

Workshop on Technology, Social Process and Gender in the Information Society, February 5-6, 2007

Compiled Feedback from Participants March 2007

Caroline Wamala, *Sweden* - PhD Student, Division of Gender, Technology and Organisation, Department of Human Work Sciences, Luleå University of Technology

Coming from an African background, I was especially eager to see and hear the development efforts that are being undertaken in India in the area of ICT issues. The similarities I noted clarified for me that even though they say development is not universal, the struggles are.

Because I have mainly concentrated on the Internet, it was especially interesting for me to hear about other ICT components being used to create awareness such as radio and video. I enjoyed especially the presentation by Jessica that brings about enlightenment for communities towards a better and healthier lifestyle.

I learned very much from all the presentations and the workshop as a whole has definitely helped put some issues of my research interests into perspective, such as my interest on continuing with analysing access for urban social actors, who are not necessarily disadvantaged.

Gloria Bonder, *Argentina* - General Coordinator of the Regional UNESCO Chair Women, Science and Technology in Latin America

The workshop reflected on voices for women's empowerment, as well as empowerment for voice. Discussions centred around the information society as an opportunity for rethinking our conceptions on gender equality and social change within a new social paradigm of power relations. Dialogue also focused on the cultural dimensions of information and communication technologies. The power of the discourses that institute them act as signs of the present and future society, and also signify the processes of appropriation and the construction of new meanings and emancipatory strategies. These are some emergent issues from the discussions.

The presentations on the amazing experiences with women and communities proves that there is no that there is no roof for imagination and social utopia.

The workshop generated a caring and sharing dialogue among people coming from different contexts. It also provided windows for exploring new collaborative ideas and projects.

Govind Kelkar, *India* - Programme Coordinator, IFAD-UNIFEM Gender Mainstreaming Programme in Asia

The workshop was a tremendous learning experience about the potential of IT in promoting equality based gender relations, improving efficiency in production and reducing poverty.

Another major benefit of this workshop I noted is the networking of scholars from east and west and civil society group's active in the area of Gender and IT. It would be a pity if we do not take this process further and treat this workshop as a one time activity. As I said during some time during the workshop Gender inequality is embedded in the history and political economy of the Asian region, including India. Yet, women are not silent observers of the male appropriation of traditional and technological knowledge, power and resources. It is this

message that demands that in our future work we should capture women's voice and their demand for dignity of work and equality in social relations.

Jessica Mayberry, *India* - Founding Director, Video Volunteers

I'm really glad I met some wonderful people and heard some very different perspectives.

I was a little sceptical before coming about how much the workshop would achieve as there was a lot of jargon and academic terminology in the agenda that is alienating to people working in the field, so I thought the conference might likely sideline practitioners and not really succeed in bridging the gap that often exists between academics and the grassroots.

However, I found the presentations of the academics quite interesting and did manage to learn something useful from all of their presentations. However, I was never too clear what we were aiming to achieve—we talked about a 'research framework,' but perhaps we should have had an initial session where we brainstormed possible research areas so we at least knew in what context we should be thinking. I also felt that the theme of "ICT and Gender" was too broad, and it might have been good to narrow it down a bit—that's important if you want to get beyond the purely superficial.

I really enjoyed meeting everyone, and the conversations were great. The people from Sweden seem like they will be great people for IT for Change (and perhaps others among us) to work with, so I look forward to hearing what kind of plans were made.

Kanchan K. Malik, *India* - Lecturer, S. N. School of Communication, University of Hyderabad

The international workshop deepened my understanding about the potential and role of media technologies in bringing about social change.

The diversity of experiences and approaches showcased in the conference strengthened my already robust faith that access to ICTs and democratisation of media technologies could go a long way in facilitating development in a manner that fosters gender equality and empowerment of women in different spheres of life. Also, ICTs and gender is an area where systematic research on its multiple techno-social dimensions could augment our abilities to exploit the potential of ICTs in their entirety.

The problem that we were addressing and responding to during the discussions – If technology is the answer; what is the question? - suitably underscores the conviction of the participants to encourage the utilisation of ICTs in influencing social processes to generate desirable development related goals. However, ICTs by themselves may not be the answer to all development related questions and issues and a whole gamut of conscientisation and democratic procedures may have to be activated before we can see/visualise/conceptualise ICTs making a definite difference in bringing gender sensitive social change.

There is an increasing consensus among communication and feminist scholars and organisations that media and new technologies of communication, informed by a gender perspective, can be harnessed as indispensable tools for reversal of women's marginalisation and for creating avenues for social change. Five dimensions of women's participation in ICTs – as listeners, programme content contributors, producers, planners and managers – could give visibility to women's realities, and bring their concerns, identities and issues to the dominant public agenda.

Since then scholars have developed these ideas, arguing for the necessity of communications spaces for expression of women's issues; dissemination and exchange of authentic

information and images about women; enhancement of women's equal participation in civil and public life; women's representation in development; and the inclusion of women's active participation in solidarity campaigns and collaborative actions for their own futures. A growing school of scholars and practitioners have also argued for more attention to the ways that women's social movements are building new communication alternatives for change at the grassroots level, and contributing to the democratisation of communication.

Community media provide women an arena, outside the state apparatus, that may be used as a potent instrument for democratic deliberations and negotiations. Such an institutionalised space for discursive interaction and for political participation through the medium of talk. These spaces, among the most marginalised, help to counteract the communications advantage of dominant groups which have rendered subordinate social groups less able to articulate and defend their interests. They function both as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; and on the other hand they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics. They also help expand the discursive space, which could eventually facilitate collective action and offer a realistic emancipatory potential.

Malin Lindberg, *Sweden* - PhD Student, Division of Gender, Technology and Organisation, Department of Human Work Sciences, Luleå University of Technology

I was inspired to detect that most participants shared similarities in the experiences of inclusion and exclusion of actors and areas in the national and international processes on ICT-development. Therefore I very much look forward to bring these experiences together in a mutual framework of policy theory and practice, which might be employed in order to strengthen our influence in the global debate on ICT and innovation.

Maria Udén, *Sweden* - Post-Doctoral Researcher, Division of Gender, Technology and Organisation, Department of Human Work Sciences, Luleå University of Technology

My overall reflection after day one of the workshop and specifically the two India-focused sessions was how many similarities and parallels the Indian cases had to what can be observed in Sweden. This is interesting, not least because the women addressed in the Indian projects presented have quite different circumstances to live with on a socio-economic level, than the women who are generally addressed in Swedish gender equality projects. Knowing one's way around in terms of legal structures, incomes, loans and funding are among the issues dealt with in Indian villages as well as in Swedish small business promotion packages for women. I never came to ask questions about the details, but I look forward to exploring these commonalities more deeply. Are the commonalities which can be noted manifestations of a truly common situation shared by women in India and Sweden, across the socio-economic differences, or are they perhaps expressions of the forms applied when addressing women?

From day two of the workshop I especially have Anita Gurumurthy's presentation in mind. Already in her opening and welcome to the workshop on day one, she had spoken about "The politics and power of information itself". Relevant as this remark is, her presentation on "Applying the information society lens to gender and development" once again brought me back to what may be called, reusing Anita's phrase "The politics and power of TECHNOLOGY itself". I sometimes get questions about joining projects aimed at developing new ICTs and ICT tools for women, but owned and run in the usual male dominated setting. This has never felt inspiring, and I would probably do a very bad job in such a project. Rather, it is when women themselves want to develop and change technology, can I see a point as a feminist to join, and the reasons for this were indeed reflected by Anita's presentation. The discussion on confusion between a paradigm and the artifact that constitutes the paradigm might hit the

point: in simply producing "women friendly" technology lays no challenge to a "women unfriendly" paradigm as such.

Meera Pillai, India - Institute of Social Studies Trust

I think the workshop was very useful for many reasons:

At a very basic level, because there are still not enough spaces and times where issues related to IT are not discussed in purely commercial and/or laudatory terms. (If you think of the IT secretary's perspective during his inaugural address at ISST's workshop on a similar theme, which reflected some of the major elements of mainstream thinking related to ICTs, the difference in perspectives expressed in this workshop stands out.)

Secondly, the workshop considered issues of populations left out of the ICT net, the implications of such exclusion, initiatives outside the private sector which sought to change this situation, and challenges and successes related to trying to make such change.

Thirdly, the workshop identified several areas for action and research, including the need to advocate for collection of gender-disaggregated data related to this sector, "measuring" "empowerment" that results from access to information, services and agency through ICTs, health implications, etc.

Fourth, the workshop drew attention to the range and heterogeneity of experiences and initiatives that are clubbed under the term "ICTs", and the importance of capturing this range.

Fifth, the workshop clearly brought out how the excessive importance given to the technology part in the discussions of ICTs so that the importance of social factors and processes was insufficiently acknowledged or addressed, and drew attention to working on the latter.

Sixth, the workshop uncovered how ICTs can fracture, threaten, and destabilize the status quo in multiple ways at the individual and community level, how these can invite backlashes, and how addressing these will require energy, effort and strategizing.

Personally, the workshop gave me quite a few ideas about possible areas to study, provided some cross-fertilizing insights to use in some areas I'm currently working on.

Michael Gurstein, Canada - Executive Director, Centre for Community Informatics Research, Development and Training

I only had a chance to attend the first few sessions of the workshop in Mysore. What struck me though was the range and depth of discussion that was being initiated. The three sessions that I did attend (or participate in) were effectively structured so that there was an "overview/theory" introduction, the presentation of several research case studies and finally some presentations from the field by grassroots practitioners.

This overall design seemed to work extremely well and I was disappointed that I wasn't able to stay on to see how the three levels were integrated and what came out of the integration as the workshop moved toward its objective of defining a collaborative Gender and Community Informatics research agenda.

I guess that I was particularly struck by the energy and commitment from the grassroots presentations and I was equally challenged (and tried to challenge others) to see how we as researchers (or even more acutely as "theoreticians") might provide support to the transformative grassroots initiatives that were being presented to us. I had some ideas based

on work in which I am engaged elsewhere but I wanted to learn from those in this environment whether those approaches could be transferred.

I also was curious to interact with research peers to see how we might individually or collectively integrate the lessons and challenges from or grassroots/practitioner colleagues into our own work and what avenues it suggested for development and re-development of existing approaches, theories and even methodologies.

Rukmini Vemraju, India - Programme Officer, Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia - Commonwealth of Learning

The two day conference provided an exciting opportunity for engagement with professionals and activists engaged in addressing gender issues from different perspectives and in different contexts.

I think the workshop succeeded in bringing together researchers and practitioners and drawing attention to the new thinking and concerns in engaging with community informatics. The practitioners provided an exciting range of experiences even while tempering it with a note of caution.

Personally, I enjoyed the conference and also learnt from presentations like the delayed internet SAMI project, which was both fascinating and a completely new learning from me. Being very focused on the implementation aspects of ICT, it was very good for me to be exposed to new concepts and terminology in gender research like "gender contracts", "gender orders" and "doing gender", which I will interrogate some more and try to introduce into our policy and planning, so that it can bring a sharper gender focus to the work that we engage in. Finally, I had an opportunity to interact with several professionals doing impressive work and since we work through partners, it gave me new contacts and ideas to take forward.

Sejal Dand, India - Director, Area Networking and Development Initiatives

Before the workshop I was not sure how much of our work at ANANDI could relate to the the theme and the paradigm of information society explored in the workshop. Hence, not only was it difficult to contextualise my presentation but more importantly it was difficult to formulate questions for exploration of this theme in our interventions to mainstream rural poor women's concerns in the development dialogue.

The workshop presentations from across the globe and the design wove a rich tapestry of opportunities, challenges and dilemma's of information society's impact on gender relations. The focus of the presentations from India on the use of communication technology (audio, video) by, for and to empower rural communities and women showed the gaps in information (especially those related to information access and impact) that need more research. The enormous influence of IT in today's globalised, liberalised economy perpetuates the old social iniquitous relationships in myriad ways which presentations on the participation of women in IT field as producers and users from across the globe demonstrated. This in itself throws up many areas of enquiry which require new frameworks for analysis, longitudinal studies employing feminist methods of enquiry.

Sonya Thimmaiah, India - Institute of Social Studies Trust

There were a few of things that struck me over the course of the seminar –

The absence of sex-disaggregated data (that a lot of the panellists commented on) was disturbing and, as Sejal pointed out, very much a political decision. This, surely, is an area of imperative opportunity.

I thought what Rukmini said - about content being perhaps even more important than access - was critical. Others reiterated this by saying that women need to go from being content receivers to content creators. Perhaps some kind of an analysis of content - who is producing it, who is consuming it - would be worthwhile?

I also agree with one of the panellists who said that we have to be very clear about the link between ICTs and poverty reduction - and that the latter is a higher priority - therefore we have to be selective about where we choose to apply ICTs as they may not be relevant in all contexts.

Taking a cue from what Malin said with regard to public funding in Sweden and the priority given to areas of industry dominated by men, perhaps a similar analysis of public funding programmes in India would reveal state-perpetrated gender injustices that might otherwise go unquestioned? This could perhaps be conducted in conjunction with an analysis of public/private initiatives as well?

It seems to me that it would also be worthwhile to conduct an analysis of ICT programmes currently in operation and evaluate them from the point of whether they represent sustainable development opportunities

I think, as Ewa pointed out, that we need to examine the contextualised 'gender contracts' across classes, and identify and challenge sex-segregated divisions of labour, as this has wide-ranging implications not merely for companies providing IT & ITeS but, as Meera pointed out, also for programmes like the NREGS.

Lastly, I think the link between research and policy making needs to be investigated - and I am only half-joking when I wonder if perhaps we don't need some research on how many research initiatives are followed through with policy changes!

Sujata Gothoskar, India - Education Coordinator, International Union of Food Workers

Change is such a complicated term and process. At one level, there is such a comfort level, especially for those of us who are relatively privileged, regarding 'non-change'. Yet time and time again we are brought to a realization that change happens and will happen whether we want it or not. Then the thing is how do we participate in it or attempt to at least partially steer it according to the values and principles we believe in – equity, participative and inclusive change.

At the workshop you had organized, this complicatedness of change and the different parameters of the complications came out very well. At the same time, the need to be critical, self-critical, to persist and persevere.