or training is the utmost required for using ICT. Knowledge is certainly a very significant variable for effective use and operation of ICT. Language - i.e., English - is another critical variable or barrier to have access to vast information opened up through Internet. However, the women with disability have relatively less opportunities for education in comparison with the men with disability and people without disability. For instance, in Korea, 29.5% of the men with disability and 15.3% of the women with disability respectively were graduates from high schools in 2000.

c. Physical and mental handicaps fundamentally prevent the women with disability from having access to ICT. Although it is possible for them to have access to ICT, they face more difficulties and need more efforts to use the best out of ICT due to physical and mental handicaps.

d. Lack of policies and regulations. The relevant policies and regulations should be first of all available so that the disabled women facing various socio-economic difficulties can afford to have access to ICT. For example, the Korea

Government issued The Information Promotion Act and The Welfare Act for the Disabled in 2000. However, these Acts have tackled neither substantial difficulties nor rights of having access to ICT by those disabled, particularly the women with disability .

Likewise, the disabled have been alienated or faced inequalities in various social, educational, vocational and many other circumstances throughout human histories, which are extended to the information age. Provided that ICT has been developed more in favor of only men and people without disability, the people with disability - women, in particular - will be much more alienated from the information society or digital era in the 21st century.

## 3.2. ICT indicators in Korea

### 3.2.1. Current statistics of ICT

According to survey, 74.9% of the people without disability and 51% of the people with disability respectively recognize the importance of ICT. Such recognition by the latter should be first educated in order to resolve a digital divide between the two groups.

Despite the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) has invested worth of

some US \$2 million annually for educating the disabled on ICT since 1999, the former has twice better opportunities than the latter when having access to and use of ICT - i.e., computers and internet.

When comparing access to and use of ICT facilities between men and women among the disabled in 2000, the former showed more active access and use than the latter : e.g., facsimiles(3.2% vs. 1.5%); mobile telephones (39.5% vs. 14.3%); computers(14.4% vs. 5.5%); Internet(9.0% vs. 3.6%).

This statistics well articulates the women with disability face most difficulties or weaknesses to have access to and use of ICT. Thus, systematic and active supports should be made at various levels from the governments to NGOs for this vulnerable or less privileged group from the very basic phase of recognizing ICT to actual access, use and application.

### 3.2.2. Assistance in access to & use of ICT

According to a survey in 2000, the most difficulties in ICT - especially, when using computers - faced by the people with disability include physical barriers(58.3%), computer illiteracy (25.0%), and lack of special equipments and software designed for

specific disabilities such as deaf, and blind (32.8%).

Another public demand in the information society is to have access to ICT services - i.e., contents - as part of universal welfare. The universal welfare means to design various products, services and even environments, which can be accessed and benefited by much broader scope of people as much as possible. In this regards, it is necessary to approach the universal welfare system, which allows people regardless their health, ages, physical and mental disabilities, and genders to have access to and use of ICT facilities and services.

### 3.2.3. Contents development for the women with disability

The women with disability want and need various special information through ICT : for example, job vacancies according to different types of disabilities, various public policies and private services relating to welfares, prevention, human rights for the women with disability, ways of independent life, pregnancy, children and so on. The governments should lead to developing and providing these kinds of contents since they are not so commercially attractive enough.

In case of Korea, the government (e.g., the MIC) sponsored a worth of some US

\$665,000 in developing contents for the disabled through distance learning system in 1997 as a part of national information infrastructure development projects. Whilst, private sectors such as Korean Association of the Disabled and Korean Union for the Blinds and the Deaf have been developing and operating their web sites (e.g., [www.ksrd.or.kr](http://www.ksrd.or.kr)) for their needs in relatively smaller scales. Nonetheless, these are still a long way to go for satisfying demands from different groups of the disabled.

#### 3.2.4. Incentive policies on ICT

The Korean governments have been supporting the disabled, the elderly, and the poor families especially headed by children through installation of telephone terminals with free of charges and exemption or reduction of telecommunication tariffs. As a part of policy narrowing the digital divide especially for the disabled, the government has been also implementing various incentives on ICT: e.g., reduce 50% of fixed phone tariffs (e.g., 50% of local calls and 50% of long distance calls up to some US \$16) for the disabled reduce 50% of facsimile tariffs for the deaf, install public phones for the disabled, deliver free postal services for the blinds, exempt registration fees for mobile phone and reduce 30% of its tariffs, reduce 50% of communication fees of computers and Internet, and reduce 40% of high-speed broadband services.

#### 4. POLICY GUIDELINES FOR THE DISABLED WOMEN IN ICT

##### 4.1. Improvement of ICT level

Although such terminologies as knowledge-driven information society and Internet are most common among most citizens in Korea, hardly are these heard or known by many women with disability. In order for the women with disability to be part of the leading members of information society, thus, I would like to suggest the following approaches for the disabled, particularly women:

- a. Various promotional programs such as developing and disseminating audio-visual programs, organizing seminars and workshops on ICT, organizing competitions for creating homepages, developing survival games and exercising informatization camps.
- b. Various incentives or subsidies. Utilizing second-hand computers, producing cheaper computers through tax incentives for the manufacturers, and subsidizing

or providing loans with low interest rate (or interest free) when purchasing computers.

c. Training or educating the disabled not only within the special training centers for those disabled but also at general schools and centers together with people without disability. Should the women with disability be unable to move to the training centers, training by visits to individuals' home needs to be combined.

#### 4.2. Assistance of access to ICT

Comprehensive guidelines and policies should be in place and implemented for the disabled to have access to ICT and eventually integrated into the information society. For instance, specific needs should be reflected from the designing phase of systems and equipments of ICT; R&D as well as distribution of various equipments and software equipped with the specific disabilities should be available. Most of all, rights to have access to ICT should be ensured from the phase of designing to that of implementing the universal welfare policies.

#### 4.3. Contents development for the women with disability

It is urgent to develop contents integrating information for the women with disability.

First of all, information infrastructure and/or networking should be established among the relevant entities providing various information for the disabled-women, in particular- to provide with or access to information ranging from rights of the women with disability, welfare services, case studies, pregnancies, children, various announcements by the public and private sectors, to various professional areas. Such networking or integrating information among the relevant entities will avoid duplicated services, optimize resources, and share various professional expertise and know-how.

#### 4.4. Economic incentives on ICT

In addition to various incentive policies especially on usage fees of various ICT services introduced in Korea, government's direct or indirect subsidies and/or incentives may be required for manufacturers and ICT welfare entities to manufacture and distribute not only telephones but also various ICT terminals and equipments specifically required for differently disabilities.

#### 4.5. Policies and regulations in ICT

In accordance with the Welfare Act for the Disabled in Korea, a right of the disabled to information(Article 20) is not a mandatory but voluntary provision. Most of all, there is no a specific provision stating a right of having access to information by the women with disability. Thus, the Article 20 should be amended as a mandatory provision, whilst the right of access to information by women with disability is to be more clearly stated in the Information Promotion Act supplemented by the relevant Ordinance and legal texts for detailed rights and obligations. These legal instruments should be also enforced hand in hand with the relevant policies to narrow the digital divide between men and women, the people with disability and people without disability, and the disabled man and women at a national level, The right of having access to ICT by the disabled, particularly women, should be furthermore extended to the relevant policies and regulations at international levels through various international organizations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

A right of having equal access to ICT should be ensured as a basic human right regardless genders and disabilities. If the right of having access to information via ICT becomes a fundamental prerequisite at whatever political and socio-economic

circumstance, a new paradigm is anticipated in the information society where the less privileged including those disabled women can have the better right and quality of life.

However, it is still a far away for the women with disability who have been most alienated and facing inequality from our society today in the era of ICT. Therefore, various policies and regulations as well as practical measures as expressed above should be prepared and implemented for the women with disability.

Last but not least, awareness of and practical guidelines to narrow the inequality or digital divide faced by the disabled, women *inter alia*, in ICT should be enhanced and implemented at national, regional and international levels. In this regard, I believe, this workshop is very timely to initiate an international networking among the interest entities worldwide in information age.

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