

Theory

Gender, ICTs, Human Development, and Prosperity

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Plus ça change! Since the first Harvard Forum in 2003, much has changed in information technology, especially with regard to women's access to it. In particular, mobile phone access has jumped in every region, and in most countries, of the world. From research sketched in the Forum's background paper (Spence & Smith, 2009), and from research more reflective of a gender lens, phone access for women, mostly to mobiles, is greatest where total access is greatest—highest in Asia, next in South and Central America, and lowest in Africa. But this, too, is changing, with Africa scoring the highest recent rates of mobile adoption, and women almost at parity in terms of users.

This can be an exciting and practical way to empower women in both their economic and social roles. But it can also have the potential to disempower women and create have-not situations, particularly at the bottom of the pyramid (BoP), if precautions that have been learned from the recent literature on ICT and women are not part of future ICT policy and practice. This concerns women's access and control over ICT as an "enabler" or "disabler" to women's self-empowerment.

As Dr. Amartya Sen has noted,

For the advancement of economic development today, nothing is as important as the participation and leadership of women. Despite the importance of the subject, its value is persistently underestimated, and the psychological and social coordinates of women's participation are also much neglected in the theory and practice of development policy (see Buskens & Webb, 2008).

Despite mainstream opinion that technology is gender neutral, cultural values and practices have tended to exclude women from access to, and power over, different technologies. ICTs can pose a potential threat to women if they are used in ways that replicate or perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases that can have unintended negative impacts on women, an idea that has been the object of recent investigation.¹ As Nancy Hafkin (2002) has suggested,

The assumption that a so-called gender-neutral information technology project will benefit an entire population regardless of gender is not grounded in reality, because of the impact of gender relations on technology and the societal constraints that women face in accessing and using information technology.

She concludes that, if you don't look for gender, you don't get gender information that can change impacts, particularly on women, and that

1. The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme developed a gender evaluation methodology (GEM) to investigate this relationship (see Buskens & Webb, 2008; or the GEM Web site, <http://www.apcwomen.org/gem/>).

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one needs to be proactive to ensure both the participation of women and their benefits from ICT.

That being said, many exciting examples of positive ICT-for-women news have emerged since the first Harvard Forum, starting in Asia, where ICT has transformed the way women “do” their business, whether it is at a personal level or at an employment one; whether it is in the home, at the workplace, or in the field. I would note, for example:

- the village phone, developed by Grameen-phone, transforming over a quarter of a million shy women villagers to commercial mobile phone users with savvy;
- an Asian Development Bank-funded Plant Doctor program that transformed Piyara Begum from a *housewife with a green thumb* to a businesswoman advising Bangladeshi farmers via mobile phone on how to address crop problems;
- Community Learning Centers set up across rural India by the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) to provide IT training to grassroots women in villages, so as to better manage their productive systems through interactive training in forestry, water conservation, and leadership;
- ICT tools to provide sexuality and life skills education that empower adolescent women in Chennai, India, where education, health, and family welfare programs are inadequate to address the special needs of women, and where life skills training using ICTs such as computers, Internet, and digital cameras educate, organize, and empower these adolescent women;
- an e-homemakers virtual network that, with most women in full-time work outside the home, supports more than 10,000 Southeast Asian women to better balance home-work issues through self-help innovations;² and
- women using ICT to strengthen their organization and the general women’s movement at local, regional, and global levels, such as Internet monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the workings of the impacts of the WTO on gen-

der and trade that detail progress in these areas to millions of women in Asia.

These are a few examples of how ICT has enabled Asian women to break through the so-called “digital divide.”

In Africa, the results have been more mixed, as the recent studies undertaken in the GRACE network have demonstrated. Case studies abound showcasing the powerful achievements that make ICTs (cell phones, computers, Internet, CD-ROMs, and radio) appear to be promising tools for African women’s empowerment. But case studies also demonstrate the “complex web of factors” (Buskens & Webb, 2008, p. 5) that determine this access, which is strongly linked to the relative access of African women to profit from these new services. That, in turn, is vital to understanding any successful leveraging of ICTs for development, poverty reduction, gender equality, and social justice. “A series of factors, including literacy and education, language, time, cost, geographical location of facilities, social and cultural norms . . . constrain women’s access to information technology” (ibid., p. 99).

One case study spoke positively of a hairdresser who needed to save for two years to buy the cell phone that enabled her to start her business, but she now owns her own home and rents rooms. Others (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001; Hafkin, 2002) speak of the obstacles and limitations faced by African women, which have brought the authors to conclude that ICTs risk unintentional reinforcement of African women’s discrimination and disempowerment. This has led the authors to the further conclusion that the development of ICT provides a tremendous opportunity for African women’s empowerment, but reaffirms the existence of a digital gender gap—a claim substantiated by a UNESCO study (2003). The priorities of intervention, in addition to equal use of ICTs by women and men, must also focus on the participation of women in decision making, the fight against illiteracy, and the removal of constraints related to the triple role of women. Plus ça change encore.

In Latin America, one illustrative example of the unique, innovative, and democratic spread of ICT use is the Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE), begun in 1998 with an Internet radio station sending out programs from a desktop computer to

2. See *eHomemakers*: www.ehomemakers.net

women audiences all over the world in an effort to take back control of communications in a unique and transformative way (Gurumurthy, 2004). FIRE enables women to determine and create program content that can have a positive impact on their empowerment, and that works within gendered power structures to open up debates within accepted spaces for women. This is done with open microphones and virtual events, as well as Webcast marathons streamed over the Internet, featuring live broadcasts with prominent women advocates.

So does this mean all is well, and we can let the for-profit and nonprofit sectors take care of access, services, and the human development, innovation, and poverty reduction potential of ICTs and communication when it applies to women? I fear not. "The more things change, the more they stay the same" is a saying that carries truth.

Access and services also depend on public policy and regulation in markets, as well as on policy and investment in ICT infrastructure and public e-services provision. The human development and capability approach, in particular, stresses the intimate relationships among *power, politics, and policies*.

Public policy involves a course of action and a web of decisions, and it cannot be associated with only one moment, one actor, one decision, and one action. Policy is political; the policy process is closely connected to the nature of power itself (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009). As a Bridge Report suggests:

The ability to harness technology is political. It involves a shift in power relations that reflects women's needs, interests and aspirations. Engendering ICT is not merely about the greater use of ICTs by women, but about *transforming the ICT system itself* to relate more to women and their needs. (Gurumurthy, 2004)

One of the greatest challenges in harnessing ICTs for the social transformation of women is to see women as ICT *producers, developers, and decision makers*, not simply as consumers, to ensure further equal participation of women in the information society (Kuga Thas et al., 2007; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006).

However, at every level of prosperity, including the BoP, information and communications themselves impact both power relations and policy. One must only look at the large and growing body of research—the GRACE studies, for example, or

LIRNEasia's video cases of mobile use at the BoP—to be convinced that access to mobiles and other ICTs is creating opportunities for *many* women in every area of capabilities and freedoms. These areas do not always break down cleanly, but the categories of "social," "economic," and "other" will do in brief.

Social: Research can conclude that use of mobiles is mainly *social*, and thus in some way not "economic," or not sufficient to justify the cost. This is myopic. In the human development and "happiness" literatures, family and social relationships are among the highest contributors to well-being. People clearly value personal communication, spending surprisingly high shares of income—15% in the BoP. Women have a high demand for social relationships and networking relative to men. Communication is also a base for building other roads to empowerment.

Economic: Case study research is clear: In countless specific ways, mobiles and ICTs increase opportunities and benefits from economic activities. This extends to fields including agriculture and fishing, marketing and trading, small business, time management, and access to economic services (banking and credit in particular), as well as access to public services, particularly in health and education.

Other: The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative highlights several missing dimensions of prosperity/poverty that are currently missing from measurement and public discussion, including security, dignity, and empowerment. Taking just security, the benefits of mobiles and ICTs in disaster warning and management, as well as in personal security enhancement, are of major importance to women. Events of the past decade have brought the vulnerability of women in disaster areas (tsunami, earthquakes, and floods, as well as man-made conflict) into clearer focus and public consciousness.

What, then, are the main challenges? I put forward a short list for discussion, recognizing that others with greater specialized knowledge are in a better position to recommend and prioritize—and that each country and society is unique.

1. *Access:* Countries with low access and/or high cost need to change, and continued research and activism on policy and regulation is one key ingredient. Many countries, especially in Africa, need more financial support

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- for basic public ICT infrastructure (and services) investments. Many (poorest) localities need some combination of market, non-profit, self-help, and public access provision aid *that directly targets women users*. Further research on this front is needed.
2. *Public services*: Gender-responsive budgeting (UNIFEM, 2009) research, in most countries, provides a framework for assessing, over time, the outcomes of public service provision for women and men. It would be useful to draw together country research on health and education (e- and non-e-) in particular, as a means to identify how telehealth and distance learning could be better designed (regarding both content and delivery) for women's needs and benefit. Women in many countries also have a strong motive and ability to manage disaster warning and management mechanisms—when provided with sufficient communications capabilities.
 3. *Economic services*: Mobile banking and financial services merit nurture and oversight, often in opposition to vested interests. The successful initial cases, such as the example of the Philippines, suggest widespread adoption and adaptation soon. Lowering the cost 5–10% on foreign and internal remittances would benefit women greatly, saving US\$25 billion a year on foreign remittances alone.³ Development of existing and new micro credit mechanisms through SMS-based mobile banking could be transformative for women.⁴ Research on the use and obstacles to use of SMS banking by women would be timely and valuable.
 4. *Gender advocates*: There is a host of gender-ICT activities undertaken by women, ICT initiatives, gender organizations, and others. The background paper covers some in gender, rights, governance, empowerment, conflict, environment, and energy. These are

fundamentally important to continue, study, improve, and support. They relate most often to the development of public dialogue and argument, as Dr. Sen so strongly emphasizes, particularly in countries and localities where it least exists.

It is only by specific attention to all the dimensions of gender equality that ICTs will realize their potential for the human development and prosperity of women. ■

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3. "The World Bank estimates that remittances totalled US\$420 billion in 2009, of which \$317 billion went to developing countries . . . The global average total cost for migrant remittances has reduced to 8.72%, down from 9.40% recorded in Q3 2009" (World Bank, 2010). The lowest costs reported for remittance transfers using SMS banking are below 1%. Reducing the remittance cost of \$317 billion annually by 8% gives a savings of just over \$25 billion.

4. Africa is leading initiatives in this area with M-Pesa mobile banking, and women have been among the early adopters.

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