

Girls Economic Rights and Empowerment

(A special feature on girls and IT from a Southern perspective, with specific focus on girls, globalisation, and information and communications technologies for PLAN International's Annual report entitled 'Because I am a Girl')

Introduction

The far-reaching changes ushered in by the advent of the Internet and other digital technologies in contemporary social, political and economic life are captured in the notion of the 'information society'. The transition we are witness to is not merely in the social architecture of information and communication. New technologies and the techno-social phenomena they spawn¹, also mediate systemic change in all socio-economic institutions, creating the space for 'institutional leapfrogging'² - a concept that suggests significant possibilities to create new methods and rules, and leave behind old ways, in the pursuit of development and empowerment goals. This transformative potential of new technologies has been recognised by developing country governments and other development agencies who have adopted ICT strategies at various levels. However, this pursuit of 'new ways' through ICT strategies can either be inimical to or further the objectives of the empowerment of girls, depending on what premises inform these transformatory efforts.

The new context thus provides marginalised social groups a radical opportunity for participating in and shaping progressive social change. For girls and young women especially in the global south, ICT access and its effective use provides new avenues in their journeys towards economic empowerment. Some of the obvious and more direct avenues lie in the emerging job opportunities in IT and ITES³ industries, ICT based entrepreneurship, and access to social networks of value that bring intangible gains such as critical information. With respect to education, ICT access can open up new learning modalities that negotiate barriers of geographic remoteness and cultural constraints on the mobility of girls, offering innovative possibilities in ongoing education and horizontal, peer to peer learning. ICTs can restructure public education systems - making wider reach and inclusion possible, and creating the conditions for learner-centred knowledge. Thus they also help address traditional gendered barriers to education.

'Access to ICTs' has been the preoccupation of development donors and national governments, who have initiated public access models and capacity-

¹ an emailing application may be seen as a *technology*, a listserv can be called a *socio-technical* phenomenon, and a virtual group a *techno-social* one. These concepts represent intermediate forms in the complex interplay of the social and technical.

² A term used in the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - ECLAC, January 2003 , <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/rc/bavaro/eclac.pdf>

³ IT enabled services

building programmes as the primary strategies for ICT access in developing country contexts. However, access to and diffusion of ICTs are not uniform between regions of the South and within countries even. Asian countries like India, Malaysia and the Philippines have emerged as significant destinations for global BPOs and more recently, Latin American countries like Costa Rica, Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Argentina are being seen as potential BPO hotbeds. In Africa, mobile telephony is being promoted increasingly as a micro-business tool in many countries. At the community level, in many countries of the South, telecentres have been seen as the vanguard of access, often for e-government services, and also promoted sometimes as women's enterprises. ICT education and skill programmes have also been undertaken through the telecentre model.

Statistical analysis shows that the relationship between the gender divide and the overall digital divide is tenuous – and so the gender divide cannot be expected simplistically to improve with overall improvements in diffusion or 'infostate'.⁴ This implies that many complex factors, including cultural factors need to be addressed by policy. Further, age in particular is a defacto critical dimension of the gender digital divide, with wider gaps within older age groups. Clearly, therefore getting girls to become active participants in the information society and enabling them to continue shaping and gaining from new ICTs is an important development goal.

The empowerment of girls in the emerging information society context also relates to complex interactions between the local and global, and is shaped in relation to gendered socio-political processes. Some typical myths about ICTs, gender and empowerment are unpacked below in order to explore these complexities.

Myth 1. IT and ITES industries are the ultimate bastion of gender equality.

It is indeed true that with globalised labour markets, outsourcing especially in the services sector is rapidly expanding. This has opened up opportunities for young women in many developing countries for employment in call centres. In many cultural contexts, jobs in the IT sector are also seen as socially more respectable. But the new global work organisation is also leading to a 'newer' international division of labor, not without gendered consequences. The feminisation of low-skill ICT jobs, unequal access of young women to technological education and the feminization of labour position based on the stereotyping of women for their "soft skills" are crucial issues in emerging jobs⁵ even as ICTs are being introduced within patriarchal organisational structures⁶. In countries where call centres are the primary choice for youth

⁴ Sophia Huyer, Nancy Hafkin, Heidi Erti and Heather Dryburgh : "Women in the Information Society", in *Digital Divide to Digital Opportunities - Measuring Infostates for Development*, (ed.) George Sciadas, Orbicom 2005., page 145.

⁵ Swasti Mitter and Cecilia Ng, "Gender and Empowerment in the Information Economy - An Introduction", in Cecilia Ng and Swasti Mitter (eds.). *Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World*. London: Sage Publications Pvt., Ltd., 2005.

⁶ Carol Upadhyya, "Gender Issues in the Indian Software Outsourcing Industry"

in expanding labour markets, the “dumbing down” of a generation⁷ through mind-numbing work and the de-skilling intrinsic to call centre jobs are a matter of concern. For a majority of the young women, the option to employment in call centres is only in very low paid jobs.

Even where young women do get into high-skill jobs in the IT sector, research indicates lower retention of women in IT careers⁸. Also, short-term work arrangements in the sector provide little social security to account for the reproductive roles of women. Neo-liberal globalization and its impact on cultures through the islands of prosperity that the IT sector creates can also accentuate gender discrimination. For instance, migration of young men in India for high-end IT jobs has further entrenched cultural practices like dowry⁹. Instances of greater dowry demands for computer literate daughters are also evidence!¹⁰

The IT and ITES sectors will no doubt remain a significant option for many women in the new economy. Girls that get involved in these sectors are drawn into the ICT world, which can enable them to explore many new possibilities, even beyond their ICT related jobs. While policy measures are needed at an industry level in terms of women’s job security, flexibility, mentoring and participation in decision making, national laws and policies also need to negotiate the balance between economic gains and gendered and other social costs in global value chains.

ICT related employment also needs to be visualized in alternate ways. For instance, young women’s livelihoods can be promoted through IT-enabled e-commerce, with considerable gains for them through institutional mediation and support. SEWA, a women’s trade union in West India, is an excellent example of such a mediating organisation of informal sector workers, offering an e-commerce platform with the necessary institutional support, to poor women. The success of SEWA in integrating ICTs comes from the embedding of the e-commerce strategy in a robust institutional system of women’s livelihoods and enterprise development¹¹. Some Latin American countries

in Anita Gurumurthy et al, *Gender in the Information Society: Emerging Issues*, Elsevier, UNDP-APDIP, 2006

⁷ Kalyani Menon Sen, “IT in India: Social Revolution or Approaching Implosion?” *Women In Action*, 1:2004. Isis International-Manila

⁸ Sophia Huyer, Nancy Hafkin, Heidi Erti and Heather Dryburgh, “Women in the Information Society”, in *Digital Divide to Digital Opportunities - Measuring Infostates for Development*, (ed.) George Sciadas, Orbicom 2005., page 180.

⁹ Xiang Biao, “Gender, Dowry and the Migration System of Indian Information Technology Professionals”, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2-3, 357-380 (2005)

¹⁰ Maindiratta, Y.A. and Maindiratta, R. “ICT for Development: Does culture play a role?”, 2004

http://www.i4donline.net/issue/may04/culture_play.htm

¹¹ Anita Gurumurthy, “Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Issues and Insights on ICT for Women’s Economic Empowerment”, United Nations Development Fund for Women and Confederation of Indian Industry, 2003

http://www.unifem.org.in/bridging_the_gender/Contents.pdf

have digital literacy initiatives that position the Internet as a means for citizen participation and expression of artistic and cultural creativity specially among youth. The underlying vision of such an approach to prepare youth for their future is in strong contrast to a more utilitarian approach of global capital that uses the labour of young people but does not necessarily contribute to their capacities and skills.

Myth 2. Universalising ICT access and bridging the gender gap in access requires smart business models

Deployment of telecentres as business enterprises has been a much touted ICT strategy, especially for rural connectivity and ICT access in many regions of the developing world. However, revenue models do not come so easily in the ICT context. The institutionalization of technology paradigms is a long and complex path for developing countries, whose trajectories of techno-social transformation are vastly different from those of the developed world. In Africa for instance, connectivity is still a huge challenge and so opportunities for networking, with a focus on innovation and entrepreneurship, are not as developed as in other regions¹². Experiences from India also indicate that poor, rural young women are able to run profitable IT enterprises only if they are backed by the state or local NGOs for sustained access to job-works, specialized skill training and innovations and market development in the local context¹³.

In rural or remote contexts, and for marginalised groups such as the urban poor, business models for ICT access often conflict with and undercut citizenship-based claims of communities to new ICTs. The pushing of business models – as donors have done through financing of ICTD and e-governance initiatives – has resulted in barriers to ICT access for the socially marginalised, including girls and women. Recent research in developed countries like Canada strongly argues in favour of public subsidies for reaching social development and related content and services to the public, for content development as well as technical access and networking, thus making a case for a public goods approach to ICTs in meeting social justice and equity goals¹⁴.

The idea and goal of using ICTs for girls' empowerment in its culturally contextual meanings requires that strategies can go beyond formulaic interpretations of ICTs. A UNESCO supported project in Latin America on ICTs and youth¹⁵ aiming to explore whether and how ICTs can be used to address

¹² Infodev, "Promoting innovation and entrepreneurship in Africa : Africa regional workshop: infoDev incubator initiative", Workshop Report, 2006

¹³ Anita Gurumurthy and Mridula Swamy, "Locating Gender in ICTD Projects – Five Case Studies from India", IT for Change, under publication

¹⁴ Vanda N. Rideout and Andrew J. Reddick, "Sustaining Community Access to Technology : Who should pay and why!", The Journal of Community Informatics, Vol 1, No 2, 2005

¹⁵ From Words to Action – ICTs, Youth and Gender Equity, A research project in Latin America directed by Gloria Bonder, FLASCSO, see http://www.crdi.ca/paix/ev-128011-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

social exclusion has found that young people look at access to technologies “as a door opened that will change their lives forever, as a necessary part of their own youth culture and as a means to participate in the construction of the ‘future’”. In the words of one of the study’s respondents - “Today, anyone without a good command of technology is an outcast; it is not about being a market outcast but a world outcast.” The aspirations and rights of girls vis-à-vis the emerging knowledge society have thus to be seen as criss-crossing the boundaries between the economic, social and political.

Responding to this need requires a public goods approach to tackle the structural barriers to girls’ and women’s access. In South Korea for instance, the government put in place a special education programme offering ICT training to a million housewives between 2001 and 2003 and launched another program to train 2 million more women¹⁶. Invariably, for the poorest women and girls, time constraints pose heavy challenges in picking up the skills that paradoxically can enhance their capabilities¹⁷. Appropriate policy vision for a futuristic knowledge ecology comprising not only the necessary software, content and networking infrastructure, but also the techno-social systems that can privilege girls’ participation in such an ecology is needed. Policies and programmes for gender and ICTs seem to be caught in monocultures of the imagination where ICTs in relation to livelihoods are seen only as connectivity businesses. In fact, new technologies seem to work best when embedded in existing livelihood activities¹⁸. Also, innovative models that promote the leadership of young girls through their roles as telecentre managers have been attempted. Here telecentres are nodes for public information access and girls become the community link to public institutions¹⁹. Lobbying for the use of Telecommunications Development Funds for financing public access models that are affordable, accessible and meaningful to young girls would be an important agenda for gender advocates²⁰.

Policies may also need to address larger political economy questions, like the nature of appropriate intellectual property regimes that favour development. This issue, framed under the right to access knowledge has been recognized by the WIPO as an important global development agenda. The knowledge economy needs creative rethinking that can strike the balance between

¹⁶ Lee, K , "ICT for Women: Opportunities and Challenges", 2003

http://www.globalknowledge.org/gkps_portal/view_file.cfm?field=1104

¹⁷ Johnson, K.S., "Strategic Thinking: Telecenters and the Gender Dimension: An Examination of How Engendered Telecenters are diffused in Africa", M.A. Thesis, Georgetown University, 2003 <http://cct.georgetown.edu/thesis/KelbyJohnson.pdf>

¹⁸ Tandon, N. "The Caribbean: ICT tools for women organic farmers - the Knowing & Growing Network", 2004,

<http://ictupdate.cta.int/index.php/article/articleview/367/1/69>

¹⁹ The Mahiti Manthana project in southern India attempts to create a new information culture in the community wherein poor, dalit women’s collectives run telecentres. They employ girls from the community who become a critical link between the village and public institutions. The girls also create and maintain information databases at the telecentre about the village, which is used for local planning.

²⁰ Sonia Jorge, "Telecentres for Universal Access: Engendered Policy Options", Women in Action, No.2, ISIS International. 2002

imperatives for inclusion of the marginalized and necessary regulation for promoting innovation. In fact, intellectual property issues epitomize the battles between democratizing and centralizing tendencies of ICTs, the free software movement being a striking exemplar of this contestation. Corporatised controls on knowledge neutralize the public commons that promote the appropriation of the information society potential. For girls from disadvantaged contexts, breaking out of their marginality requires participation in the vibrant and rich knowledge platforms made available through new ICTs, which requires societies to carefully think through gendered cultural barriers to knowledge processes as also girls' safety and security online. These socially critical functions are not likely to be embraced readily by markets, and need to be concerns for public policy in interpreting universal access.

Myth 3. For socially marginalized women, traditional technologies like radio work best; and of all new technologies, mobiles are easily the most widely accessed and hence better than the Internet for the marginalised to participate in the information society.

There is a tendency to celebrate the appropriateness of radio and video while talking about marginalised social groups and their lack of access to new technologies. This celebratory approach to traditional technologies mistakenly views technology paradigms in terms of user-end devices instead of the underlying technology platforms, which is the more basic and crucial distinction. In doing so, it fails to see the phenomenon of the new ICTs in an appropriately futuristic and human development oriented frame. It is indisputable that VoIP²¹, telephony and digitally enabled community radio and video are much cheaper and user-friendly because of digital technology platforms, and it is indeed the Internet paradigm that has revolutionized information and communication systems underscoring a new society and economy. Obscurantist assertions about the superiority of 'traditional technologies' undermine the role of new technologies in democratizing information access and creating the conditions for the marginalized to participate as knowledge producers in this emerging society and economy.

While existing barriers to access are a reality, new institutional frameworks are needed to make technology paradigms and platforms that are shaped as much by policies as by market forces. The high costs of new ICTs and lack of resources become a justification for many governments in developing countries not to plan for an inclusive ICT ecology based on a public goods model. This leads to a paradox where markets become the sole harbingers of the information society for the excluded, and mobile telephony - market penetration of which is rapidly increasing - becomes the symbol of their membership in the new economy. This is especially true for young people. In the specious argument that mobiles are easily available and hence better than the Internet, telephony, which is primarily voice and text based is erroneously equated with Internet based techno-social systems that are much more powerful in reconstructing social realities. In fact a study in four southern African countries found that women were losing out in expanding

²¹ Voice over Internet Protocol

their business networks by relying on cell phones rather than on the Internet that could broaden their contacts²². Internet-based systems are investment heavy, but that would be true for core public infrastructure – whether of the ‘physical’ variety – roads, electricity etc, or of the ‘social’ kind – health, education, literacy or employment training, all of which can take years to achieve meaningful results and may need to be ongoing. Interestingly, new ICTs are a complex of both physical and social infrastructure and services, which is of such transformatory potential across social sectors that a public goods model for them should be more or less self evident. Internet-based hybrid offline-online models can also lend a basis for new social cohesion for girls at the community level that individual gizmos like mobile phones cannot.

Even though Internet access through mobiles makes much more than just ‘voice’ based functionalities possible, unlike on the Internet where content and services are independent of the network provider, these are locked-in to network providers in the case of mobiles, and consequently subject to highly non-competitive, arbitrary commercial arrangements. Today, the Internet through its ‘openness’ allows users to also be creators, and this public interest character of the Internet is vital for building equitable societies. Smaller, portable, hand-held devices are indeed very attractive especially for girls and women who have greater constraints to access public Internet facilities, but markets cannot be expected to support innovations for the development and empowerment cause.

Especially for young women and girls, ICT diffusion or connectivity per se is no guarantee for inclusion. Inclusion in the information society requires an open architecture where the technology network allows girls to participate as citizen-contributors rather than user-consumers. A sensitive and aware policy intervention is needed to nurture the potential of the Internet and make it relevant for girls and their empowerment needs. Statistics indicate that gender gaps become progressively larger with the sophistication of ICTs even in a country like Taiwan with high Internet penetration or in European countries like Italy²³. It is quite likely that in the rapidly transmutating technological scenario, girls will lag behind in access to new techno-social horizons of the Internet paradigm and their relatively easier access to ‘traditional’ technologies will lead to simplistic and reductionist arguments about the greater appropriateness of telephony or traditional media for them unless the gender gap is recognized as needing to be plugged more than just by market based, bottom-of-the-pyramid models of ICT diffusion.

Why a Citizenship and Rights Framework is Important

²² Sophia Huyer, Nancy Hafkin, Heidi Erti and Heather Dryburgh : “Women in the Information Society”, in Digital Divide to Digital Opportunities – Measuring Infostates for Development, (ed.) George Sciadras, Orbicom 2005., page 170.

²³ Sophia Huyer, Nancy Hafkin, Heidi Erti and Heather Dryburgh : “Women in the Information Society”, in Digital Divide to Digital Opportunities – Measuring Infostates for Development, (ed.) George Sciadras, Orbicom 2005., page 141.

A citizenship and rights approach to ICTs provides the basis for addressing issues regarding the empowerment of girls in the information society. Like education, basic access to ICTs represents a set of basic ‘capabilities’, and would qualify as a basic right as per Amartya Sen’s capability framework. Policy processes must explore what is recognised as a ‘virtuous circle’ linking information, knowledge, work organization and development, and the regulatory framework deemed necessary to translate that virtuosity into action.²⁴ Importantly, the economic empowerment of girls is intrinsically linked to their social empowerment, and here ICT access can provide both the training ground for, as well as the means to claim, their citizenship by opening up new associations, shared learning, collective action and also enabling access to public authorities and information.

A citizenship and rights framework to ICTs is the basis of an ‘equalising’ opportunity structure for women and girls in moving towards greater gender equality. Relying on a predominantly market model, in areas of ‘development’ and ‘empowerment’ as is the present dominant approach in global and national policies, will only further accentuate inequalities, through a vastly lopsided ‘opportunity structure’ that further benefit the already advantaged. Policy processes need to orchestrate the balance between social and economic considerations envisioning the place and role of market mechanisms and ushering in the institutional change for capitalizing on the potential for structural change in the new technological paradigm. One question in this process would be – “is it possible to devise bottom-up but market-based strategies that, instead of embedding themselves in the global business sector, embed themselves in the development sector?”²⁵ Can we envisage women owned telephony and ICT networks, build capacities of girls in using ICTs to further their livelihoods and for enterprise development; and nurture local economies? Another critical question would be how do we meet both social and economic needs and aspirations of girls and women, without a dichotomy between the two? Can we address girls’ empowerment as a significant social priority so that the transformative possibilities in the new technological paradigm are coopted for addressing discrimination against girls within communities, in organisational structures and in policy processes? How can policy choices be made to meet the goal of girls’ empowerment for their equal citizenship in the information society?

Table - A Citizenship and Rights based ICT Policy Model for Girls’ Empowerment

Goal	Policy approach	Policy Action wrt ICTs
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²⁴ Martha Roldan “From ‘Information to ‘Knowledge’ societies? Argentina in the context of engendered regional globalization”, in Cecilia Ng and Swasti Mitter (eds.). *Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World*. London: Sage Publications Pvt., Ltd., 2005.

²⁵ Seán Ó Siochrú, “BOPping” in the information society”, blog contributed to the IS Watch website, <http://is-watch.net/node/652> 14th May 2007.

Inclusion of women especially poor and young	A citizenship and rights framework	Girls' access to ICT infrastructure and digital literacy, Local ICT ecology that nurtures off-line communities of girls addressing information and communication needs through women-owned networks, publicly subsidised telecentres, integration of public service institutions. NGOs and schools to be part of this ecology.
Economic opportunities for women	Social development and welfare	Access to ICT skills and training, ICT infrastructure, and credit
Citizenship and political participation of girls and young women	Decentralisation with participatory and accountable governance	Creation of networks that connect off-line and online action, ICT-based skill building for empowering community roles for girls, NGO and CBO involvement in access to and monitoring of public information.
Cultural / Technological Creation	Diversity and Inclusion	Girls' access to ICT training, creation of networks of girls and young women, blending off-line and online community cultural action