Role of Digital Skills as Strategy for Women Empowerment

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Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to (a) examine the role of digital skills for women empowerment in Pakistan; and (b) identify the challenges faced by women having [low education level] in using digital platform for employment. The study used focused group interview(s) of the participants women who were digitally skilled and running some sort of online business. The study concluded that digital skills to enabled women to become financially independent, and to extend and strengthen their social networks. They have become empowered to play important roles in family and society. They can address their socio-cultural challenges and are respected in their families and society. However, they need training to use digital platforms properly, government support, and access to affordable technology to promote empowerment.

Keywords: *Digital Skills, Women Empowerment, Financial Independence, Social Networks, Economic Empowerment, Social Empowerment, Psychological Empowerment*

Rationale of the Study

Generally, Pakistani society is considered to be a male dominating society; where the role of the women appears to be limited due to socio-cultural reasons. Whereas, on the other hand, almost half of the population of the country consists on women. If half of the population of the country has restricted role to play in national development; then its progress would be too good to compete the nations in the world. Therefore, the need for women empowerment becomes one of the fundamental aspects of the national development. There would be different strategies for women empowerment like education, business and entrepreneurship, social justice, guaranteeing the basic human rights etc. but the digital skills seem to be most appropriate and feasible strategy for empowering Pakistani women. They can use digital skills for their overall empowerment to live their productive and healthy lives. Digitally skilled women would be able to overcome their educational barriers and become socio-economically independent by earning through their digital skills. They would make their own choices and decisions of and/ or in life. The available literature scarcely focusses on this aspect of women empowerment in Pakistani context; and hence there appears a reason to conduct a qualitative study on, "Digital skills as a strategy for women empowerment" in Pakistan. The present study would examine the role of digital skills in women empowerment as well as would identify the specific challenges they face, such as restricted access to technology and low level of digital competence.

Introduction

Our present is the era of digital skills which encompass a, *"combination of behaviors, expertise, know-how, work habits, character traits, dispositions, and critical understandings"* (Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2017). Digital skills are described as the abilities to use the ICTs in enhancing everyday life for oneself and others, ranging from basic to advance level. These are are used in everyday life in different ways almost in all activities of the human being (The International Telecommunications Union -ITU, 2018). Pakistan is a developing country and almost half (49.6%) of its population consists on women (Dataportal, 2023). It seems challenging for the women to empower themselves to live and work independently except those having access to the digital services (UN-Women, 2023) and skills. Digital skills help women in getting gender equality by empowering them and reducing gender discrimination (OECD, 2018). Digitally skilled women become capable of overcoming their socio-psychological and cultural barriers by generating and/ or increasing their income and accessing to the new information (Akram, 2023) and ways of earning. In

this regard, different studies found that generally everyone needs power in the society and women are not exception (Islam & Rasool, 2023); they want more authority than others (Wiklander, 2010); whereas, digitally skilled women are considered to be empowered to get their due rights (Akram, 2023); rather playing their submissive role(s) in the society (Batool, 2018) to contribute towards the socio-political and economic development of the country.

Digital Skills and Women Empowerment

Digital skills are considered to be the catalyzing agents for women empowerment particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. By acquiring digital skills, they can earn a lot while staying at their home(s) and without travelling to the far-away areas which is culturally restricted. Such women strengthen themselves in social, economic, psychological and political aspects of their lives; and can contribute the same in the national development.

Digital Skills and Women's Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment of women ensures them to have equitable access and control over financial resources along with their socio-psychological and political independence (Pereznieto &Taylor, 2014). They can participate in or initiate their income generating activities and have the right of ownership of assets like moveable and immoveable property (Khare et al, 2024). Digital skills and efficient use of technology empowers women economically through work-from-home and e-commerce opportunities (Islam & Rasool, 2023). They use the digital platforms and virtual marketplaces to sell & purchase the products, launch businesses, and work remotely by overcoming socio-cultural barriers and getting greater autonomy and authority over their work and income (Debbarma & Chinnadurai, 2023). Economic empowerment ensures them to secure and maintain their income and better lifestyles (Cicerchia, 2017).

In South Africa, digitally skilled women worked in telecentres. It promoted their confidence and potential for success (Alao et al, 2022) in entrepreneurial activities. Similarly, Ben Othman (2023) viewed digital skills to be necessary for women in entrepreneurship, business and financial services: learning about career opportunities, economic developments, and financial services, making informed decisions, selling products, connecting with clients, and securing finances. Even so, a study conducted on 2200 females revealed, "*nearly half of respondents use the Internet to search for and apply for jobs, and 30% use the Internet to earn extra income used the Internet to earn additional income. Women are likely to benefit from a shift in employment toward non-routine occupations, and away from physical work*" (Intel Corporation, 2013, p.12).

Digital Skills and Women's Social Empowerment

Observingly, societal development is directly linked with empowerment of women (Gramme, Morrison & Skordis-Worrall, 2019). Women's empowerment enables them get their due rights: education, social & political autonomy, access to public places, mobility and involvement in social activities (Siwal, 2009; Gigler, 2014). Learning digital skills promotes social independence of women: involving them in social activities by overcoming their socioeconomic barriers, observing work flexible hours and making them financially independent (Sorgner & Krieger-Boden, 2017). It is generally said that socially empowered women can travel alone according to their need and will; and they can make their personal decisions freely (Haque, et al, 2011). They enjoy rights and social privileges equal to their male counterparts in the society.

Women are increasingly employing digital skills to run their own businesses and expand their social and professional networks along with benefitting from the online healthcare services (Anzak & Sultana, 2020). Therefore, it becomes obvious that having digital skills not only enable women to express themselves, share stories, and advocate for equal rights but also, they access to various opportunities like online jobs and entrepreneurial activities. It has significantly impacted social and political engagement, with more women organizing, mobilizing, and influencing change through web-based activities and social media campaigns (Perrin, 2024) even in developing countries like Pakistan.

Digital Skills and Political Empowerment of Women

Political empowerment guarantees the women's rights and equality with autonomy (Risse, 2022) in their life span. It promotes inclusive governance for achieving the [basic] human rights (Fox & Romero, 2017; Sandler & Lane, 2021) to every individual of the society; particularly, the women (Zimmerman, 1989). Whereas, the use of digital tools empowers individual by enhancing their political performance to influence the political process (Pirannejad &Janssen, 2019). In traditional social system, the online activities, enable women to express themselves and to stand for gender-related issues through collective efforts (Risse, 2022; Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2008) in the community.

In Pakistan, social media has become one of the main informal communication platforms that young people prefer to use in sharing their views (Babar et al., 2023) and information. Digital platforms appear to have revolutionary influence on political discourse as 53% of the young women as compared to 60% of their counterparts i.e. young men viewe the online political and civic activism to result in significant change (Next Generation, 2024). In Nigeria, women

shared their political views and opinions more openly through WhatsApp groups and it enhanced their civic involvement (Abubakar & Dasuki, 2018); and mobile phones increased mobility and financial autonomy of women; and they overcome the feelings of powerlessness and despair (Risse, 2022) and address the structural and cultural challenges in the society.

Digital Skills and Psychological Empowerment of Women

Psychological empowerment is a statement of one's contentment with life and life styles with a capacity to manage the situation(s) and circumstances by using his/her vision and wisdom (Adams, 2008). It encompasses intrapersonal, social, and cognitive components of one's life (Zimmerman, 1995). It is characterized by intrinsic drive and cognition that indicates an individual's attitude towards their activities (Grošelj et al., 2020).

Psychological empowerment of women enables them to develop a sense of self-worth that enhances their ability to assess their circumstances, solve issues, and affect their decisions in life (Gigler, 2014; Britwum et al., 2019; Saha & Sangwan, 2019). Whereas, digital skills and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) particularly, the social-media-platforms involve women in different activities and enhance their exposure and social circles. It promotes their personal development, political, social, legal, and economic independence. Increased access to information and contacts with family and friends by using digital devices and social-media-platforms can boost self-esteem among women (Rajkhowa & Qaim (2022). The use of ICTs particularly, social-media-sites has enhanced interaction and interpersonal skills of women as they have quick access to information and get social assistance psychological support (Saeed, 2023). It has enhanced their trust in their abilities and self-esteem by developing progressive mindsets, leadership skills, freely addressing gender stereotypes, and promoting a sense of being a role model for the young girls (Almjeld 2019; Grant 2023).

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to (a) examine the role of digital skills for women empowerment in Pakistan; (b) identify the challenges faced by women having [low education level] in using digital platform for employment; and (c) give suitable recommendations to promote digital skills for women empowerment in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

It was a qualitative study which was conducted to explore the role of digital skills in women empowerment. Therefore, it used goal-oriented semi-structured interview schedule for women to explore their perspective(s) of digital skill. It involved in-depth focused-group

interviews. It was a flexible, conversational approach involving pre-prepared questions but adaptable topics, focusing on exploring the information.

Participants and Sampling

This study was conducted in Southern Punjab. The participants of the study were females of the age 17 years to 45 years with their [maximum] intermediate academic qualification; and using ICTs/ online platforms as a source pf income. They had diverse socio-economic backgrounds and different levels of digital skills. Purposive sampling technique was used and the participants of the study: women, who were frequent user of digital devices like mobile, laptop, and tab and were able to browse information, create content and make use of different applications for their online work or business were recruited on volunteer basis. It was a qualitative in-depth study; therefore, it was conducted on six (06) participants who participated on volunteer basis narrated their perspective on the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

As the study was of the qualitative nature which explored the perspective of women on digital skills for their empowerment; hence, it used a semi-structured interview schedule. The semi-structured interview schedule was prepared after the literature review on four basic aspects of women empowerment i.e. social empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment and psychological empowerment. It was finalized through initial discussion with participants who were not included in data collection. The semi-structured interview schedule allowed participants to express their views, experiences and difficulties in detail regarding digital skills and empowerment.

The researchers briefed the participants about the study and obtained their formal consent; and the time of interview was mutually decided. Interviews were conducted with the participants who were working online to support their families. Interviews were conducted at participants' own places of work or houses. The purpose of selecting this location was to provide them a familiar and comfortable atmosphere to make them feel comfortable while sharing their views and opinions. Interviews conducted at their places of work provided valuable perspectives into their professional and personal lives, which were crucial in understanding their answers as well. All interviews were recorded with permission of the participants and soon after interviews were transcribed to include essential details. The duration of the interview was of 35 minutes to 45 minutes. Considering the educational background of women, the interview was conducted in Urdu language which was later translated into English.

The researchers observed the research ethics of social sciences during data collection and completion of the write up. they remained purposeful and non-judgmental; and ensured confidentiality and secrecy of the participants and their provided information. Fictitious names have been used in data/ narrative analysis.

The researchers also ensured the credibility of the results through member checking technique and the they shared the transcribed information with participants of the study for their review. It maintained accuracy of the data and results of the study.

Data Analysis

It was a qualitative study and the data was collected through focused group(s) interviews. Therefore, the researchers used the thematic analysis technique to arrive at the findings of the focused group(s) interview(s) according to the objectives of the study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Terry et al. (2017), thematic analysis technique is effective for analyzing the qualitative data to sort it in themes aligning to the objectives. Furthermore, it is used in exploratory studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in social sciences. Similarly, the researchers used the digital framework of International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2018) to find the level(s) of the participants' digital skills. These levels are given below.

1. **Basic Level**
   - Familiarity with basic digital concepts (e.g., email, online search)
   - Ability to use simple digital tools

2. **Intermediate Level**
   - Understanding of digital literacy concepts (e.g., online safety, digital citizenship)
   - Ability to use digital tools for information management and communication

3. **Advanced Level**
   - Proficiency in specialized digital skills (e.g., coding, data analysis)
   - Ability to critically evaluate and create digital content

Analysis of the Data of Focused Group Interview of the Participants

The present study was qualitative which explored the women's perspective on digital skills for their empowerment; hence, it used a semi-structured interview schedule. The semi-structured interview schedule was prepared after the literature review on four basic aspects of women empowerment i.e. social empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment and psychological empowerment.

Social Empowerment

Women are increasingly using technology to improve communication, access to information, and initiate, maintain & manage their online interactions, leading to their increased confidence and finding better job opportunities. During the interviews almost, all of the participants of the study said, *"We can easily use our mobile phones at home for initiating and maintaining our online interactions. We find better job opportunities; better market places; and better marketing. It is very beneficial to us. We are earning a handsome money. We haven't to go out of our homes and cities/ or towns. We are easily earning money staying at home".*

The participants use digital skills for enhancing their careers and searching & finding new jobs and social interactions. Financial independence has transformed many lives, giving women a sense of confidence, social power and courage as one of the participants [Sabra] says, *"People think that I am a courageous woman".* This increased confidence and economic independence has also changed the importance of women's views in families, increasing their influence in decision-making. Technology and online work have made it easier for women to negotiate conventional gender roles at their homes and workplace. Despite initial reluctance to interact with male workers, *"In the beginning, I don't feel comfortable talking to both men and women",* [Batool] another participant said. It gradually has developed confidence among women in interacting with men and women even of higher social class(es). However, traditionally, they are/ and have been facing social and cultural challenges as one of the participants [Naghma] said, *"I face challenges to run my business in male dominating society. I have to depend on males for my safety and security; and even if I want to grow my business, I have to contact the male members of my family and/ or society".* But social confidence and economic independence of women enabled them to manage the challenges. While [Mehak] another participant of the study was of the opinion, *"My own family knows that I am working with males but my in-laws don't know, but my husband supports me in this matter".* Even so, one of the participants [Raheela] said, *"I don't have permission to go alone; and therefore have to depend on male family members. I can manage it by working from home".* Therefore, digital literacy and work from home enables women to overcome gender-based restrictions.

Besides the benefits of internet and social media, women in Pakistan, sometimes, face negative comments and cyber-bullying. Therefore, digital literacy is important for online safety and to avoid cyber-bullying.

Economic Empowerment

The participants of the study who were working online; were maintaining a balance between their personal and professional lives. They appeared to prioritize their tasks and adhered to their [online] work schedules. However, one of the participants [Sabra] is a widow and she is running an online cloth business and is raising her children. She did find it challenging in balancing her family and professional responsibilities. Financial independence was a main concern of all of the participants; some were earning substantially more while others reported their income to be low; but were confident. Majority of the participants [Sabra, Raheela, Naghma, Batool, Samreen and Mehak] reported to be financially autonomous but none of them had an account in a bank. They were using mobile banking services like Jazz-Cash and Easy-Paisa for their business transactions. Two of the participants [Mehak and Batool] were facing problems in transactions as they were using bank accounts of their mothers.

Almost all of the participants reported that they felt comfortable while purchasing their groceries and other things of domestic use alone rather depending on others. They said, "*We are comfortable in buying grocery and other items of domestic use. When we are busy, give the list to our male members to get things of domestic use from the market*". It was obvious that majority (four out of six) of the participants did not possess any property; and it highlights the challenges in achieving their complete financial freedom.

Political Empowerment of Women

The participants of the study revealed that they used digital platforms like Google, Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp to get information about political news and events. It is due to the shift from conventional media like radio and television to the use of android phones and social media as source(s) of information and they (the participants women) preferred this. Seemingly, it influenced the politics and political behavior of the people.

However, it is observed in Pakistan that decision of the family and head of the household and/ or tribe influence the voting behavior of the individuals. The women particularly, in rural areas have to follow the political decisions of their family heads as one of the participants [Naghma] said, *"Obviously, I have to listen to my family members."* Similarly, other participants of the study [Batool] said, *"I always followed the directions of my father and voted for the candidate of his choice."* Rest of the participants were of the view, *"We have learnt from the new sources of information how to exercise our right to vote; and we are independent in our political decisions and we freely exercise our right to vote according to our own choice"*.

Nevertheless, all of the participants of the study said that they did fear of crowds at polling stations and this situation prevents many women from their right to vote. Even so, all of them described that they did not use online services except the online bill payments. However, they were of the opinion that digital platforms provided access to government services but there existed a gap between digital literacy and the online services. It appeared as a limitation in getting the online services properly. They emphasized on the promotion of digital literacy and skills to get benefits of online services. Two of the participants [Mehak and Samreen] were of the view that digital skills would not empower all women equally as they all would not be having equal knowledge of their political and legal rights.

Psychological Empowerment of Women

Digital skills have significantly improved the personal and professional lives of women. It resulted in their increased confidence. This confidence seems to enable them to participate in socio-economic and political activities in their lives. It is observed that the women who are active and participate in different social, economic and political activities, feel confident and psychologically empowered. They appear to be effective in decision-making not only in their professional and personal lives but n society also.

One of the participants [Batool] said, "*By using digital skills and social media I became expressive and feel to be confident. It has changed a lot in my life. I feel that my decision-making power has increased*". Similarly, other participant [Mehak] described, *"I am using digital skills for my earning and I feel that I am an independent woman".* Digital skills and online business have reshaped the role and status of women in their families; where their efforts are valued and their decisions are respected now. Social and psychological support from family members are crucial for women to overcome their socio-cultural barriers and they continue their online activities. However, participants of the study face challenges in maintaining a balance between family expectations and their professional activities which sometimes effects their psychological states. One of the participants revealed that her husband complained that she did not have time for him and children due to online work.

Challenges to Empowerment of Women

The participants of the study apprised benefits of digital skills for women empowerment, but they faced barriers in their empowerment due to social and cultural factors like gender roles, limited job opportunities, lack of confidence and lack of equal educational opportunities. These barriers are appearing with more intensity in rural areas of Pakistan; where girls often have little or no education and are married at their early ages. In general, the participant

women said, *"Women want to do something but they don't have investment"*. They further were of the view that majority of women in society are unable to invest in their business; even they are unable to purchase android phones and internet package. It is a big barrier in their empowerment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The above findings of the study revealed that the digital skills to enabled women to become financially independent, and to extend and strengthen their social networks. They have become empowered to play important roles in family and society. They can address their socio-cultural challenges and are respected in their families and society. In overall, digital skills may be used as strategy for women empowerment in Pakistan. However, they need training to use digital platforms properly, government support, and access to affordable technology to promote empowerment. The training and awareness may be provided by the government for promoting online entrepreneurial activities.

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