

Technology as the Key to Women's Empowerment: A Scoping Review

April Mackey (✉ april.mackey@usask.ca)

University of Saskatchewan <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7069-5843>

Pammla Petrucka

University of Saskatchewan

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Abstract

Background: With women's empowerment and information and communication technologies (ICTs) being the subject of global goals and discussions for many decades, there is a need for a clearer and deeper understanding about how the current gaps can be bridged. Despite ICTs having made communication and networking a possibility between and among people on a global scale, a digital divide has emerged.

Research Question: To determine the global impact of information and communication technology on women's empowerment.

Methods: The authors report on a qualitative scoping review using the Arksey and O'Malley methodology. The search identified papers from ten databases, including Scopus, Embase, ABI Inform, Soc Index, Sociological Abstracts, Gender Studies, Springer Link, PsychInfo, Science Direct, and Academic Search Complete over the period of 2012-2018. Search criteria included articles that focused on women's empowerment and utilized technologies as interventions. A total of 4481 articles were initially identified and a final total of 51 were charted and analyzed.

Results: Technology played a variety of roles in supporting the development of women's capacity and resources. Results demonstrated the use of ICT interventions in the following areas: outreach, education, lifestyle, prevention, health challenges, perceptions of barriers. However, despite this clear positive use of technology to support women in their daily lives, there was a lack of consensus regarding the definition and use of the term empowerment. The concept of empowerment was also inconsistently and poorly measured among individual studies which led to issues in measuring whether or not empowerment was achieved.

Conclusions: This scoping review supports the use of current and emerging technologies to engage and empower women across a variety of contexts.

Background

The term women's empowerment emerged in the 1970s to acknowledge social justice and gender equality.¹⁻² As the term evolved in the 1990s, it was increasingly applied to women who were oppressed and lacking the freedom of choice and action to shape their lives, as well as to discuss women's inter-sectoral participation. More recently it has been used as an outcome and a goal to be achieved in order to balance the scales of gender equality and equity. For this research, the definition used regarding women's empowerment is a process by which women who have experienced oppression acquire the ability to make autonomous and strategic life choices based on their personal priorities. When a woman has the resources, agency, and capabilities to execute decisions on matters of importance, empowerment has been achieved.³⁻⁴

Globally women are more likely to experience the social determinants of health less favourably than their male counterparts. Women carry the bulk of responsibility for raising children and meeting household obligations, which, globally, contribute to this continued disadvantage.⁵⁻⁷ Due to a lack of affordable and quality daycare, women are over-represented in the part-time work force, and often remain within the low-income bracket.⁵⁻⁸ Gender, as a social determinant of health, is influenced by the "gendered" norms of the roles, personality traits, attitudes, relative power, and influence that society ascribes to gender.⁹⁻¹⁰ In the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 saw the emergence of Target 5 which articulates the imperative to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (p. 20).¹¹ A major SDG indicator supporting attainment of women's empowerment is "enhancing the use of enabling technology by increasing the proportion of women and girls who have access" (p. 20).¹¹

Information and communication technologies have catalyzed communication and networking between and among people on a global scale. However, as ICTs have become ubiquitous growing in both type and access, a digital divide has emerged. This divide parallels gaps found in social contexts, such as income and education, as those who use and benefit from technologies access often have other resources more readily available.¹² This divide widens the inequity and inequality gaps based on gender, age, disability, or socioeconomic status.¹³⁻¹⁴

Women's empowerment and ICTs have been the subject of global goals, discussions, and debates for many decades.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Global discussions, such as the 1995 World Conference on Women: Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, deliberated and launched the inclusion of women in the information society as an imperative to fully achieving women's empowerment in connection with ICT. In 2013, 200 million more men had access to the internet than women.¹⁷ Women use ICTs much less frequently and intensely than men.¹⁸⁻²¹ In 2016, the ITU stated that the percentage of women gaining access to ICT is actually regressing – with women utilizing ICTs 11% less than men in 2013 and 12% less than men in 2016.¹⁹ The most recent 2018 report reported that the overall proportion of internet usage for women was 12% lower than men.¹⁹

The extant evidence lacks sufficient depth and detail as to exactly how ICTs are being used by women and why they use it less frequently. An important aspect of empowerment in the context of ICTs is gaining a clearer picture as to the type of technologies and technological interventions being used by women. Many authors agree that improved access to ICTs can assist in providing women with employment resources and opportunities that could narrow the gender wage gap, assist in making education and health information more accessible, contribute to the end of violence against women, and lead to women's empowerment and leadership.^{15, 22-24}

The objectives of this research were to: determine how the concept of empowerment is defined, utilized, and measured among research studies; explore existing evidence regarding the use of ICTs as interventions towards the goal of women's empowerment; and explore the gaps in knowledge and research on this topic from an individual, community, and global perspective.

Methods

This research used a scoping review, which is methodologically similar to a systematic review, to provide a rigorous knowledge synthesis of current evidence.²⁵⁻²⁶ For the purpose of this study, the scoping review framework used was described by Arksey and O'Malley²⁷ as a five-step process with an optional sixth step. These steps include: (1) identifying the research question, as the starting point and as the launching point to guide the search strategy; (2) identifying relevant studies, which involved the development of a comprehensive search strategy to ensure accurate and complete results; (3) selecting studies, which involved developing a-priori inclusion and exclusion criteria that were revised throughout the review, as familiarity with the evidence increased; (4) charting the data, which involved charting and sorting key material from the results into themes and trends; (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results, which involved presenting the results as a visual and/or narrative; and finally, (6) consulting with relevant stakeholders, which is contingent upon time and resource considerations. For the purposes of this research, the sixth step was not performed.

Review Protocol, Team, and Management

To ensure transparency, rigour, reproducibility, and consistency, protocols were developed prior to the start of the research, for the inclusion criteria, search protocols, and data characterization utility form. This helped to ensure an unbiased approach to the search protocol and to enhance rigor.²⁷ These are available upon request. The scoping review was conducted by a team of individuals with multi-disciplinary capability in nursing, knowledge synthesis methodologies, and ICTs. The primary reviewers included the primary and secondary authors, as well as one research assistant. In addition, a University librarian was consulted throughout the search term selection process to ensure completeness and accuracy of search terms contributing to a comprehensive and complete search strategy.

Any and all potentially relevant citations identified throughout all stages were imported into EndNote™, a reference management software, where duplicates were removed by the program and then double checked, with manual removal by the primary author; the list of citations was then imported into a web-based electronic systematic review management platform, DistillerSR™. The screening for article relevance, up to the data extraction stages, were conducted within this software. Two reviewers (the primary author and research assistant) were used throughout the selection and analysis process to ensure consistency, adherence to the inclusion/exclusion criteria, relevance to the research question, as well as the categorization of data into themes and trends. As part of this process, all articles were screened by the primary author and research assistant. Any discrepancies were brought forward to the secondary author who made an independent decision whether to include or exclude.

Review Question & Scope

The authors used a scoping review methodology to address the following question: What is the global impact of ICTs on women's empowerment?

Search Strategy

The authors ensured identification of relevant and suitable publications by creating a search strategy protocol prior to retrieving evidence from a variety of sources. As per Arksey and O'Malley²⁷, the following avenues were reviewed as part of the search strategy: searching relevant electronic databases, reviewing reference lists of pertinent articles to identify additional sources, and manually searching key journals.

To ensure the search was comprehensive, the following databases, available via the University of Saskatchewan library, were searched on November 30, 2016 and updated on January 1, 2018: Scopus, Embase, ABI Inform, Soc Index, Sociological Abstracts, Gender Studies, Springer Link, PsychInfo, Science Direct, and Academic Search Complete. The COCHRANE Library was also searched for any relevant trials in the trial registry. Limits placed on the search included: English only, no book reviews, publication dated 2012-2017, and the protocol was

pretested in Scopus and Soc Index using select key words including “women” and “empowerment” and “technology.” An illustration of the search term strategy can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Search Term Strategy

Women Search Terms		ICT Search Terms	Empowerment Search Terms	
*searched with OR	“AND”	*searched with OR	“ AND”	*searched with OR
Wom?n		Technolog*		Empower*
Female*		Information technolog*		Disempower*
Girl*		"information communications technolog*"		Barrier*
Maternal		"ICTs"		Enable*
		"social media"		Self concept
		mobile		Self efficacy
		handheld		Capacit*
		telehealth		Emancipat*
		computer		
		Smartphone		
		Digital		
		Internet		
		Telecommunication*		
		"world wide web"		
		Laptop		
		ICT4D		
		"web-based"		
		Iphone		
		Ipad		

Legend: * at end of word = truncation, any number of letters (e.g. capacit* will find capacity or capacities); ? at end of beginning of word is used to represent one or more other characters in a search term (e.g. wom?n will find women or woman).

Limits included: 2012-2017, English language, no books/book reviews

Search terms were drawn from the research question, as well as from lengthy discussions with the university librarian and expanded upon based on a cursory search of two databases. To determine the range and breadth of key terms, an initial limited search of two databases was conducted yielding several papers. These databases were determined in consultation with the university librarian and included Scopus and Gender Studies. These papers were then analyzed for similar keywords, definitions, analogies, and index terms that were relevant synonyms to the initial search words.²⁸⁻²⁹ These additional terms were added to a master list that informed the final search strategy. Specifically, for the term empowerment, keywords were chosen that could provide results that included a lack of empowerment as well, thus the inclusion of “barrier” and “disempower”. The other search terms came directly from key articles and databases and were demonstrated to be the most common variations on the term “empower”. An additional term that was used interchangeably with “empower” was “agency”, however, as this term is used more frequently in conjunction with organizations and not empowerment, it was removed from the search term list.

The ability of the electronic database search to identify all relevant primary research was verified by hand searching the reference lists of eight key peer reviewed articles and nine key electronic journals that were flagged through the initial test search as well as the main search. The journals were chosen based on their relevance to the research question as well as their scholarly nature. The initial three identified journals were: *Community Informatics*, *Gender and Development*, and *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Subsequent journals were identified and selected for a hand-search once the initial search was completed. These were: *Gender, Technology & Development*, *Computers*

in Human Behaviour, American Journal of Health Behaviour, American Journal of Public Health, and Women's Health Issues. These journals were then reviewed for additional articles potentially not identified via the database search; this included entering the general search into journal databases.

Additional grey literature was identified by hand-searching the websites of the Association for Computing Machinery Digital Library Journals and Conference Proceedings, the UN Women, Status of Women Canada, the United Nations Development Programme, the International Center for the Research of Women, the Girls Action Foundation, the Information and Communications Technology Council, the International Telecommunication Union, and the International Development Research Center for primary research reports, guidelines, situation reports, and referenced publications that were not already included.

Study Selection: Relevance screening and inclusion criteria

The focus of the study selection was locating published and unpublished academic articles, which may have any type of study design, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. The initial pool of results included a total of 4481 citations. An initial set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed a-priori to screen abstracts and titles of citations and were refined during each review of the pool of articles. Research articles were initially considered relevant if they included women's empowerment and/or information and communication technology concepts in the title or abstract of the publication. Synonyms for these concepts were created in consultation with the librarian to ensure a robust search strategy for maximum location and inclusion of studies. Given the evolving nature of ICTs and their role in interventions, the authors wanted the articles to reflect a recent knowledge base, therefore the timeframe of 2012-2016 was chosen, which was later expanded to December 31, 2017 as the review progressed. The results were also filtered to include English only content.

First Screen: Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria created for the first level of study selection were driven by the research question topics, specifically, women, empowerment, and ICTs. According to the JBI (2015), the inclusion criteria should be based on three themes, also known by the acronym of PCC: (a) participant description, (b) concept, which is likened to the phenomena of interest, and (c) context. The inclusion criteria used in the first level of selection were country of publication, date of publication (2012-2017), and the use of both of the following concepts in the title or abstract of the publication: women's empowerment and/or information and communication technology. At this stage, the primary author looked for the presence of the key words in the title and/or abstract. The use of these keywords as inclusion criteria were designed to be intentionally broad to provide a sense of what publications linked the two concepts (i.e., women's empowerment and ICTs).

First Screen: Study selection

On first review, the initial pool of articles was subjected to a staged process to ensure studies were selected that were relevant to the research question and met the inclusion criteria. Articles were first excluded based on duplication within the initial search results. This exclusion was conducted using the search tools feature within the electronic database, but also within the reference management program Endnote™ and then manually by the primary author. The inclusion criteria were applied to the title and abstract of the publication. Any title or abstract that did not meet the inclusion criteria was removed from further review and consideration. All articles excluded by the criteria were sent to the research assistant who confirmed the exclusion. Any disagreements or contradictions between the primary author and the research assistant were thoroughly discussed, with both parties having to agree to the inclusion before the publication would be added back into the pool of articles to move forward. Additionally, if an article could not be excluded based solely on the title or the abstract, the full article was reviewed for relevance to the research question and inclusion criteria. These latter two points did not prove to be an issue as there were no disagreements.

Second Screen

The remaining pool of articles was then reviewed a second time by applying a second level of inclusion criteria to the title as well as the abstract. It is common and encouraged as part of the scoping review process to generate increased cumulative familiarity with how concepts are presented within the evidence. This, in turn, informed the decisions that were made regarding the inclusion or exclusion criteria of the subsequent stage. Much of the articles after the first level of elimination included technology as a passive aspect of the study and not one that women actively participated in. It was important for the authors that the technological aspect of each study be an intervention that women could engage in towards building self-efficacy and capacity. This informs current gaps within the evidence that speak to how women are using technologies to support their empowerment. As such, this set of inclusion criteria focused on technology as an intervention in the study and women as active participants in the study versus just the word "women" found throughout the first set of criteria.

Final Screen

For the final review of the full text articles, based on the content and findings in the scoping review process, an additional criterion was included. The authors wanted to explore how the social determinants of health informed and supported the concepts of women, empowerment, and ICTs. At this stage, it was noted which social determinants of health, if any, were present in each article. The list of social determinants as per the Government of Canada (2019) was utilized as a reference for this portion of the process. The remaining 59 articles all had social determinants of health present. After another review using the above inclusion/exclusion criteria, 14 more articles were removed from consideration. Rather than focus on a range of these determinants, the authors decided to include all 45 articles and to then review the implications of this finding in the analysis (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow for Screening Process

Re-run Searches

Due to the gap in the timeline as to when the review began, the authors included re-run searches for each database up to January 1, 2018. A total of 573 articles were found in all 10 of the main electronic databases. Through the first cut and second cut, using the same above inclusion and exclusion criteria, all but six new articles were eliminated. The final total of articles included within the analysis was 51.

Study Characteristics, Extraction, and Charting

The final step required of Arksey and O'Malley's²⁷ scoping review framework was to collate and summarize the results for presentation and discussion. Each selected article was summarized in a customized data characterization utility form to guide data extraction. The goal of this step was to determine and chart factors to be extracted from each article to help answer the research question.^{26-27,30} The charting of data was an iterative and exploratory process in which the data charts were continuously updated to ensure completeness and accuracy.^{26,30} Data extracted from the charts included year of publication, country of study, implications for policy and practice, types of ICT interventions, demographics, empowerment (definition, as a design consideration, and measures), and social determinants of health (presence and description within in the study). All data was then analyzed using thematic analysis and the main ideas refined over several iterations. The data was then mapped using tabular and visual presentations of the main conceptual categories followed by a narrative summary describing how the results related to the research question and objectives.

Results

Demographics & Study Characteristics

The geographic range of the included evidence was global; however, 41.1% (21/51) described research had been conducted in the USA. Seven studies were conducted in India, three in Australia, three in Sweden, and two in Canada. One study was conducted in each of the following countries: Finland, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Nepal, Netherlands, Nigeria, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, and United Kingdom.

Collation and comparison of demographics was difficult due to a lack of consistency in reporting. However, all articles described the demographics of women who were the primary focus of the study. Seventy eight percent of the articles (40/51) reported on some or all of the descriptive study characteristics. The age of participants was frequently reported though there were inconsistent age groupings across all studies. Some articles only reported the mean age of participants, while others provided only a range of categories. The lowest mean reported was 24 years of age and the highest was 59.6 years of age; the categories ranged from 16 years and under to 64 years and older. It is difficult to compare these as the categories varied and it was unclear as to whether age was simply a descriptive statistic designed to describe the sample or whether it was reflected upon consistently in terms of the overall implications to the study.

Missing from these studies were the perspectives and participation of women who cannot currently access, afford, and/or purchase an ICT device as well as effectively and fully utilize it to support their empowerment. Exclusion criteria from within the individual 51 studies illustrate that women not already owning a mobile device, computer, or tablet were eliminated from participating in the research.

Empowerment Definition

In the included studies, the concept of empowerment was used incongruously with terms like self-concept, self-esteem, and self-worth, sometimes by the same author in the same study, which further challenged achievement of a uniform definition for the purposes of this research. Less than one quarter (12/51) of the studies used the term "empower(ment)" in their definition of the concept of interest. These studies defined empowerment as a process but with different foci: as individuals having choice or control over their decisions³¹⁻³⁸, as being

multi-dimensional and influencing a variety of areas.^{34, 37, 39-40} or with a focus on building individuals' capacities, including internal and external resources.³⁹⁻⁴²

The remaining studies described empowerment in a more indirect way, never including the term "empower" or "disempower." Instead, the term empowerment was described in synonymous terms, for instance, over half (28/51) described the concept of empowerment as the process of enabling a sense of self-efficacy or self-worth in the ability to overcome barriers to resources, as well as the barriers to decision-making control.⁴³⁻⁷⁰ One fifth (11/51) described empowerment as the process enabling a sense of self-efficacy or self-worth in the ability to overcome barriers to control over resources.⁷¹⁻⁸¹

Measures of Empowerment

All studies considered the concept of empowerment in their design; approximately 80% (41/51) of articles considered empowerment as a primary outcome of the study. No measures of empowerment were specifically cited in any of the articles, beyond the measures of the behaviour being studied. Several studies included various measures of self-efficacy (i.e., childbirth⁷⁴, physical activity^{56, 67, 71, 74, 80-81} intimate partner violence⁷², caregiving⁷⁵, barrier⁵⁵⁻⁵⁶, health⁷⁸, and chronic disease management⁷⁷). The authors did not compare the different types of self-efficacy scales for validity to empowerment. The diversity of the scales illustrates a focus on improving efficacy of individual behaviors rather than the holistic empowerment of women.

ICT Interventions to Support Women's Capacity and Tools

The articles described a range of supportive ICT interventions, thought with inconsistent and overlapping classification. The specific types of interventions within the 51 articles included web-based devices (17), the internet (19), particular websites (3), blogs (1), text messaging (4), telemedicine (1), video (1), apps (5), social media (2), computers (6), email (1) and FitbitTM (1). The categorization of ICTs focused on how the specific interventions were utilized within the day to day lives of women and were obtained from a thematic analysis of the types of ICTs used by women among the studies.. These themes included, (1) Outreach; (2) Education; (3) Lifestyle (4) Health Challenges; (5) Prevention; and (6) Perception of Barriers.

Outreach

A number of articles (10//51) described supportive ICT interventions as a means of outreach or connecting with clients in the community. Common themes in this section included supporting women where they are at in the community, in terms of their social position, to enhance positive health behaviours with technological assistance, as well as overall enhanced accessibility to ICTs. This was accomplished using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy via computers,⁴⁶ and using Web-based decision aid for understanding fetal anomalies.⁴⁷ Educational text messages were sent to encourage breastfeeding,⁷⁹ and general health promotion interventions were delivered as well.^{43-44,56, 65,73, 75,80}

Education

Within the literature, a number of articles (6/51) described supportive ICT interventions that delivered various health information, through smartphones or other web-based devices. These included FacebookTM virtual learning systems,³⁴ psychoeducation for breast cancer patients,³⁵ as well as interactive voice response as a tool for improving access to healthcare in remote areas.⁵⁹ Other interventions included English language programs,⁷⁰ antenatal perineal massage support groups,⁷⁶ as well as supports for enhancing doctor patient relationships.⁶⁴

Lifestyle

A number of articles (12/51) described supportive ICT interventions that focused on behavioural outcomes related to general lifestyle areas, using web-based devices. Commonly, these interventions provided some form of external support for women to improve their overall way of being healthy. These included improving nutrition knowledge and behaviours,^{67,69} promoting healthy food planning, shopping, and eating behaviours,⁵⁴ interventions for weight loss behaviours,⁴⁵ and engagement with physical activity coaching.^{55,71,74} Many of these interventions also focused on social networks,^{9,48} for example, peer support for building social capital,⁵² promoting social behaviours via an iPad book club.⁸¹

Health Challenges

A number of articles (11/51) described ICT interventions that focused on using web-based devices to support specific health challenges. These health challenges were largely focused on ways to enhance maintenance of women's health, for example self-paced education programs for those who experience intimate partner, as well as dating violence^{33,41,72}, and educational training to enhance understanding and management of chronic illness⁷⁷. The interventions based around health challenges were concentrated on those that affect women only, for example Educational training for patients with breast cancer,^{38,61} health modules for those with breast cancer⁷⁸ and stress incontinence⁶³ and advanced care planning for women with ovarian cancer.⁴⁹

Prevention

Several articles (3/51) described ICT interventions that focused on preventing specific health challenges using web-based devices. This section focused largely on preventing health challenges that are specific to women's issues. One intervention focused on the prevention of sexual and reproductive illness using education information.⁵⁷ Another encouraged vaccination behaviors and immunization with educational information⁵⁸ as well as the prevention of pre-eclampsia in rural developing countries using diagnostic tools⁵¹. One study focused on utilizing mobile phones to manage money transfers to support transport of women with fistulas to urban hospitals⁶⁰ and another examined electronic health records to improve breast cancer screening.⁵³

Perceptions of barriers

A number of articles (9/51) described ICT interventions that focused on the perception of barriers to ICTs that assist women in advancing their understanding and use of ICTs. These studies focused on the perceived barriers and understanding of the role of mobile phones,^{42,66} the awareness of gender-based barriers in telemedicine,⁶⁸ the development of women via mobile phones,^{32,40} as well as the connection with women in the community via apps.⁵⁰

Dicussion

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional and contextual concept that is internal by nature, varies in meaning, and reflects how women self-ascribe it to themselves. From the outset of the review, search terms had to include words beyond simply "empower[ment]" as much of the initial searching revealed synonyms including self-efficacy, self-worth, self-concept, and/or capacity. This inconsistency in the use of the term empowerment yields a lack of consensus on how empowerment is understood which impacts how research studies and interventions are structured and delivered to ensure maximum effectiveness and generalizability. While none of the included studies indicated the broader negative outcomes related to the use of ICT, it was noted by the authors that the literature supports a flip side to using technology to empower women. For example, technological advances are disproportionately accompanied by female-directed cyber abuse.⁸²⁻⁸³

Empowerment through the vector of ICT has the potential to cross multiple sectors, both private and public. The complexity of empowerment and ICTs, as they relate to the root issues of inequities, suggests the need for collaborative, multi-sectoral involvement. These partnerships consider the contextual factors that act as facilitators and barriers for women in all types of communities. Interagency partnerships are uniquely suited to develop interventions aimed at enabling women to make better use of ICTs. These interventions should include information on access to education, facilities for education regarding entrepreneurship, employment opportunities, and health and other government health resources. Governments partnering with public and private telecommunication agencies through subsidization could provide discounted or refurbished devices for women who are deemed disadvantaged. Funding may also benefit those who experience difficulty in obtaining mobile devices as well as in accessing interventions aimed at enhancing the use of ICT. For example, funding is needed to support the cost of accessing services, low-cost devices, or the provision of Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards. Alternatively, governments should support and encourage private mobile operators through tax exemptions and other benefits to facilitate better mobile services and infrastructure in rural, remote, and urban areas. Providing accessible laptop sites within communities or in schools is another way to bridge the gap in access to and use of ICT. These strategies not only help in improving the overall status of girls and women but also influence overall empowerment and development of the community.

Opportunities exists for further evaluation as to how empowerment is being measured and used in conjunction with ICTs, as well as which frameworks are being used to guide research in this area. The lack of specific measures to empowerment reflects a barrier, not only in how strategies for empowerment are understood and implemented, but in how researchers will know whether empowerment has been achieved. Key to this being operationalized is the development of a standardized tool for measuring the level of empowerment experienced by women.

Policy Implications

Evidence that women of poor socio-economic status are being eliminated from research studies and programs that claim to support women's empowerment, suggest that access and funding play a large role in policy and program development. This also reflects a biased view in terms of the population demographics of participants in research studies that aim to advance empowerment. Though ICT is not the only factor that can support women's empowerment through capacity building, women who do not have access to or who cannot afford ICTs, are potentially disempowered due to a lack of voice and participation within the information society. Exclusion of these women from the research limits the measurement of the true impact of ICTs on empowerment and generalizability of results. Continued research regarding empowerment involving more advantaged cohorts of women does not address the inherent issues of oppression of women within society and, in fact, further disempowers those under-represented groups. Local policies have the greatest potential of improving the uptake of ICTs, as this process occurs initially at the individual level

Policy change needs to begin with a focus on how these resources will address socio-economic and gender issues. Local and national governments need to invest in information gathering tools that inquire how and why women are using technology to support their lives and families. Equally as important is the inquiry of women's perceptions regarding how they prefer to use ICTs to benefit their daily lives or the barriers they experience. A global survey undertaken by the UN Statistics Division in 2011 indicated that only 30 percent of countries regularly produce sex-disaggregated statistics and current data collection does not at all focus on qualitative data collection that would represent the voices of women.⁸⁴ Future data should be translated into gender sensitive policies that support equal access and use of ICTs. The development and implementation of such policies should involve representation of women from all socio-economic backgrounds and ages to ensure in-depth results. Examples include policies that allow women to effectively access and participate in ICTs within society, the delivery of ICTs at a reasonable cost for all, as well as policies that regulate the cost and provision of services linked to ICTs such as availability of cell phone, easily accessible WiFi sites, and cost-effective internet plans.

Limitations

While scoping reviews examine the breadth of evidence available on a topic, they do not factor in the depth or quality of that evidence.²⁵⁻²⁷
³⁰ Some authors have argued that scoping reviews should include an assessment of quality; however, Armstrong et al.²⁵ contend that this decision should depend on the resources available for the review as well as the purpose of the scoping review itself. The quantity of data that is generated in a scoping review can be significant and so it is important to find a balance between providing an overview of all types of evidence found and providing detailed data and assessment of a smaller number of studies.²⁵ Scoping studies also lack a thorough evaluation of the quality of results, instead producing a narrative account of all available evidence.²⁶⁻²⁷ This approach serves to ensure that all resulting evidence is included in the review and does not limit the end number of articles, as in a systematic review.

Conclusions

The diversity of technological interventions utilized to support empowerment is infinite and there is no limit as to how ICTs can be implemented in daily lives. This research provides a foundation on which future research regarding the concept of empowerment with ICTs can move forward. This study is the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive connection and discussion as to how empowerment is currently defined and operationalized, as well as how empowerment and ICTs come together to support women's ability to elevate their experience with oppression to experiencing empowerment.

List Of Abbreviations

SDG: Sustainable Development Goals

ICT: Information and communication technology

ICTs: Information and communications technologies

WHO: World Health Organization

UN: United Nations

ITU: International Telecommunication Union

GPS: Global Positioning System

SIM: Subscriber Identity Module

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board was waived for this study as the information retrieved was publicly available.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and material

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

PP assisted in analyzing and interpreting the data and was a major contributor in writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

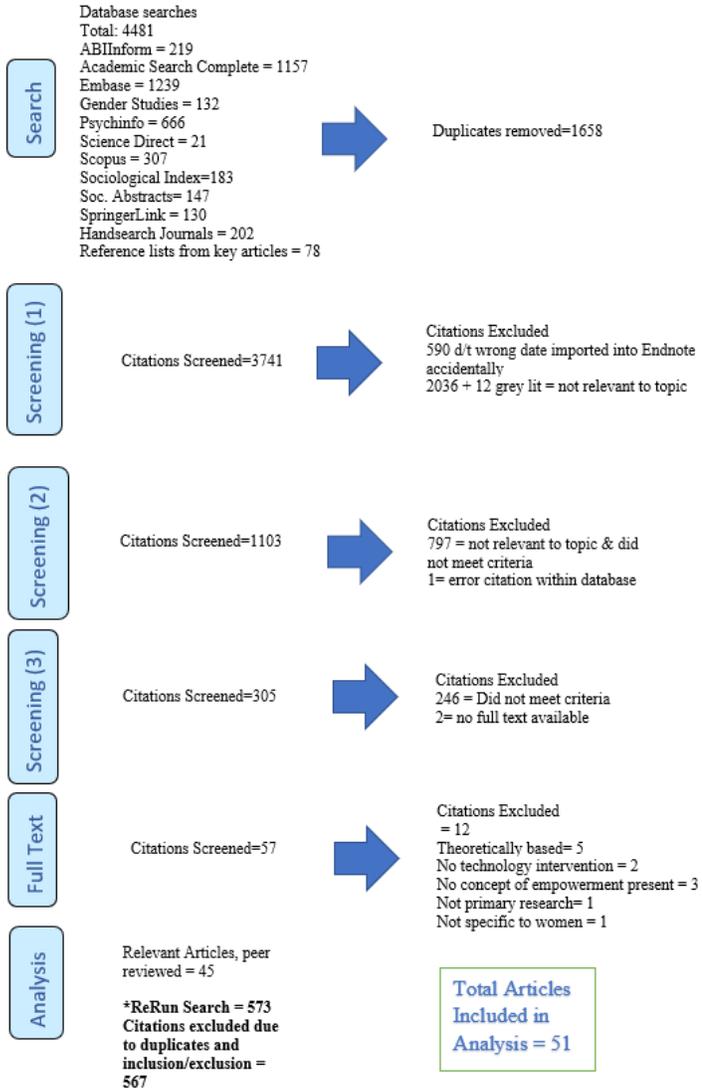


Figure 1

PRISMA Flow for Screening Process

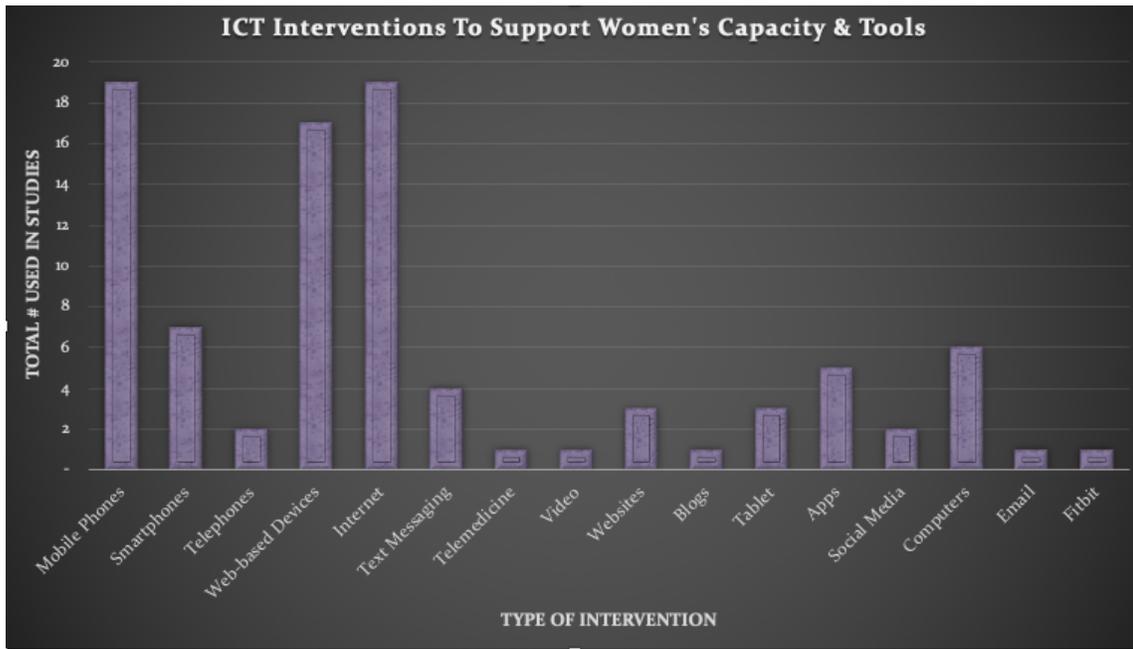


Figure 2

ICT Interventions to Support Women's Capacities and Tools

Supplementary Files

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- [PRISMAChecklist.pdf](#)