Attracting and Keeping Bangladeshi Women in the ICT Profession

Given a decelerating population growth, Bangladesh needs its women to prepare for and join the ICT profession in order to fulfill its ambition to become the next global ICT hub. If this happens, the country can maintain its competitive edge in terms of having a young, driven and relatively cheap workforce. In light of the negative perceptions of Bangladeshi women against the ICT sector, there is a need to formulate a gender-basedICT strategy.

Introduction. Bangladesh appears all set to become the next Information and Communication Technology (ICT) hub. In recent years, it has attracted global ICT companies such as Samsung and Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) – which have established their Research and Development (R&D) centers. Gartner, a technology research house, has included the country in the top 30 outsourcing destinations in a 2010 report.

The Bangladesh government, in line with this, has viewed ICT development as an engine for economic growth, particularly in the manufacturing and service industries. It plans to build a software technology park with dedicated data communication facilities. As a result of these developments, there is a growing demand for ICT workers in the country. Bangladesh needs its women to participate in the ICT sector in order to offset decelerating population growth and a decreasing labor force pool. Without this participation, the country would not have the comparative advantage to become the next global ICT hub.

The problem is – Bangladeshi women are not that inclined to pursue ICT professions given digital exclusion, mindsets, cultural factors and negative perceptions of the sector.

Methodology. The present paper found inspiration from Omamo, Abagi and Sifuna (2005) who followed the journey of successful professional women in the ICT sector in Kenya. The present paper's design is exploratory, qualitative and descriptive. Primary data came from depth interviews of Bangladeshi women who successfully navigated the ICT sector to be able to study it, join it, remain in it and prosper in it. The selection of respondents was purposeful – five students, five professionals, two owners/ entrepreneurs and one ICT human resource manager. Qualitative data was analyzed using an analytical deductive method and presented using matrices. Secondary sources included past papers, documents, job advertisements and reports on ICT, education and women in Bangladesh. The researchers are mindful that the sample is small but they felt that searching or exploring a new narrative for women's participation in the ICT sector is more prudent than knowing existing narratives of the general female population. For the existing narrative is already well-known in existing literature as follows:

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- Women are not good in math, engineering and technical courses. There is no future for them in these professions. Wangmo, Violina and Haque (2004), Islam (2012)
- Women are experiencing digital exclusion.Bangladesh Women in Technology (2010)
- Women should not have tough and challenging jobs. Freris (2012)
- Women could not thrive in the ICT profession given its macho culture.Tandon (2006)

Study Findings/New Narratives.From the interviews of students, professionals, owners and HR manager, the paper discovered the following that facilitated women's attraction to the sector:

- they were naturally inclined to computers and technology;
- they were exposed to computer education and Internet at an early age;
- they own a laptop, desktop or tablet and have Internet connection at home or in school;
- they use computer and the Internet for a variety of purposes (relatively superior quality of ICT usage); and
- they have social support for ICT use.

The paper likewise found out the mindset of the families the respondents belong to. These are as follows:

- they are given full freedom by their families to select their field of study;
- they belong to families that are liberal and modern;and
- they belong to families that do not associate certain careers with genders.

Regarding job and family life cycle concerns, the paper realized the following:

- they got job offers through competitive selection process, through internship and/or job fairs;
- they are moving up in their careers (high job satisfaction);
- they can manage to balance marriage and work albeit with more responsibilities;and
- they are willing to go back to work once their children are old enough to fend for themselves.

The paper described the work place culture and environment experienced by respondents as follows:

- they experienced some machismo but these are tolerable;
- they do not have feelings of isolation given the number of female employees in the company; and
- they can take work pressure and decide on their career path.

Need to develop Gender-based ICT strategies. Gender-based strategies to attract and keep Bangladeshi women in the ICT profession should deal with the aspects of increasing parental support, school support and workplace.

PARENTAL SUPPORT
- Giving freedom to select field of study
- Encouraging liberal and modern values at home
- Allowing association with opposite gender
- Treating women equal to men

SCHOOL SUPPORT
- Giving access to ICT and ICT connection
- Enabling language skills

- Providing role models
- Encouraging social support for ICT use
- Improving computer literacy

WORK PLACE SUPPORT
- Increasing number of women in Company
- Ensuring continuous progress in career
- Discouraging machismo
- Allowing women to get back in career
- Understanding the need to balance work and home

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