

Mobile Phones, (Dis) Empowerment and Female Headed Households: Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

Authors : S. A. Abeykoon

Abstract : This study explores the empowerment potential of the mobile phone, the widely penetrated and greatly affordable communication technology in Sri Lanka, for female heads of households in Trincomalee District, Sri Lanka-an area recovering from the effects of a 30-year civil war and the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. It also investigates how the use of mobile phones by these women is shaped and appropriated by the gendered power relations and inequalities in their respective communities and by their socio-economic factors and demographic characteristics. This qualitative study is based on the epistemology of constructionism; interpretivist, functionalist and critical theory approaches; and the process of action research. The data collection was conducted from September 2014 to November 2014 in two Divisional Secretaries of the Trincomalee District, Sri Lanka. A total of 30 semi-structured depth interviews and six focus groups with the female heads of households of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim ethnicities were conducted using purposive, representative and snowball sampling methods. The Grounded theory method was used to analyze transcribed interviews, focus group discussions and field notes that were coded and categorized in accordance with the research questions and the theoretical framework of the study. The findings of the study indicated that the mobile phone has mainly enabled the participants to balance their income earning activities and family responsibilities and has been useful in maintaining their family and social relationships, occupational duties and in making decisions. Thus, it provided them a higher level of security, safety, reassurance and self-confidence in carrying out their daily activities. They also practiced innovative strategies for the effective and efficient use of their mobile expenses. Although participants whose husbands or relatives have migrated were more tended to use smart phones, mobile literacy level of the majority of the participants was at a lower level limited to making and receiving calls and using SMS (Short Message Service) services. However, their interaction with the mobile phone was significantly shaped by the gendered power relations and their multiple identities based on their ethnicity, religion, class, education, profession and age. Almost all the participants were precautious of giving their mobile numbers to and have been harassed with 'nuisance calls' from men. For many, ownership and use of their mobile phone was shaped and influenced by their children and migrated husbands. Although these practices limit their use of the technology, there were many instances that they challenged these gendered harassments. While man-made and natural destructions have disempowered and victimized the women in the Sri Lankan society, they have also liberated women making them stronger and transforming their agency and traditional gender roles. Therefore, their present position in society is reflected in their mobile phone use as they assist such women to be more self-reliant and liberated, yet making them disempowered at some time.

Keywords : mobile phone, gender power relations, empowerment, female heads of households

Conference Title : ICSRD 2020 : International Conference on Scientific Research and Development

Conference Location : Chicago, United States

Conference Dates : December 12-13, 2020