

# Technological Access and Gender Equality: A Qualitative Study of Women's Empowerment Among University Students in West Bengal

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## Abstract:

This study explores how technology can support women's empowerment and gender equality among university students in West Bengal. The main aim of the study is to understand students' access to and use of technology and to examine whether there is any difference between male and female students in this regard. A qualitative research method was used for this study. Data were collected from 45 female university students through semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. The findings show that technology creates many opportunities for education, awareness, skill development, and social participation. However, female students often face social and cultural barriers that limit their access to technology compared to male students. The study also shows that when women have access to technology, it increases their confidence, independence, and participation in educational and professional activities. Despite these benefits, gender differences in technological access still exist. Therefore, the study concludes that technology can play an important role in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality if social, cultural, and economic barriers are reduced.

**Keyword:** Women's Empowerment, Gender equality, Gender Discrimination, Education, women's education, basic rights, Technology, ICT, Digital Access, University students

## Introduction:

Gender equality is a fundamental human right for every person in a society and forms a vital foundation for a peaceful and sustainable world. However, in earlier times, women were treated as homemakers, performing domestic duties and giving birth. In the present scenario, the implementation of women's movements has become very effective; therefore, women have begun to challenge the social, traditional, economic, and political systems that had caused injustice for a long time, which has initiated new roles in society. Although progress is revealing more opportunities for women, there are still many disparities between men and women that need to be addressed (Suresh, 2011).

In this revolutionary time, technology has become a potent force in transforming social, economic, and political life globally. This technological transformation now provides empowerment for women and can help contribute to greater gender equality in the professional world (Patel, 2018).

Women have begun to challenge the social traditions and economic and political systems that had caused injustice for a long time. Though, in the present scenario, discrimination against women remains pervasive in many societies, manifesting in various forms such as unequal pay, limited access to education, and restricted job opportunities, etc. (ALI AL-SHEHHI, 2022). Therefore, technology can play a significant

role in advancing gender equality by addressing various barriers and empowering individuals of all genders. Technology can also play a significant role in empowering women in various ways, such as access to information, education and skill development, economic empowerment, entrepreneurship support, healthcare access, safety and security, advocacy, and awareness, etc. (Bergman, 2018).

Women's empowerment literally means that a woman can make her own personal decisions and successfully run her life. Women have the power, opportunities, and freedom to build a successful life. They should have equal rights, opportunities, and respect in education. Society should create equal opportunities in education and health. Women's empowerment ensures proper education, work opportunities, and participation in decision-making. In this scenario, the traditional concept of a patriarchal society is changed by this concept. Women's empowerment directly impacts society by providing freedom, power, and liberty in expressing their thoughts, opinions, and mentality. Empowerment means giving women social, political, and economic freedom to make their own choices and run their lives. Therefore, women's empowerment plays a key role in promoting gender equality and creating a fairer and more balanced society (Independent Academic Scholar & Somani, 2022).

### Review of Literature:

Dr. Somani Parin (January 2022) conducted a study titled "**Strengthening Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in India.**" In this study, the researcher wanted to understand gender inequalities in India with the objective of facilitating societies towards sustainable equality. A total of twenty-eight papers were shortlisted to aid the focus of this study, and the study results indicated that although there has been progress over the last few years, including more females acquiring education through attending schools, fewer forced and early marriages, and more females being appointed to leadership positions and serving in parliament or governing bodies, there is still a requirement to advance gender equality further (Independent Academic Scholar & Somani, 2022).

Suresh B. Lal (2011) conducted a study entitled "**Impact of Information and Communication Technologies on Women's Empowerment in India**". In this study, the researcher focuses on the current ICT tools and their impact on women's empowerment in India. The researcher showed aspects of ICT, global numbers of internet users, total internet users, female internet users, and women internet users by gender. This study concluded that the majority of women in the developing world do not have access to ICTs due to a variety of barriers, such as infrastructural, social, cultural, and linguistic barriers (Lal, 2011).

Tharu Manisha and Yadav Ganesh Ram (26 September 2018) conducted the study entitled "**Effects of Technological Development Through Electronic Communication in Women Empowerment**". In this study, the researchers wanted to find out the role of technological effects through electronic communication in furthering the empowerment of Indian women. This study concludes that advances in technology and social media have a greater role in the empowerment of women who previously lacked such opportunities. The Government of India has been making concerted efforts to empower women with the development of ICTs (Tharu & Yadav, n.d.).

Dr. Baglari Jeemina conducted the study entitled "**Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Women Empowerment**". The purpose of the study is to examine the role that information and communication technology (ICT) plays in empowering women. It focuses on identifying the obstacles that prevent women from using ICT as well as the potential it offers in fields including education, work, entrepreneurship, and government. The study is based on a conceptual and descriptive research method and uses secondary data. The study identifies three main pillars of empowerment through ICT, such as

employment, entrepreneurship, and e-governance. The study concludes that although technology presents "unprecedented opportunities," real empowerment necessitates tackling the socioeconomic factors that trap women in low-paying, entry-level digital professions in addition to providing basic access (Baglari, 2014).

AHMAD Nehaluddin, AZIZ ABDUL HJ. Hanan Hjh, and ZULKIFFLE Norulaziemah (6 September 2023) conducted the study entitled “**Women’s Empowerment through Social Media: A Comparative Study of Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia**”. This study examines how social media contributes to women’s empowerment and compares the role of social media in empowering women in Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia. The study follows a qualitative and comparative research approach. It mainly uses secondary data collected from books, journal articles, reports, and online sources. This study finds that social media plays an important role in empowering women. It helps women raise their voices against violence, access educational opportunities, and develop entrepreneurial activities through online businesses. However, challenges such as cybercrime and online harassment still affect women’s empowerment in the digital space (Ahmad, n.d.).

#### **Research Questions:**

1. Do students have adequate access to and usage of technology?
2. Is there any disparity between male and female students in relation to technological access and usage?
3. How do technologies influence women's empowerment?

#### **Objectives:**

1. To find out the present status of technological usage among students.
2. To explore the relationship between gender equality and technological access and usage.
3. To explore the role of technology in women's empowerment.

#### **Research Methodology:**

The researcher used a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences and perceptions of female students regarding the usage of technology and the concept of empowerment.

#### **Research Design**

The researcher chose a descriptive qualitative research design to explain how technology impacts gender equality and empowerment.

#### **Sample**

The researcher selected West Bengal university-level female students as participants. The researcher used a purposive sampling method to choose 45 participants as the sample of this study.

#### **Data Collection Technique:**

The researcher used a semi-structured interview technique to collect data. Data were collected through interview questions. The researcher asked questions on internet access, technological knowledge, tech gadgets, and other digital tools. The researcher also asked about the concept of gender equality, women’s empowerment, sustainable development, the status of women, the digital divide, etc. The main objective

of the researcher was to discover how technology impacts our lives, education, health, work opportunities, awareness, and self-confidence.

### **Analysis of Data:**

After the data were collected, the researcher identified the answers as codes. Coding is a method used to identify responses in qualitative research. This coding system consists of very short phrases that elaborate the main concept of a response. Then, the researcher associated the codes on the basis of similarity and grouped them accordingly. These codes helped the researcher to organize broader themes. Then, these themes were interpreted on the basis of the aim of the research. The researcher also used the thematic analysis method to explain the collected data.

### **Discussion of the Study:**

This article explores the present status and use of technology, empowerment, education, and gender discrimination among university-level female students in West Bengal. On the basis of the findings, the researcher analyses the relationship between gender equality and women's empowerment. This study concludes that there is a conceptual and functional difference between men and women in terms of their use of technology, opportunities in careers, health, education, etc. These findings clearly represent that certain beliefs and traditional practices impact gender roles and society.

The findings of this article show similar results to Somani Parin (2022). This study revealed that there has been little development in women's empowerment. However, there also exists inequality between males and females in different areas of our society. Along with this study, Suresh B. Lal indicated that the development of women is hindered by barriers such as the use of technology, infrastructural limitations, and cultural patriarchal norms impacting gender issues.

The conclusion of this article is almost the same as that of Tharu Manisha and Yadav Ganesh Ram (2018). They stated that technological aspects of society and electronic communication impact women's empowerment. Technology can improve women's status, help them gain knowledge, improve various skills, and participate in more social activities. In another article (Baglari Jeemina), it is also stated that ICT (Information and Communication Technology) can create a powerful medium for women's employment and economic stability. This study also revealed that if social and economic barriers are removed from society, women can easily and equally participate in the digital world.

Furthermore, the conclusion of this article is the same as that of the article by Nehaluddin, Aziz, and Zulkiffle (2023). This study showed that social media plays a vital role in empowering women by allowing them to express their own thoughts, opinions, creativity, learning, and entrepreneurial activities. This study also revealed that when a woman gets access to technology, she can acquire confidence, independence, awareness, and opportunities related to her rights. Technology also helps them participate in online learning and explore different professional opportunities. In this way, women can build their social networks and develop their communication skills.

In summary, the researcher can say that disparities based on technological use and access still exist. This creates significant differences in gender equality and directly impacts women's empowerment. If these barriers are removed from society, technological resources can create a more inclusive and gender-equal society.

**Conclusion of this Study:**

This article aims to explore disparities in society and how these differences impact gender equality and women's empowerment. The researcher collected data from university-level students of West Bengal to examine the present status of women in society and gender equality. Based on qualitative data analysis, the findings of the study also showed the status of women's empowerment.

Based on the first objective of the study regarding access to digital devices among male and female students, this article clearly shows different rates of access and usage of technical devices based on gender. Based on the explanation of interview answers, the researcher observed a traditional, conservative, and restrictive culture in society regarding women's perspectives compared to men. Therefore, this result clearly states that technological access plays an important role in gender perspectives.

The second objective clearly states that not only access but also usage influences gender inequality. The researcher explains that access is important for the development of women, but access without usage cannot help them grow themselves. Therefore, skills in using digital devices can improve the status of women in our society. Proper usage of technological devices can change the stereotypical traditional patriarchal concepts of society. These objectives also clearly state that the usage and access of technology directly impact gender inequality.

The third objective of the study states that gender equality directly impacts women's empowerment. Technological usage and access play a key role in gender inequality. Gender inequality impacts empowerment. Therefore, the researcher suggests that if society can remove barriers to technological usage and access, women can empower themselves. As a result, women can make useful decisions, participate in important discussions, and lead economically stable lives.

**Further Study:**

The researcher indicates different barriers to spreading technological knowledge in our society. The researcher also indicates that the traditional mindset and patriarchal conservative perspective of society are the main reasons for this discrimination. This study ensures that technology has the potential to promote equality and empowerment, but barriers must be reduced to ensure equal access and meaningful participation of female students.

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