An Empowerment Approach to Gender Equality in the Information Society — Perspectives from East Asia

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By Angela M. Kuga Thas

Introduction

Socio-economic and political power in the global society today is increasingly defined by control over, access to and use of information. In such a society, "information" (and products and services related to it) has become a significant tradeable and very profitable good, tipping the scales even further against and negatively impacting the traditionally important comparative economic advantage of countries which own natural and agricultural resources.[2] According to Govindan Parayil from the National University of Singapore, although the increasing returns from informational or digital capitalism is not an anomaly, they have created an instability marked by the most unequal distributions of income and wealth in human history.[3] Just as one can be enriched financially or otherwise when one has access to, control and ownership over material resources, one can also be enriched by having "the right information at the right time and at the right place". Likewise, one can be impoverished without access to, control and ownership over these resources. But because of the "increasing profitability" of informational capitalism, this impact, positive or negative, of enrichment or impoverishment, is exponential[4] and these have serious implications for the "utopic" information society in terms of communication rights[5] and the freedom of information, which in turn impact the ease and extent of knowledge-sharing.[6] In the "utopic" information society, information and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) are ideally global public goods[7] to be developed and governed in the public interest.[8] This vision is shared by a number of civil society organisations which have actively

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1 Includes countries in the Southeast Asian and Mekong region.

2 Magaly Peres Pazello (2005) refers to the work of Manuel Castells, "The Rise of the Network Society" as she expounds on the effects of the emergence of the new technological paradigm which is more flexible and powerful, stating that the ICTs have turned information into an output of a productive process, which in turn can bring about institutional transformations, resulting in the intensification of unequal development beyond the boundaries of the North-South division.

3 Key points from a paper exploring whether ICTs could be India's growth engine, which was presented at the Indo-US workshop organised by the department of management studies of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. See article by Subir Roy (2003) at http://www.rediff.com/money/2003/mar/12guest.htm.

4 Progress of the World's Women (UNIFEM, 2000) reports that income inequalities between both countries and individuals have been accelerating since the early 1970s.

5 There are a growing number of articles on communication rights, such as "The Internet and the Right to Communicate". Most of these articles are located on the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) website, http://www.wacc.org.uk/.

6 This is not to say that ICT heralded the way to knowledge-sharing. Throughout history, knowledge is empowering, and it has been passed on from one generation to another through written texts, folk lore, word-of-mouth, religions and customs. However, within these traditional knowledge systems, knowledge remained preserved geographically and hierarchically. ICTs break down the socially, politically, economically and geographically constructed barriers to knowledge-sharing in an unprecedented manner. Hence, in the information society, knowledge should be able to perpetuate and enjoy a continuous value-addition and customisation.

7 A public good has two critical properties, non-rivalrous consumption—the consumption of one individual does not detract from that of another—and non-excludability—it is difficult if not impossible to exclude an individual from enjoying the good.

8 This position was first outlined in "Financing the Information Society in the South: A Global Public Goods Perspective" by Pablo Accuosto and Nicky Johnson of ITeM in June 2004 (Association for Progressive Communications, 2006: p.1).

advocated during the two-phase World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)[9], among other issues, the right of access to knowledge and free exchange of ideas and cultural assets.[10] However, the information society is propagated against a backdrop where the status quo global systemic powers determine what kind of information society the world will get and "should" embrace. In this dominant paradigm, instead of material production, it is the actual capacity and speed in harnessing the potential of information and the expansibility and proliferation of knowledge—as we consume information, we generate knowledge—that are becoming critical differentiating factors which separate the developing from the developed. This has resulted in the rejection of problematic concepts like "digital divide", "information society", "knowledge economy" and "multi-stakeholderism"[11] by some among civil society.[12] This is because the disparities in access to ICTs are a symptom of broader social and economic divides between and within countries, rather than a specific "digital divide" which can easily be demarcated. The term "knowledge economy" implies that information and knowledge are commodities to be traded, protected and marketed to those with the capacity to buy them, rather than be made accessible to all. "Multi-stakeholderism" in an ideal world would not be problematic, however, in the real world as it exists today, glosses over the important goal of making processes more inclusive and transparent, which would then allow and consider a diversity of voices and perspectives. Control over "who harnesses what information to benefit from certain knowledge" and "to what extent that knowledge is further shared and with whom" has also become a politically volatile issue between the state and its citizens since the 11th September 2001 attacks.[13] Hence, the "information societies" in the various sub-regions are not free from the existing and very gendered global framework of governance, ownership and control over resources—particularly in the areas of technology, finance and trade, and now, information.[14] As countries start to lose their traditional and historical economic comparative advantage in international trade, they are quick to turn to the potentials of information and knowledge as tradeable goods. However, because developing countries own little protected information, the enforcement of Intellectual

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9 The WSIS, compared to other UN Conferences represents the first time a Summit of this kind that took place through a two-stage process in two different countries—Switzerland and Tunisia. WSIS was formally created as a result of Resolution 73/2001 submitted at the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), subsequently ratified by the UN General Assembly, where preliminary negotiations on topics, approaches and objectives centred mainly on the Internet structure. The ITU which was responsible for proposing and carrying out the Summit, has become an organisation where large telecom companies play a key role. The ITU includes large multinationals (sector members) in addition to governments (state members) (Pazello, 2005: p.2).

10 UNESCO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, is one such organisation. Originally created in 1945 to facilitate the free exchange of ideas, promote debate on information and communication and their links and crucial significance for countries in the South, UNESCO played a very active role throughout the two-phase process of the WSIS. UNESCO managed the Intersessional stage in order to guarantee that a baseline document was put forward following up on the negotiations during the two Meetings of the Preparatory Committee, PrepCom 2 and PrepCom3 (Pazello, 2005: p.4).

11 The WSIS was continuously claimed as the first Summit in which all three sectors—government, private sector and civil society—were actually involved in the negotiation processes. However, Pazello (2005) contests this citing the UN Conference on Financing for Development which was held in 2002 and which resulted in the development of the Monterrey consensus.

12 This includes groups who advocate for communication rights.

13 Internet governance and issues of security are still unresolved topics from Phase 1 of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). However, there is a growing consensus among nations of the importance of signing the Council of Europe's Cybercrime Treaty which is an international agreement created for the ostensible purpose of helping police cooperate on crimes that take place on the Internet. Unfortunately, the treaty, which was drafted with very little public input, requires signatory nations to cooperate with foreign dictatorships and give invasive new surveillance powers to law enforcement. It also lacks protections for privacy or other civil liberties, and applies far more broadly than to just the Internet. What is curiously interesting is that the final draft of the Treaty was ready by 25th May 2001, long before the September 11th attacks, and was opened for signatures on 23rd November 2001. For more information, see http://www.treatywatch.org/.

14 This is on the assumption that we understand that "trade" does not always take place without circumstances of exploitation (e.g. bonded slavery, underpaid employment, insecure conditions of employment) and exchanges of favours (in-kind, of "you do something for me, I do something for you" and bartering of labour (sometimes under conditions of violence) in exchange for goods and opportunities.

Property Rights (IPR) has become a tacit "taxation" of the developing countries, who have to "import" information in order to develop their economy and society further.[15] IPR has effectively infiltrated the domain of food and medicine, threatening the sustainability of indigenous knowledge and biodiversity.[16] Women as traditional bearers of local and indigenous knowledge find themselves further obscured from today's "wired" information, communication and knowledge systems. Access to ICTs is spoken of in terms that are devoid from the socially and culturally constructed gender roles and relationships, which often limit the capacity of women and men to participate on equal terms in the information society. It was within the negotiation arena of the WSIS, particularly phase 1 in Geneva in 2003[17], which could have addressed these substantial issues. However IPRs, rules and barriers imposed by trade agreements, external debt and interconnection costs, were completely left out.

Information Society, Tell Me Thy Name[18]

In East Asia, it is difficult to speak about "the" information society in general terms. In an ideal world, the term inherently implies an "informed" society. This means that information must be made accessible in a timely manner and be considered a public good so that everyone, rich or poor, can be kept equally informed on matters and issues that can affect and obstruct their overall well-being. This includes educating the public how to decide for themselves if a piece of information has sufficient credibility. However, in "the information society", being informed and keeping informed is not just dependent on access to ICTs—with its economic, social, cultural and political aspects—but also on accessibility of information, including issues of availability and transparency of that information. Therefore, issues of access to ICTs must include an analysis of power, including the politics of inclusion and exclusion that has strong gender dimensions. Who

15 Gerster and Zimmermann, 2003: p.4. Joseph E. Stiglitz discusses the concept of knowledge as a global public good in detail at: http://www.worldbank.org/knowledge/chiefecon/articles/undpk2/ and speaks of the need for global collective action in protecting this global public good for the equal benefit of all.

16 In addition to promoting and dealing with the liberalisation of telecommunications services and tariff-free trade in information technology products, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) addresses intellectual property rights (IPRs) and e-commerce issues. The General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the Agreement on Basic Telecommunications (ABT) have been used to pry open the global telecommunications market, while the Trade-Related Aspects of International Property Rights (TRIPS) agreements of the WTO, which IPRs, are not only precluding possibilities for developing countries to obtain affordable generic medications to treat HIV/AIDS, it is also precluding developing countries from benefiting from the "fruits of modern science" that has roots in local and indigenous knowledge that originates from these countries in the first place, most times knowledge held by local women. In the TRIPS agreement, intellectual property was extended from individual works to intellectual creation, making software copyrightable. With this new law, WTO is effectively precluding developing countries from the benefits of ICTs, affecting the public's access to knowledge in the public domain and to copyrighted works, limiting legitimate opportunities for cultural appropriations, stifling learning, creativity and innovation, and therefore, efficiently placing curbs on the democratisation of knowledge. The laws that regulate patents are national laws but the agreements such as TRIPS make sure that these laws are extended internationally. For a fuller discussion, see "Chapter 19: Intellectual Property" in Nicol, 2003: pp. 85–96.

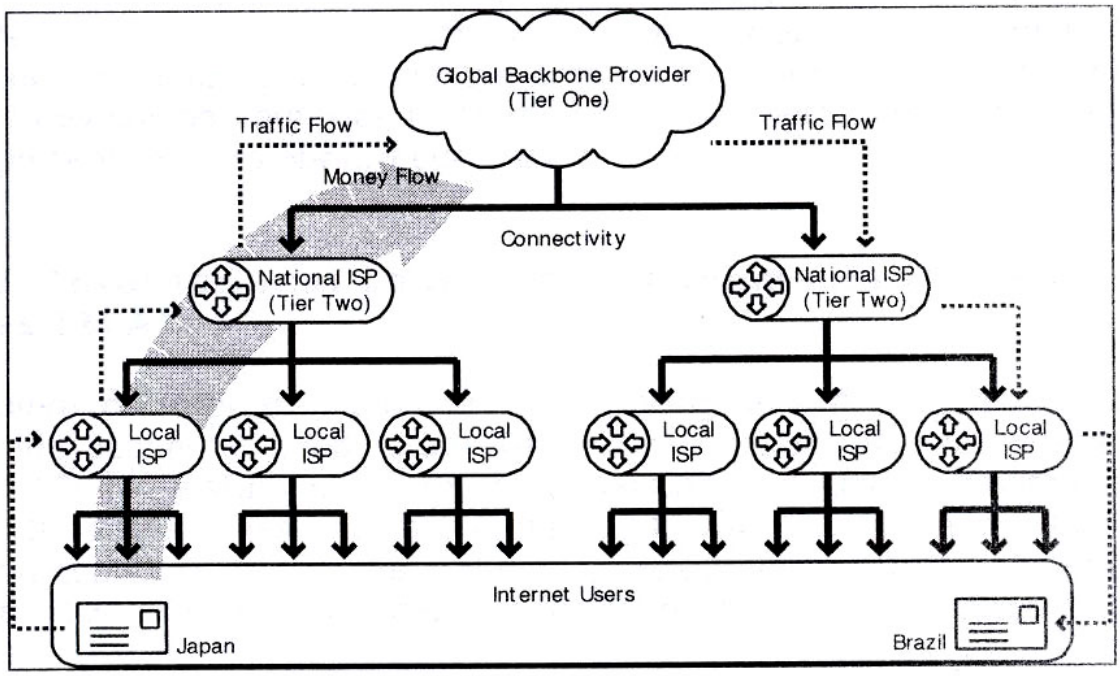
17 Phase 2 of WSIS witnessed the Tunisian government's clampdown on freedom of expression (including website filtering, intimidation of journalists and the sabotage of the Citizen's Summit on the Information Society, a WSIS side-event organised by a group of international organisations in partnership with Tunisian human rights and media freedom groups. This raised critical questions on the thoroughness of procedures in choosing the host country for UN summits, the protocols for host country agreements with UN agencies and the commitments required of the host country (Association for Progressive Communications, 2006: pp.7–8).

18 The term "thy" means "your". There is an inherent belief that name allows you control over that person. This is particularly highlighted in biblical and spiritual texts. Feminists recognise the importance of language and that men have historically been in positions to define the words that are used and thereby define the context of women's realities vis-à-vis that of men's. For further reading, see http://www.feminista.com/archives/v1n4/malefem.html.

wields power and how it is wielded, at local, national, as well as global levels, cannot be ignored in conceptualizing the contours of the emerging information society.[19]

Access to ICTs in East Asia corresponds very much with levels of human development indices and in-country telecommunications infrastructure. Telecommunication infrastructures differ quite significantly among countries in the region, with countries primarily in the Mekong region lagging far behind the rest. This does not mean to say that telecommunication infrastructure development is necessarily evenly distributed in the other countries. Unfortunately, the extent and level of infrastructure plays a significant role in determining whether costs are kept at a reasonable level, if not at the lowest levels possible. Hence, it is common to find scenarios where making telephone calls to one country is cheaper than someone in that country making the same call out.[20] In a similar strain, Internet connectivity is re-sold by top-level providers to lower-level providers, allowing those on top to financially benefit from those below at considerable high costs (see Figure 1: Traffic and Payment Flows across the Internet).

Figure 1: Traffic and Payment Flows across the Internet



Source:
Figure 2, Peake, Adam (2004: p.17)

As can be seen from Figure 1, the regulation of the Internet is also linked to its physical structure, which is under the proprietary and legal control of the United States, although since 1996, the American administration has attempted to reorganise the Internet infrastructure management system. The Internet is based upon a system of root servers which coordinate the information flow on the network, and thereby ensuring that all the information sitting on the Internet is available. There are also mirror servers which are updated daily and are replications of the root servers, which help alleviate the heavy traffic of data flow which in the past was solely

19 See Section on WSIS and Figure 3 for an idea of who actually wields decision-making power in the field of ICTs.

20 See reflections by Mr. Walter Fust, Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation in the preface" in Gerster, Richard and Zimmermann, Sonja. [March] 2003. "Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for Poverty Reduction". Discussion Paper. Berne: SDC.

hosted by root servers. However, original information is stored in the servers controlled by the United States.[21] In the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (WSIS Phase 2), governments endorsed the findings of the Task Force on Financial Mechanisms and made proposals for improvements in existing financial mechanisms, which included enhancing regional cooperation and creating multi-stakeholder partnerships, especially for building regional backbone infrastructure and providing affordable access to ICTs by reducing international Internet costs charged by backbone providers[22], among others.[23]

In addition to the above, language is a significant issue constraining access, since over 85% of online content is in English.[24] Except for Singapore and the Philippines, and to some extent Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, the other East Asian countries do not use English predominantly. Although Thailand has quite a bit of online content in Thai, the fact that the society does not use English that widely renders them quite segregated from the global exchange of communication and information. Countries which have complicated language scripts like Cambodia for example, face an uphill task of ensuring that software applications in business and offices for day-to-day use like word processing, spreadsheets and database management, are developed and made widely accessible to their local citizens.

In the meantime, as populations and segments of society become increasingly isolated from global communication and information tools and content, there is a definite increase in urgency in countries like the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand to more actively engage in e-business. Attention, however, has been paid much more to issues of technology and application of security standards without suitably designed supporting policies and substantive programmes which would encourage women's active participation, ownership and decision-making in such processes.[25]

Accessibility of information per se, on the other hand, unlike access to ICTs, does not directly correlate with a country's human development index. Access to information is a very political issue, and it is problematic to go by the simple assumption that all countries in the sub-region equally uphold the values and principles of human rights, gender equality and justice. The political systems within the region are not necessarily democratic, transparent or accountable. Some countries are known to have purchased filtering systems to block access to information available on the Internet. Only a nominal few have made efforts towards being transparent and accountable in the provision and accessibility of information—specifically Japan, Thailand and Hong Kong SAR (China). These countries have some form of freedom of information laws.[26] In Japan, this is known as the Information Disclosure Law (2001), while in Thailand, this is known as the Official Information Act of 1997.[27] Hong Kong SAR (China) has a Code on Access to

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21 Pazello, 2005. pp.7–8.

22 However, the Internet Backbone Service Providers argue that they do not charge developing country ISPs anymore than they do their other customers. They cite poor telecommunications infrastructure at the regional and national levels, fewer peering points than elsewhere, and a lack of genuine competition in most developing countries, as reasons for the higher international costs. For a fuller discussion of the issues, see "Chapter 4: Market Structure Monopolies and Multinationals" in Nicol, Chris (ed). 2003. ICT Policy: A Beginner's Handbook. Johannesburg: Association for Progressive Communications. pp.30–33.

23 For further reading, see Association for Progressive Communications, 2006: p.6.

24 Yet fewer than one in ten people worldwide speak the language (Nath, 2000).

25 For a more extensive discussion, please refer to the gender assessment by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific entitled "Gender Assessment of Current E-business Policies and Strategies in Asia: Lessons from Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Thailand" (forthcoming, 2006).

26 See http://foi.missouri.edu/internationalfoi/ for more information.

27 Thailand's Official Information Act of 1997 was to guarantee government transparency, make public agencies clearly accountable, enable the people's participation in the formulation and implementation of government policy, and provide access to the information to do so. The law's scope is

Information.[28] Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia are just beginning to campaign and lobby for Malaysia's Freedom of Information Act.[29] Seen in the above contexts and together with the different stages of e-readiness[30] of these countries, the diversities and complexities of East Asia become even more difficult to speak about in general terms, and the distinct experiences of each country do take on greater validity from a gender perspective.

Scope of Study

Adopting an empowerment framework, this study attempts to give a brief overview of the ICT context in East Asia by reviewing both available statistical data and selected case studies to further illustrate how the empowerment approach is indeed critical for achieving gender equality. Hence, the study is not exhaustive since secondary data is usually not available for countries that are less e-ready and not all countries in East Asia collect and disaggregate data by sex. Even if they do, data collection may not be consistent or regular.[31] The study gives special focus to the use of ICTs and its implications for women in the areas of work and governance. Case studies are provided to help further illustrate the issues in analyzing the dynamics of gender inequality and women's agency and how these interact at various institutional[32] levels—household, community, state and market[33]—to empower or to (intentionally or unintentionally) disempower women. The case studies particularly highlight issues of identity, and control and ownership. Issues of collective action and institutional transformation are also touched upon, albeit briefly. The case

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linked to the 1997 Constitution. Article 58 of the Constitution establishes a "right to know." A right to privacy is also established, in Article 34. The Official Information Act covers these two important rights by guaranteeing every citizen access to public information while protecting his or her privacy. The Official Information Act thus obliges the government to act in accordance with the desires of the citizens. For more information, see http://www.foi-asia.org/Thailand/Confreport_Thai.html.

28 For the Code on Access to Information, visit http://www.info.gov.hk/access/code.htm.

29 For more information on these efforts to petition for Malaysia's Freedom of Information Act, please visit SUARAM's website: http://www.suaram.net and Centre for Independent Journalism Malaysia's website: http://www.cijmalaysia.org/, the latter produced under the Creative Commons License.

30 There is no one definition and measurement of e-readiness. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, e-readiness is the extent to which a country's business environment is conducive to Internet-based commercial opportunities and its preparedness for e-business. The definition of e-readiness is therefore dependent on the objectives of the study undertaken, and as a result, various assessments have defined e-readiness in different ways. One of the more appropriate and broader definitions of e-readiness includes issues of governance and accountability. The e-readiness definition with respect to States, based on Sen's Capability Approach and Brown's Information Based Approach, is as follows: "It is the preparedness of states to provide governance equitably and cost effectively and the capability reflected in the degree of integration the deprived segments of society attain after application of ICT as an e-governance tool. Apart from this, the ability of the state to provide business, the capacity to participate in the provincial level digital economy and further networking with the national level digital economy." (See www.mit.gov.in/ereadiness/2003/EX_SUMM_I-VI.PDF).

31 Michael Minges of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), in his paper on "Gender and ICT Statistics" (26 November 2002) for the 3rd World Telecommunications/ICT Indicators Meeting, acknowledges that, "The availability of ICT statistics showing a breakdown by gender at the country level is limited, indeed almost non-existent". Having identified the reasons behind this problem, the ITU begun to ask for a more straightforward and easily obtainable statistic: the number of female telecommunications employees in a country. The results illustrated not only the difficulty of obtaining a simple statistic even for developed countries such as France, Germany, Japan and the United States, but also showed the wide variation in the data from an analytical perspective. For more information, see http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/WICT02/doc/pdf/Doc07_E.pdf.

32 The term "institution" takes on the meaning meant by Kabeer (1996), that is, "as the rules for achieving social or economic ends". These are the rules that specify how resources are allocated and how tasks, responsibilities and values are assigned. In short, these rules determine who gets what, who does what and who decides. Although institutions vary within and across cultures and are constantly evolving and changing, they are embedded in relational hierarchies of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, etc. that define identities and distribute power both symbolically and materially.

33 As identified by Geoff Wood (among other analysts, including North and Kabeer).

studies do illustrate how these issues overlap from one institutional level to another reflecting how the perpetuation of gender inequality through women's disempowerment is quite systemic. The study also attempts to link and contextualise the local within the global and gendered context of the information society, and concludes with some broad policy recommendations.

Gender Equality in East Asia

For most of the existing efforts in gender mainstreaming around the world, gender equality is limited to the misconception of equal numbers of women and men benefiting from a project or programme. This perspective is also the dominant one in East Asia. If at all there are attempts to address gender inequality, women are categorised as a marginalised group and in order to correct the equilibrium, it is arranged that women as beneficiaries, at least in numbers, must at least equal the number of male beneficiaries. This is too simplistic an approach as it does not critically look at processes of socialization and the resulting power imbalances and how these gender inequalities have manifested through history and in the present—in disempowerment and impoverishment. It does not take into account distribution of resources and opportunities. Moving towards gender equality demands an honest examination of how masculinity and femininity become and remain borders and restrictions on people's being and well-being. Addressing gender inequality is the most difficult, because it demands each individual to look at himself or herself critically and question the values and beliefs he/she has been imbibed with and continues to carry for years. Gender, after all, is a primary field within or by means of which power is articulated.[34] Power is identified with equity and equality for women and men in access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of resources and benefits. Gender inequality is implicated at these different levels and must be addressed if equality between men and women is to be achieved. Access to resources refers to both *the right* and *the means* to obtain services, products or commodities. Gender gaps in access to resources and services are a major obstacle to women's development. The process of empowerment includes mobilising women to eliminate these gaps. This is why if gender equality is at all to be achieved, policies, programmes and legislation must be designed from a gender perspective with women's empowerment as the pivotal core. Such policies, programmes and legislation though may only prove to be successful if pushed from within the institutional framework of the State, guided by human rights principles.[35] If we understand the unbalanced power dynamics that arise from gender inequality in its full context, its implications and the consequence of those implications, it becomes clearer that gender equality cannot be achieved if we do not centre our efforts on empowering women.

> Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are full involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries.
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> - UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, March 8, 2003[36]

34 Scott, 1991, cited in Rao and Kelleher, 2002.

35 A number of people may not agree with this view especially if the State has historically and continuously failed to effectively deliver public goods and services to the people. Privatisation of the healthcare sector in Latin America, for example, has been welcomed by women health activists as expressed during the Beijing +5 review process in New York, in the year 2000. However, recently, a number are beginning to realize that privatisation has a very limiting effect in terms of access for the poor.

36 UNIFEM (2002), Progress of the World's Women 2002, Volume 2.

Asia, as a whole, is far behind in achieving gender equality. This becomes obvious when we peruse the World Economic Forum's report on "Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap" (2005)[37] and find that none of the Asian countries surveyed out of the 58 came even close to the first 20.

> Even in light of heightened international awareness of gender issues, it is a disturbing reality that no country has yet managed to eliminate the gender gap. Those that have succeeded best in narrowing the gap are the Nordic countries…Brazil (51), Mexico (52), India (53), Korea (54), Jordan (55), Pakistan (56), Turkey (57) and Egypt (58) occupy the lowest ranks.
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> - Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005, World Economic Forum (WEF)

Of the 58 countries studied by the WEF, six were East Asian countries. These were China (33), Japan (38), Malaysia (40), Thailand (44), Indonesia (46) and Korea (54), with overall scores between 3.18 (Korea) and 4.01 (China), with 7 representing maximum gender equality.[38] Of these, according to the World Bank's national income-level classifications, Japan is a high-income country, Malaysia and Korea are upper middle-income countries, Thailand is a lower middle-income country, while both Indonesia and China are low-income countries. Table 1 shows how these countries fare in relation to the five critical areas of economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being, as determined and assessed by WEF for the study.

Table 1: The Gender Gap in Selected East Asian Countries

Country	Overall Rank	Overall Score	Economic Participation	Economic Opportunity	Political Empowerment	Educational Attainment	Health and Well-being
China	33	4.01	9	23	40	46	36
Japan	38	3.75	33	52	54	26	3
Malaysia	40	3.7	40	36	51	32	15
Thailand	44	3.61	1	39	49	54	32
Indonesia	46	3.50	29	24	46	53	29
Korea	54	3.18	34	55	56	48	27

Source:
Lopez-Claros and Zahidi. 2005. *Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap.* Geneva: World Economic Forum. p.9.

The WEF report shows that overall, Asia as a region, ranked second lowest in achieving gender equality after the Middle East and Africa, and the lowest in the specific critical areas of political empowerment and educational attainment.[39] These are the two key areas that have the potential to contribute substantively in addressing women's strategic gender needs. It is not surprising to see Asia ranking a little higher in women's economic participation as women are well-recognised as a nation's human resource (though most often at a lower level of skills and largely at a lower

37 Written by Augusto Lopez-Claros and Saadia Zahidi, the study is a first attempt by the World Economic Forum to assess the current size of the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in 58 countries have achieved equality with men in five critical areas: economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. These five important dimensions of female empowerment and opportunity were chosen based on the findings of UNIFEM concerning global patterns of inequality between men and women.

38 See Table on "The Gender Gap Rankings", Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005: p.9.

39 Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005: pp.12–13.

level of income compared to men) but lower in women's economic opportunity, which is not surprising since this measures the quality of women's economic involvement beyond their mere presence as workers.[40] This indicates that gender equality is not seen as a strategic development priority, and if gender equality is pursued, it is usually pursued for practical purposes of contributing towards national productivity. Even when Asia is the third highest in rank for health and well-being (as per the WEF report), whether healthcare services are provided from a women's rights-based perspective is suspect. While some may consider that this WEF study is not very comprehensive in showing the true picture of gender equality for Asia[41], there are other trends that confirm the glum picture painted by the WEF report—that achieving gender equality is still a long way off.[42] These are primarily: 1) the prevalence and pervasiveness of violence against women; 2) the increasing rate of HIV infection among women[43]; and 3) the feminisation of poverty[44] (see Tables 2 and 3 for snapshots of gender gaps. Table 3 in particular shows how the countries in East Asia rank vis-à-vis their respective human development index, gender-related development index and gender empowerment measure).

40 Even in these, Asia ranks third and second from the bottom respectively.

41 In measuring women's health and well-being, it was good that the adolescent fertility rate was used as an indicator of health risks among women aged 15 to 19 years, and as an indicator of the lack of other choices available to young women. However, the other indicators used were more traditional i.e. on percentage of births attended by skilled health staff, and maternal and infant mortality ratios. Women's health and well-being is surely more than just her fertility. Data which directly measured ownership and control over women's bodies and sexuality were not included. For example, access to (safe) abortion was not included when it tabulated its rankings. Other statements point to the report's emphasis on the inclusion of women for national economic prudence rather than on the empowerment of women. For example, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland were described as countries that provided a "workable model" for the rest of the world to follow, in understanding the economic incentive behind empowering women, yet domestic violence persists in Sweden: "Countries that do not fully capitalise on one-half of their human resources are clearly undermining their competitive potential". See comment by WEF chief economist, Augusto Lopez-Claros, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4550789.stm.

42 The UNDP Human Development Report 1997 was one of the first reports that unabashedly confirmed that "no society treats its women as well as its men".

43 Available data on the UNAIDS website shows that HIV infection among women is increasing, with estimates sometimes tripling (for more information, visit http://www.unaids.org/). According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2005, in 2003, 18 countries with a combined population of 460 million people registered lower scores on the human development index (HDI) than in 1990—an unprecedented reversal. In the midst of an increasingly prosperous global economy, 10.7 million children every year do not live to see their fifth birthday (p.3). Current global spending on HIV/AIDS, a disease that claims three million lives a year, represents three day's worth of global military spending.

44 This should not be equated to number of women-headed households alone. Here, issues are related more to access, control and allocation of opportunities and resources.

Table 2: Some Sex-Disaggregated Data towards Measuring Gender (In) Equality

Country	GNP Per Capita (US$)	Female Population (% of Total)	Life Expectancy at Birth (years) M : F	Adult Illiteracy Rate (% of people aged 15+) M : F	Female Labour Force Participation (% of total labour force)	Female Education Access and Attainment Net primary school enrolment rate : Progression to grade 5	Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births)	HIV Prevalence Rate (% of people aged 15–24) M : F	Female Internet Users as % of Total Internet Users, 2002 [a]
High Income									
Brunei Darussalam	n/a	47.3	74 : 79	5.4 : 11.9	n/a	n/a : 93	37	n/a	n/a
Hong Kong SAR (China)	26,830	50.8	77 : 82	3.1 : 10.8	37	n/a	n/a	0.1 : 0	49
Japan	35,400	51.1	78 : 85	n/a	41	100 : n/a	10	0 : 0	41
Singapore	22,780	48.7	76 : 80	3.8 : 11.7	39	n/a	30	0.2 : 0.2	47
Upper Middle Income									
Republic of Korea	9,010	49.6	70 : 77	0.9 : 3.6	41	99 : 100	20	0 : 0	45
Malaysia	3,390	49.4	70 : 75	8.6 : 16.6	38	97 : 96	41	0.6 : 0.1	36
Lower Middle Income									
Dem. Rep. Korea	n/a	49.8	60 : 63	n/a	43	n/a	67	n/a	n/a
Philippines	1,030	49.6	67 : 71	4.9 : 5.2	38	93 : 83	200	0 : 0.1	41
Thailand	2,010	50.8	67 : 71	2.9 : 6.1	46	85 : 96	44	1.2 : 2.3	49
Low Income									
Cambodia	290	51.3	52 : 55	19.8 : 42.8	52	81 : 70	450	2.4 : 3.5	n/a
China	840	48.4	69 : 72	7.9 : 22.1	45	93 : n/a	56	0.1 : 0	39
Indonesia	570	50.1	64 : 68	8.2 : 18.1	41	91 : 92	230	0 : 0	35
Lao PDR	290	50.1	53 : 55	23.8 : 46.6	n/a	78 : 63	650	0 : 0.1	n/a
Mongolia	390	50.4	64 : 67	1.4 : 1.7	47	92 : n/a	110	n/a	n/a
Myanmar	n/a	50.3	54 : 99	11.1 : 19.5	n/a	83 : 61	360	1 : 1.7	n/a
Timor-Leste	420	n/a	n/a	n/a	45	n/a	660	n/a	n/a
Vietnam	380	50.6	67:72	5.5 : 9.3	49	92 : 88	130	0.3 : 0.1	n/a

Notes:

i. [a] http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/f_inet.html

ii. n/a = not available
iii. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2005, maternal mortality ratios are notoriously difficult to measure accurately. Nationally reported data on maternal deaths often suffer from underreporting and misclassification. The UNDP Human Development Report 2005 uses international estimates produced by the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) which have been produced separately for 1990, 1995 and 2000. Because of large ranges of uncertainty and lack of comparability due to changes in methodology, these estimates can be used only to indicate the scope of the problem and offer little insight about the trends over time.

Sources:
i. Figures used from the World Bank's Gender Statistics Database are for the year 2000, unless otherwise indicated. Taiwan (China) was not listed in the World Bank's Gender Statistics database.
ii. According to the ITU ICT statistics, female Internet users in Taiwan is 44% of total Internet users in 2002.
iii. http://genderstats.worldbank.org/home.asp for all other data.

Table 3: GDI, HDI and GEM Ranks of East Asian Countries

Country	HDI rank	GDI rank	GEM rank
High-Income			
Brunei Darrussalam	33	31 (2001 data)	n/a
Hong Kong SAR (China)	22	22	n/a
Japan	11	*14*	43
Singapore	25	28 (2001 data)	22
Upper Middle-Income			
Republic of Korea	28	27	59
Malaysia	61	50	*51*
Lower Middle-Income			
Dem. Rep. Korea	n/a	n/a	n/a
Philippines	84	63	*46*
Thailand	73	57	*63*
Low-Income			
Cambodia	130	99	*73*
China	85	64	n/a
Indonesia	110	87	n/a
Lao PDR	133	102	n/a
Mongolia	114	90	n/a
Myanmar	129	n/a	n/a
Timor-Leste	140	n/a	n/a
Vietnam	108	83	n/a

Notes:
i. n/a = not available
ii. Figures in italics indicate deterioration in rank that country held from the year 2001.

Sources:
i. HDI data is 2003 data. Sourced from UNDP, Human Development Report 2005. Available online at: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/.
ii. GDI data is 2003 data, unless otherwise stated. Sourced from UNDP, Human Development Report 2005. Available online at: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/. 2001 data sourced from UNDP, Human Development Report 2003, available online at: http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic_196_1_1.html.
iii. GEM data is 2003 data, unless otherwise data. Source from UNDP, Human Development Report 2005. Available online at: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/. 2001 data sourced from UNDP, Human Development Report 2003, available online at: http://www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic_207_1_1.html.

According to Rao and Kelleher (2002), even when there is a political acknowledgement of the importance of addressing gender inequality, efforts get bogged down in technical questions and "bureaucratic mire". In Cambodia for example, putting a gender infrastructure in place—by mainstreaming a gender perspective and analysis within existing policies, programmes and laws (e.g. the Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan (GMAP) which was developed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs with UNDP facilitation, a strategy to engender sectoral plans. Currently 21 out of Cambodia's 26 Ministries and two Secretariats have set up gender mainstreaming action groups to develop plans in their sectors)[45]—is just beginning, as focus has been on developing policies, building capacity and capturing more resources from the traditional development perspective. In comparison, the Philippines which has a more established bureaucratic context was concentrating more on developing specialised expertise on, for example, gender and economic globalization and in addressing deep-seated cultural barriers to gender equality within bureaucratic structures. The value of women in the not-so-ideal information society, as in the past, continues to correlate very strongly with their economic value and their reproductive abilities.[46]

Unpacking Women's Empowerment in East Asia

At the core of the concept of empowerment is the idea of power. The possibility of empowerment depends on two things. First, that power can change, and that it is not inherent in positions or people. Second, that power can expand. For many who are in power, they feel that correcting power imbalances means "giving up" their power. This is not always so. In fact, there is considerable strengthening within any institution—household, community, state and market—when power expands and is distributed more widely. If we aim to empower women however, there is one prerequisite, as Elson (2003) in UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women, 2000, points out:

> "Choices for women, especially poor women, cannot be enlarged without a change in relations between women and men as well as in the ideologies and institutions that preserve and reproduce gender inequality. This does not mean reversing positions, so that men become subordinate and women dominant. Rather, it means negotiating new kinds of relationships that are based not on power over others but on a mutual development of creative human energy (power that is based on power within and power with). It also means negotiating new kinds of institutions, incorporating new norms and rules that support egalitarian and just relations between women and men".

Addressing gender equality therefore requires us to address power dynamics and power imbalances. Empowerment refers to enabling people towards self-determination. Empowerment can be and most often is a process that challenges some of our fundamental assumptions about the way things are and can be. For women, empowerment emphasises the importance of increasing their power and having control over resources, decisions and other issues that shape their lives. In the information society, this is not limited to just physical access to ICTs, but includes having full access to complete information and to be free to self-discern the quality and credibility of such information in making these decisions. This is when information becomes

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45 For more information, please visit http://www.un.org.kh/undp/?url=/undp/areas/gender.

46 Unfortunately, women are still not valued for their productivity at the household, and women's unpaid work remains significantly missing from quantification in national accounting. However, a recent move by the Malaysian government which was reported by the media on 8th August 2005, has encouraged husbands to contribute to their stay-at-home wives' employee provident fund. Contributions however are voluntary and there is no minimum stated.

knowledge, and enables the individual to form her or his own opinion, and to act and transform conditions that would help lead to a better quality of life.[47] While generally, knowledge is empowering, for women, knowledge alone without the ability and opportunity to test its validity, and apply it usefully, does not empower them.[48] Having said that though, access and control over some kinds of resources is able to bestow, if not some level of empowerment, at least some level of immediate respect to women who gain access to these resources—finance/credit[49] and ICTs.[50] Research has shown though that when women's self-help groups are established around these, especially ICTs, these new spaces alone can become quite empowering. This was the experience of some Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT) participants (see case study below). An evaluation of WENT noted that the skills-building was a plus, but what made the training a vibrant and conducive space for women was that they were among like-minded women, women who shared the same experiences and issues, and for the chance to share their own experiences and issues.

Case Study of the Women's Electronic Network Training (WENT)

WENT[51] began in 1999 as a project-based initiative jointly managed by the Asia Pacific regional members of the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) and the Asian-Pacific Women's Information Networking Centre (APWINC), Republic of Korea, on behalf of AWORC[52] until 2004. WENT began by training women on basic website development tools and other Internet-based group communications in 1999. WENT sought to promote greater networking among women's organisations in the region and to enhance their capabilities to use ICTs to advance their social and policy advocacy. The first WENT workshop trained 23 women from 11 countries to use email and Web-based services to promote and enhance their participation in the review process for the Beijing Platform for Action (popularly known as the Beijing Plus Five review). In response to various information and communication needs of women in Asia and the Pacific, WENT then diversified its training. Since 2000, WENT ran parallel instructional tracks on Web-based Information Management, local area networking, Using ICT for Advocacy, and database management. In 2004, instructional tracks focused on e-commerce, content development, and training for ICT trainers. From a workshop designed for women's organisations in the Asian region by women ICT practitioners, WENT has

47 Both women's and men's generation, adaptation and use of knowledge and technology are shaped by the economic, social, cultural, political and geographical contexts in which the two sexes live, but which each gender experiences in a different way (Appleton, 1993a; cited in Fernandez, Maria E. 1994. "Gender and Indigenous Knowledge", IK Monitor 2(3), available online at: http://www.nuffic.nl/ciran/ikdm/2-3/articles/fernandez.html.

48 Women, who are often visible in their own cultures and production systems, are becoming less and less visible as disconnected "bits" of local—indigenous—knowledge are made known to the outside world (Fernandez, 1994). Although, women and men not only can have a different knowledge of similar things; a different knowledge of different things; different ways of organising knowledge; and different ways of preserving and transferring knowledge; there is little or no reference to the differentiated role of men and women in the generation, transmission and use of knowledge. Hence, the mere sharing of knowledge cannot be assumed to have the same effect on men and women if it cannot be applied further.

49 There are a number of replications in East Asia of the Grameen Bank's micro credit system, e.g. Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Vietnam.

50 For example, through the establishment of community telecentres as those in Cambodia and the Philippines, although all of these may not necessarily be designed from a gender perspective.

51 The Women's Electronic Network Training Workshop, strongly supported by UNESCAP for five consecutive years, was initiated by the Asian Women's Resource Exchange (AWORC). AWORC is an Internet-based women's information network founded in 1999 to develop cooperative approaches and partnerships in increasing access to and exploring applications of new information and communication technologies (ICT) for women's empowerment.

52 The members of AWORC include women's information, resource and documentation centres, women's information providers and users, communications organisations working closely with women's networks. More information can be found on the network at http://www.aworc.org/inidex.html.

opened its doors to women and their organisations in the Pacific. Women coming from relatively under-represented countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, East Timor, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Lao PDR and Uzbekistan have also graduated from WENT. By 2003, women from 23 countries have been trained under WENT's methodology. Since then, WENT has been successfully replicated in Africa and nationally in Korea (1999), the Philippines (2002), Malaysia (2002) and India (2003). WENT was echoed in the Pacific by the Pacific Women's Bureau of the Secretariat of the South Pacific Community (SPC) in March 2005.

The experience of WENT tells us that in enabling women's social empowerment, access to ICTs alone is insufficient. Content must match women's needs in order for ICTs to remain relevant in women's lives. As needs change, so must content. With WENT, year after year, content evolved to match women's capacity-building needs as women in the region gained more opportunities and exposure in using ICTs. What WENT did was to provide "safe spaces" of communication and exchange that forged women's solidarity within these spaces. As a result, women strengthened each other in their learning and sharing, knowing that they are no longer alone, no longer isolated. On the other end of the scale, participants learnt about what exactly lies behind the technology, demystifying it for themselves. Women who participated understood the technology, could determine which technology would be most suitable, and make choices and propose solutions. For some participants, depending on the organisation they were coming from and how they were placed in the management hierarchy, they were given the freedom to decide on how the organisation's technological needs would be met. For others, their additional knowledge was not put to optimum use as they were in no position to challenge the status quo. This reality is echoed in the research conducted by AWORC in the year 2000, and documented in "I on the Mouse". "By only emphasising 'access' to ICTs as the key factor to consider in women's empowerment through ICTs, there is a danger that issues of power and marginalization within organisations, including women's organisations, may go unacknowledged.

What should be mentioned here too is that one of the key pivotal and influential factors that enabled WENT to be as successfully implemented was the encouraging role of the President of Sookmyung Women's University in the Republic of Korea. President Dr. Kyungsook Lee is known for her forward-looking strategies and is much respected for the work that she has managed to carry out for the advancement of Sookmyung Women's University. When WENT was first organised in 1999, it was on university grounds that had wireless Internet access. Women could sit under a tree and go online. Even though participants had little access to such forward-looking infrastructure in their own countries at the time, being in such a technology-abled women-centred environment gave them an insight into possibilities. The example of Dr. Kyungsook Lee embodies what can happen if women have decision-making authority and control over ICTs—enabling not only the application of ICTs, but also insights into the possibilities and potentials of ICTs.

Case Study Source: Kuga Thas, A.M, Ramilo, C., and Cinco, C.; e-Primer on Gender and ICT Centring Women's Empowerment within The Gender Equality Framework (Bangkok: UNDP-APDIP, 2005) — forthcoming.

The individual and collective experiences of WENT participants during the training and after show that to empower women requires each of us to understand and address the various dynamics of power and relationships in a particular society, which are intertwined with issues of gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, culture and history. It is these dynamics that greatly influence and can adversely impact upon women's individual and collective agency. Ann Ferguson, in her paper on "Can Development create Empowerment and Women's Liberation?" concludes that:

> Individuals and groups divided by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and nationality can only be empowered by a participatory democratic culture which strives for solidarity in a coalition of oppressed groups, while working out a democratic procedure to negotiate possible conflicts of interests among its members as one of the ends of a developmental process towards social justice.

She, however, stresses that, "without a multi-system analysis of social dominations, women may be empowered as individuals in relation to particular men, but still disempowered in relation to other relevant hegemonic forces, such as racism, capitalism and imperialism" and so "the situation of women from a privileged class and privileged race may be improved, but the bulk of women will simply be controlled in the interests of dominant groups". So, the question that faces us is; where are women in the information society if there were roadblocks to information and knowledge such as illustrated in Figure 2 below?

Figure 2: Information Society—an Exclusive Club

Source: http://www.vermontguardian.com/global/0904/BlockingTheNet.shtml

Hopefully, the case studies in the following sections will provide at least a snapshot of where women are.

In East Asia, women's empowerment by governmental interventions has largely been pursued to meet functional development objectives which are very closely linked to women's traditional gendered roles and responsibilities.[53] These serve the lowest levels of empowerment (including

53 According to Maxine Molyneux, these are called women's practical gender interests, defined by women acting to promote perceived practical needs that they have as a part of their given gender role in the sexual division of labour. On the other end of the scale are women's strategic gender interests. Molyneux defines these as interests that are derived from a critique of male domination and a vision of an alternative set of gender arrangements that would eliminate it. Caroline Moser (1985) made a similar distinction to Molyneux but re-defined both as "practical and strategic

zero level when a purely welfaristic approach is used) where policy and programme benefits are "given" to women beneficiaries as and when deemed appropriate, rather than designed to bring about an internalization of power within them, enabling them to arrive at a higher consciousness, and to stimulate the will to mobilise and take control. An example of this is the "T-Center for Teleworking and Telecommuting" which was designed to guide 200 participants mainly women and youths to learn and acquire teleworking skills and to enable them to adapt teleworking as a new mode of work. This was a project supported by Malaysia's Demonstrator Application Grant Scheme (DAGS) and one of the project's specific objectives was to "empower" women, youth and pensioners to become important economic factors in the family, community and the nation. Because of such conceptually flawed design trends, women have benefited from policies and programmes more often as members of the family and the larger community—sometimes as pregnant women and mothers but most often as potential members of the nation's workforce. Table 4 below gives some examples of government-initiated ICT-based programmes and projects that have been undertaken, which have women as beneficiaries.[54]

Table 4: Some Examples of ICT-based Government-led Programmes and Projects in East Asia

Govt Agency, Country	Programme/ Project	Year	Beneficiary Group	Overall Aim
SIGMA, Mimos Berhad, Malaysia	Demonstrator Application Grant Scheme (DAGS)	1998 to current	Communities in general, women are included as part of the larger community.	A platform to build human capacity and capability through ICT applications.
Ministry of Information and Communication, South Korea	One Million Housewives	2001–2002	Housewives/home-makers	One million housewives trained in computer and Internet use
Ministry of Labour, South Korea			Unemployed women, especially those who are heads of households	Computer training for unemployed women
Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, South Korea			Girl students	Enhance ICT skills of girl students from elementary through high school
Ministry of Gender Equality, South Korea	Programmes at 12 Korean universities		University female students	Women who want to work in an e-business or to start Small Office-Home Office (SOHO) businesses
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, South Korea	Onsite and mobile computer education and technical support services.		Women farmers	Real-time information on market prices is posted on the web. The web site also operates a shopping mall for agricultural products. Technical assistance is available to farmers in building personal web sites.
South Korea	The Kyonggi		Unemployed women,	Women are trained for 10

gender needs" and explicitly tied both to subjective claims of women, consciously identified, rather than ones defined outside of the context. This was to distinguish between what she called "top down" government approaches to development and "bottom-up" approaches.

54 Illustrative case studies on the application of ICTs for development have largely come from South Asia, rather than East Asia, with most of these examples from India, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Govt Agency, Country	Programme/ Project	Year	Beneficiary Group	Overall Aim
	Province Program for women IT professionals (http://www.womenspro.org) provides training in business incubation and capacity building (including gender training) and lifelong education for women tailored to the different stages of women's lives.		women heads of households and handicapped women who want to enter the work force	to 12 months as IT specialists, and at the end of it, they either seek employment or start their own businesses.

In order to better measure the achievement of gender equality, we need to consider qualitative indicators just as much as we do quantitative ones. We need to, in particular, allocate resources towards measuring opportunity costs and replacement cost borne by women, specifically indicators that measure change in traditionally accepted roles and responsibilities, and change in power. Table 5 suggests some examples of indicators.

Table 5: Suggestions for Indicators to Measure Women's Empowerment

Traditional Indicator	Reflections on Indicator	Proposed Indicator
Length of time women spend on the computer/Internet	This is not a suitable indicator as it does not take into account issues of connectivity and download time.	Who does the work the woman would usually do during this time spent online? Is it another woman? Her daughter? Her son? Or her husband? If it is her daughter who does the work in her absence, there is no shift in gendered roles and responsibilities. It shows that there is no real support from the male members of the family, and so no change in power. Does she still have to complete her work duties after she leaves the computer/Internet i.e. her usual duties are put on hold till then? What does she give up in order to be there in front of the computer? Work, rest time or pleasure?
Number of computers within a household/ number of households with a computer [note: this applies too to similar indicators in relation to number of radios, television sets within each household]	This does not tell us who within the household uses the computer, how is this particular resource distributed?	Who owns the computer? (with ownership to mean who decides who can use it and when and how, and so not necessarily the original purchaser) Who uses the computer? Where exactly is the computer located? In the son's room? Daughter's room? Mother's study?
Number of women trained in ICT skills	This does not tell us the extent to which skills are actually acquired and put into practice.	Are women able to display these new skills independently without further support? Were better jobs obtained as a result of acquiring these new skills? Are these women involved in making decisions around technology/ICT use? Do these women continue to stay in the workforce? If they choose to opt out, what are their reasons—to meet practical gender needs or strategic gender needs?
Number of women teleworking and/or telecommuting	This does not tell us if there is adequate support provided by the family at the household level in terms of balancing	Are women still the caregivers and doing the cooking and other household responsibilities?

Traditional Indicator	Reflections on Indicator	Proposed Indicator
	responsibilities.	Is a domestic helper hired even though the woman is working from home? Number of househusbands who consciously choose to become househusbands (and not because they are jobless or underemployed).
Number of women in politics/women in Parliament	This is a useful indicator for achieving critical mass. However, while women are encouraged to enter politics, we have to remember that it is a field which is strongly gendered in its culture, and this gendered culture is even more prominent if we examine the sectors more closely. Women politicians are very seldom given the portfolio of science and technology. And even if they were, the additional challenge is that women themselves are imbibed with traditional notions of gender roles and responsibilities, and so may not necessarily be the best champions for women's rights and empowerment unless they are successfully sensitised to the issues and supported institutionally and with adequate resources.	Policies, programmes and laws that in practice challenge traditional notions of gender roles and responsibilities: e.g. equal citizenship rights irrespective of marital status, ethnicity lineage (is ethnicity only from the patriarchal lineage?), equal custodial rights, equal land/property rights, etc. Number of male politicians who champion women's rights with concrete results that materialise in the smooth implementation of women's rights-based policies and programmes. Number of religious authorities who champion women's rights and empowerment towards gender equality.

Women's Agency and the Dimensions of Power

ICTs are increasingly individualising the spaces of information exchange and communication. For women, however, access to these individualised spaces is dependent on their current social, political and economic status, and the extent to which these prevent them from challenging existing institutions.

According to Rao and Kelleher (2002), women are prevented from challenging institutions by four interrelated factors:

- Political access: While there is a push towards women's political representation in government, there exist neither systems nor powerful actors who can bring women's perspectives and interests to the table. The field of ICTs is dominated by men, both as developers and as decision-makers. Ministries and divisions for women's affairs and other similar agencies have been slow to understand the relevance and importance for them to be more involved in the formulation of national ICT policies and programmes. One exception may be South Korea, which has a Ministry of Gender Equality and inter-

linkages with other ministries have resulted in a variety of ICT-related programmes (see Table 4).

- Accountability systems: How resources are utilised to achieve positive development outcomes are still very much steered by quantitative targets, which from year to year or plan to plan are replaced with a new set of equally quantitative targets, without any consideration for qualitative ones. These are often distantly related to institutional change for gender equality. A typical example is number of women trained in ICTs vis-à-vis that of men, without looking at level of technical skills imparted nor how these technical skills are used and how having such skills confer "power" and increased levels of respect to women at the household, the work place and beyond. Singapore, however, has moved beyond this minimal step of "equal numbers equals gender equality". Women's representation in ICTs is strong in Singapore because of the government's concerted state-directed ICT training—58 per cent of analyst programmers and 52 per cent of analyst designers in as early as 1987 were women.[55] Women educated in such fields are likely to have the skills and propensity to adopt modern ICTs. Women's enrolments in such disciplines would have doubly greater social benefits since women trained in ICTs are likely to be the future designers and incorporate features that are likely to favour women's adoption. But the emphasis on building up women's capacities in the area of ICTs must be accompanied by new ways of imparting ICT type of education, while considering issues of intention and power dynamics as earlier described.[56] Most countries build up the ICT capacities of women because they are a source of cheaper labour, and are quite satisfied with only providing them training to acquire lower level ICT technical skills. This is because women are seen as practical solutions from the narrow development perspective, rather than self-determining agents of change.

- Cultural systems: Women are sometimes obstructed to becoming full participants in programmes that can benefit them due to either clear and vocal objections from family, or due to lack of support from family, their community, and their work place. Typical examples are seen when women try to participate in community telecentre activities. The establishment of community telecentres is sometimes assumed to impact and serve women and men equally. In the planning and design of telecentres and their services, usually little consideration is given to women's heavy workloads and multiple roles that limit their available time to use the telecentre. Male attitudes within the telecentres towards women's use of technology can also severely affect women's self-esteem and discourage more active participation. Other factors like the lower educational levels of women compared to those of men, and therefore their lack of literacy skills; the lack of relevant content for women in their local languages; and their lack of disposable income for fee-paying centres are all gender-based factors that constrain women's use of telecentres. Some women tend to resort to sending their daughters rather than themselves for training, with the belief that "it's too late for them" and that their daughters might stand a better chance of finding a good job and pulling themselves out of poverty after getting some ICT-based training. On a parallel note, access to ICTs alone does not take into account who controls these resources. If women need permission from their husbands on exactly when they can turn on/use the radio and the types of radio programmes they can listen to, having a radio in the household as an indicator of successful ICT distribution (extent of usage) or penetration is extremely misleading. Likewise, if households have computers but women are only allowed to clean them, then number of computers per household brings no meaning for gender equality. The best

55 Webster, 1996; cited in Dholakia, Dholakia and Kshetri. 2003. "Gender and Internet Usage".

56 Shaffner, 1993: p.97; cited in Dholakia, Dholakia and Kshetri. 2003. "Gender and Internet Usage".

indicator would be to see the distribution of resources within the household, e.g. number of computers vs. who uses them.[57]

- Cognitive structures: Where women's work is concerned, this is often seen only within existing gender-biased norms and understandings. For example, the belief that "women are good at detailed, nitty-gritty repetitive work because their hands are small and dainty", so they are largely employed to handle microelectronic chips and to work in electronic assembly lines. Or the belief that "women don't have a head for technology", and so computers and technical toys are primarily bought for boys rather than girls.

Having discussed briefly these factors and how they can prevent women from being empowered and from challenging institutions that perpetuate gender inequalities, we can now turn to examining how ICTs have affected women in the area of work and governance.

ICT, Women and Work

ICTs have changed the terrain of many fields. One such field that stands out for women in East Asia is the area of work and employment and so affects women as labour (whether they are paid, underpaid and unpaid). To understand the implications of ICTs for women and work, the first question we need to ask is; where do women work?

The case study of e-homemakers, Malaysia, speaks of women who have made the choice to work from home in order to balance their household responsibilities, hence, practical gender needs.

Case Study of E-homemakers, Malaysia

A project that was funded under the DAGS scheme is the e-homemakers' project, the only tri-lingual local portal that promotes the concept of working from home by providing resources and a platform for homemakers and homeworkers to teletrade and tele-exchange. A WENT (Women's Electronic Networking Training) Award[58] winner in 2003 and a Gender and ICT Award winner[59] in 2005, this project provides basic ICT skills training to disadvantaged and special women to enable them to participate effectively in this knowledge-based economy. The project prepares them to work at home through other soft skills trainings and empowerment exercises.

While the system provides women with the possibility of managing their homes and earning a living, there is a danger that their contributions to society will remain invisible. It would not change their existing gender inequity in the home or the prevailing stereotypes that domestic work is essentially women's work. E-homemakers in Malaysia is one group whose work since 1998 is aimed to support women who choose or want to work from home to balance their gender roles and responsibilities[60], and is currently working in tandem with a similar policy thrust and

57 This is to avoid collecting misleading data where women might purchase the computers for their sons' use.

58 WENT, as described earlier, was an Asia Pacific regional annual training for women in the use of ICTs, and was a project that was implemented for five years continuously. At the end of those five years, an award was funded by UNESCAP as a form of acknowledgement to the most successful WENT graduate who applied her learnings from WENT for a selected community or within her own organisation.

59 In 2005, e-homemakers tied in second place for the Gender and ICT Awards which is organized by the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) and the Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP). Two awards were given out for the economic empowerment of women.

60 Most of e-homemakers' members are women who have tertiary-level education.

emphasis of Malaysia's Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development[61]. The growing interest in teleworking for women in Malaysia though is also motivated by the fact that women's labour force participation is low. In 2003, e-homemakers evaluated conducted an evaluation plan called "A Study on How Gender Dynamics Affect Teleworkers' Performance in Malaysia" to test APC WNSP's Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) tool. The main objective of the evaluation was to explore how women's family lives and home situations affect teleworking and their job performance. The study fournd that introducing ICTs in the home as an alternative work solution without addressing the gender-power dynamics within households, leaves the burden of negotiating these usually conflicting intricacies on women who are often already in a disempowered position. Hence, an indicator of number of women teleworking may not be an accurate picture of closing the gender inequality gap compared to say, number of house-husbands—data which governments have not thought about collecting.[62]

Case Study Source: Kuga Thas, A.M, Ramilo, C., and Cinco, C.; e-Primer on Gender and ICT Centring Women's Empowerment within The Gender Equality Framework (Bangkok: UNDP-APDIP, 2005) — forthcoming.

The e-homemakers, Malaysia, case study reminds us that the family can be a constant arena of contestations of power. In the household, power is exercised through a complex fabric of social interaction that is, more often than not, rooted in existing gender inequalities. The family is seldom the venue for distribution of resources that is either equal or equitable. However, many policies and programmes are centered on the family, identifying potential beneficiaries by comparing size vs. total household income, without giving due attention to what are the prevailing gender-biased norms in the distribution of household resources.

Outside of the household, the introduction of ICTs in the market has, in effect, often intensified the vulnerability and temporariness of women's employment (self-employed or otherwise). In the 1990s, during the wave of industrialization and manufacturing in East Asia, women were only able secure employment during rapid expansions, and most times, under harsh conditions.[63] It is very likely that there will be a similar scenario for women in ICT-related fields particularly if these are very much dependent on foreign capital investments since these have proven to be volatile when the economy is unstable or in recession (either at the global level or in the home country or host country). Foreign capital-based growth has also very often compromised on progressive labour regulations since host countries give up the little power they have to enforce these in exchange for the injection of capital and the promise of jobs. The employability status of many

61 Given that women in Asia continue to fulfil traditional gender roles, promoting teleworking for women should be done with a conscious recognition that it will not fully challenge gender issues and concerns in relation to work and family. Home-based work can clearly address practical gender needs without necessarily challenging socially (and internally) accepted roles of women and men in the home. Home-based work can become a compromise for women so they can continue to fulfil their roles as mothers and homemakers. The long-term effects in terms of gender relations within the family will not be truly evident until further evaluation and monitoring is done. What is necessary, however, is to make sure that indicators and benchmarks in terms of changes in gender relations as a result of teleworking are developed and evaluation of teleworking from a gender perspective is continuous (APC WNSP, 2003).

62 The exercise though may prove to be complicated as unemployed men or men who have lost their jobs may also be mistakenly counted as "house-husbands". Here, house-husbands does not just mean that the husband stays at home, but that he plays an active role in undertaking responsibilities around the household which have been traditionally done by women.

63 Jayati Ghosh (1999) pointed out that the possibility of easy dismissal was always one of the main reasons why women found employment in large numbers during the boom years of the 1980s and early 1990s. She also highlighted the widespread perception that female employees are more tractable and subservient to managerial authority, less prone to organise into unions, more willing to accept lower wages, less likely to expect upward job mobility and easier to dismiss using life-cycle criteria like marriage and childbirth.

women has definitely weakened considerably as women who had lost manufacturing jobs find themselves generally not qualified and unskilled to enter into the new service industry. Only women who have been able to avail of ICT skills training are able to move up in the new information economy, and this upward mobility is also dependent on whether they can understand and speak English. Most of these women are also younger, as it is the younger generation that is growing up with ICTs more than their parents, and to this fact is added pressure for the young woman, especially of disadvantaged classes, who grows up with little exposure to ICTs. The service jobs show a preference for young women, familiar with English, single and better-educated than those who had worked in manufacturing. In call centres in the Philippines, employees—both women and men—commonly recount that they are trained to speak in an American accent, and are often expected to handle emergency calls which get redirected to these call centres outside of the country concerned.[64] The increased opportunities for ICT-related work is no doubt welcomed in the South, irrespective of whether there are sufficient labour laws protecting labour rights as workers or if there are sufficient opportunities for labour organising. The outsourcing of work and increasing trends in teleworking and telecommuting have no doubt placed women into more individualised work spaces, but such work spaces may also provide smaller opportunities for collective action at the local and national levels. Women who are privileged to be networked to groups like e-homemakers may be able to engage to a certain extent at policy level, but may find they lack the collective muscle to ensure implementation and enforcement on the ground.

Globalisation has no doubt facilitated greater opportunities for labour in developing countries but in a paradoxical manner where higher educated labour are doing more menial type work. Globalisation has also facilitated opportunities for local producers and entrepreneurs to reach international markets, but even among these, the gains are concentrated in the hands of those with higher education and/or who own resources and have access to capital, which a lot of women entrepreneurs do not have. Women entrepreneurs, however, are primarily necessity-based entrepreneurs and they are largely represented by small and medium-sized enterprises. For women-owned businesses, it mat be difficult to handle the pressure to be IT-savvy and literate and to invest in technology that requires a much higher capital outlay which many women entrepreneurs can ill-afford since many women-owned businesses are either small or medium-scale. The issue of upward mobility not only affects women as workers but also affects women as employers/entrepreneurs.

Along with the increasing lack of employment security and labour rights protection with the increasing trends of outsourcing work, wages earned too remain an issue. Worldwide, outside of the agricultural sector, in both developed and developing countries, women are still averaging slightly less than 78% of the wages given to men for the same work, a gap which refuses to close in even the most developed countries. Figures of women's earnings for every US$1 earned by men, in both the industrial and services and manufacturing sectors, are almost identical, and range from a low of 53 cents in Azerbaijan to 90 cents in Australia, but with very poor correlation between developed and developing countries.[65]

64 Interviews conducted by Womenshub, Philippines. ICTs have enabled the outsourcing of work and has affected women both in the South and in the North. As women in the North lose out on employment opportunities because their labour costs are higher, women in the South who may not have high level technical skills but have a reasonable command of English are being trained to handle calls at call centres.

65 UNIFEM, 2000, in Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, 2005: p.3.

ICTs, Women and Governance

As citizens, women have varying levels of rights depending on the constitution of each country as well as the laws that have been put in place[66], but largely more dependent on existing practices and the values assigned to these practices in governance. It is within the constitutional and legal framework that women can become politically empowered, seeking equitable representation in decision-making structures, both formal and informal, and having a strong, influential voice in the formulation of policies affecting their societies. Unfortunately, as stated in UNIFEM's *Progress of World's Women 2002*,

> Although there were definite signs of progress in all regions between 2000 and 2002 towards meeting the target [of increasing women's political participation], Progress 2002 indicates that women are still on the whole largely absent from parliaments. They account for about 14 per cent of members in 2002 overall. Only 11 countries had reached the 30 per cent benchmark in 2002 – Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Norway, Iceland, the Netherlands, South Africa, Costa Rica, Argentina and Mozambique. All of these countries have used quotas.

UNIFEM's Progress of World's Women 2002 describes a global scenario of women's political participation where all of Asia figures poorly, let alone East Asia. Statistics from Progress 2002 show that correlation between a country's development status and women's political representation is weak.[67] Even when there is women's political representation, those who were elected are not necessarily familiar with the issues faced by women in ICT-related areas, nor on how ICTs can particularly further exacerbate gender inequality if planning and implementation is gender blind. For example, in Malaysia, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development attempts to address women's needs and concerns very much within the "family" and "community" framework. Its linkages with the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia are very weak. Nor does the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development have strong links with the e-business Department of the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) for issues faced by women-owned SMEs. If ICT-type of projects are adopted, their selection is based on how they complement and support women in meeting their traditional roles and responsibilities, and practical gender needs.

With the growing proliferation of ICTs, a number of governments in East Asia are keen to be e-savvy and e-equipped. However, these efforts centre more on the delivery of government services to the public using electronic means. This is known as e-government. E-governance, although much talked about in the region, is very different from the concept of e-government. It not only covers the implementation of various programmes that apply ICT in delivering government services—the more critical aspect is in the promotion of transparency and accountability. E-governance, therefore, is the transformation of governance processes resulting from the continual and exponential introduction into society of more advanced digital technologies. E-governance should strongly focus on how these new technologies can be used to strengthen the public's voice as a force to reshape the democratic processes, and refocus the

66 Which do not always necessarily properly reflect the content and intention of the country's constitution.

67 Unlike the other indicators of progress which show systematic differences between wealthy and poor countries and an undeniable link between poverty and gender inequality, there are no such differences in terms of women's participation in national governments. This is the only indicator that is not affected by national poverty, resulting in the fact that in some wealthy countries, women's political participation is well below that achieved in many developing nations. The United States, France and Japan, where women's share of parliamentary seats are 12 per cent, 11.8 per cent and 10 per cent respectively, lag behind 13 developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which is experiencing the greatest regional poverty in the world. In South Africa and Mozambique, women's share of seats is 30 per cent, while Rwanda and Uganda have 25.7 per cent and 24.7 per cent respectively.

management, structure, and oversight of government to better serve the public interest. Defined in this way, e-governance becomes significant in the exercise of citizenship and direct public participation in government activities. Both are key elements in women's empowerment and the achievement of gender equality. It can potentially bring forth new concepts of citizenship, both in terms of needs and responsibilities.[68] For many governments in East Asia however, allowing e-governance to make it possible for their citizens (and non-citizens) to truly communicate with government, participate in policy-making and strengthen democratic processes remain a huge challenge. There are three main barriers to e-governance, none of which are given serious consideration in e-government discourse, including at the WSIS. These are:

1) the serious gaps in universal access to ICT as a means of participation
2) the complete absence of gender equality consideration in e-governance plans of governments and;
3) the restrictions on civil liberties and freedom of expression imposed by undemocratic and fundamentalist states that seriously put into question citizen's access to information and participation in political processes.

In truth, even where there are constitutional guarantees for women's rights and non-discrimination based on gender, these more often than not are insufficient to ensure gender equality, particularly when women have been denied their rights on the basis of culture and tradition, and hence, within these contexts, the denial of women's rights have traditionally not been seen as discrimination. The following four case studies exemplify the issues described above.

The case study of the Philippine government's Government Information System Plan (GISP) below shows how ICTs are still considered an area devoid of gender implications. ICTs are deemed to have the same and equal impact on members of the community, whether they are men or women, young or old, fully body-abled or not.

Case Study of Philippines' E-Governance

In July 2000, the Philippine government adopted the Government Information System Plan (GISP) as the country's master plan for reforming governance through ICT. The GISP sets the enabling policy, institutional infrastructure and environment, direction, priorities and benchmarks for computerisation of key government operations and activities over the next five to ten years. It is envisioned as the blueprint for an electronic bureaucracy that is widely and readily accessible to its constituency. The plan fails to deliver in two fronts. First, it is gender blind and totally devoid of any provisions that address gender gaps in access, education, government services and political processes. Interviews conducted with the main government agencies responsible for the country's national ICT programmes and key government departments delivering public services, reveal that policy-makers have not thought of factoring in gender in their e-governance projects at all. In fact, the first question that was invariably asked in these interviews was "What does gender have to do with ICT or with e-governance projects?" Personnel in IT units, management information systems divisions, women's bureaus and gender and development technical working groups equally shared this same puzzlement.*

Even when the basic elements of gender mainstreaming are in place, none of those responsible for gender mainstreaming in these departments had any awareness about gender issues in

68 Women's agency in governance issues can be severely affected by whether they are citizens or whether they are migrant workers (legal and illegal). In East Asia, Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia are "sending countries", with women making up the majority migrating for work.

relation to ICT programmes or projects within their department. Most of the personnel were familiar with ICT mainly through: the use of email in their work, their information work for their department's website and the use of their department's intranet. None of the gender and development programmes or projects were related to ICT directly.

Awareness about the differences of perspectives, roles, needs, and interests of women, and men in relation to ICT was absent. At the same time, there was very little understanding that e-services may entail specific planning requirements that take into consideration women's and men's access, know-how and control over ICT. Second, the GISP sets an unrealistic target of ensuring that every citizen have online access by 2010 in a country where formidable economic and connectivity problems remain. Available data about access to the Internet indicates that the digital divide is very real with figures ranging from a low 2% to a high 6% of the population having Internet connection. While teledensity is higher at 9.05 per 100 persons, majority of Filipino homes do not have a phone because they cannot afford it or the infrastructure is not available. The most positive development in telecommunications access in the country is the phenomenal growth in mobile telephony and the popularity of SMS or text messages as a source of information. While sex-disaggregated data is almost impossible to find, general access information indicate that women's access to the Internet is marginal, concentrated in main urban centres and skewed towards the educated and the middle as well as upper classes.

Notes:
* Chat Ramilo conducted a gender assessment of the Philippines government's gender capacity in E-governance. The gender assessment was commissioned by the Canadian International Development Agency's for its "E-governance for Efficiency and Effectiveness Program" which will provide US$8million in bilateral cooperation funding to support the Philippine government's e-Governance programme.

Case Study Source: Chat Ramilo. 2002. "National ICT Policies and Gender Equality Regional Perspectives: Asia". Paper presented at the UNDAW Expert Group Meeting on "Information and Communication Technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women", Seoul, 11 to 14 November.

Why does the question "What does gender have to do with ICT or with e-governance projects?" still persist? The Philippine case study above shows exactly how gender is still considered an issue apart from other issues. Gender equality as an issue has not been mainstreamed at all despite the rhetoric. Cross-sectoral cooperation on gender equality issues are negligible if it at all exists. This facilitates a policy environment that can work against or negate any positive effects from gender equality measures that are initiated by women's affairs committees, divisions and ministries, assuming they are well-designed. How then can gender equality concerns and women's empowerment issues manifest in these governance structures if the attitude is going to be that gender equality has no place in science and technology, and worse, in governance, when half of a country's citizens are women?

We have noted from the Philippine case study that for e-governance to be effective, the distribution of ICT infrastructure is critical. In terms of ICT infrastructure, the liberalization of the telecommunications sector has generally helped nations and their peoples get connected at lower costs. However, before ICT infrastructure can even permeate rural areas as at comparable levels as it does in urban areas, States are already beginning to exercise their muscles in controlling "who gets what information, who does what with that information, and who decides. For example, in 2004 to 2005, Malaysia has seen an increase in the number of attacks made on Internet users, despite assurances by the former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad,

that the Internet would not be censored. This was encoded in law under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, which covers both the Internet and broadcast media. Three bloggers were threatened with prosecution under the Sedition Act 1948 (Amended 1971), which allows for a fine of up to RM 5,000/- (or USD 1,351/-) and up to three years in prison for a first offence. All three bloggers were "hauled up" based on comments about religion.[69] Three case studies below further illustrate this growing threat.

Case Study of China's Internet Filtering

China's Internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated effort of its kind in the world. Compared to similar efforts in other states, China's filtering regime is pervasive, sophisticated, and effective. It comprises multiple levels of legal regulation and technical control. It involves numerous state agencies and thousands of public and private personnel. It censors content transmitted through multiple methods, including Web pages, Web logs, on-line discussion fora, university bulletin board systems, and e-mail messages. Testing by OpenNet Initiative (ONI) found efforts to prevent access to a wide range of sensitive materials, from pornography to religious material to political dissent. Chinese citizens seeking access to Web sites containing content related to Taiwanese and Tibetan independence, Falun Gong, the Dalai Lama, the Tiananmen Square incident, opposition political parties, or a variety of anti-Communist movements will frequently find themselves blocked. While it is difficult to describe this widespread filtering with precision, ONI's research documents a system that imposes strong controls on its citizens' ability to view Internet content.

Unlike the filtering systems in many other countries, China's filtering regime appears to be carried out at various control points and also to be dynamic, changing along a variety of axes over time. This combination of factors leads to a great deal of speculation as to how and why China filters the Internet. These complexities also make it very difficult to render a clear and accurate picture of Internet filtering in China at any given moment. Filtering takes place primarily at the backbone level of China's network, though individual Internet service providers also implement their own blocking. ONI's research confirmed claims that major Chinese search engines filter content by keyword and remove certain search results from their lists. Similarly, major Chinese Web log ("blog") service providers either prevent posts with certain keywords or edit the posts to remove them. ONI also found that some keyword searches were blocked by China's gateway filtering and not the search engines themselves. Cybercafés, which provide an important source of access to the Internet for many Chinese, are required by law to track Internet usage by customers and to keep correlated information on file for 60 days. As a further indication of the complexity of China's filtering regime, ONI found several instances where particular web pages were blocked but the domain was accessible, despite the fact that the source of content appeared consistent across the domain—suggesting that filtering may be conducted at a finer level in China than in the other countries that ONI had studied closely. Moreover, China's Internet filtering appears to have grown more refined, sophisticated, and targeted during the years of ONI's testing.

China's intricate technical filtering regime is buttressed by an equally complex series of laws and regulations that control the access to and publication of material online. While no single statute specifically describes the manner in which the state will carry out its filtering regime, a broad range of laws—including media regulation, protections of "state secrets," controls on Internet service providers and Internet content providers, laws specific to cybercafés, and so forth — provide a patchwork series of rationales and, in sum, massive legal support for filtering by the

69 For further reading, see "Malaysian gov't must review laws to free media and information" by the Centre for Independent Journalism, http://www.cijmalaysia.org/display_story.asp?ID=102.

state. The rights afforded to citizens as protection against filtering and surveillance, such as a limited privacy right in the Chinese Constitution, which otherwise might provide a counter-balance against state action on filtering and surveillance, are not clearly stated and appear to be considered by the state to be inapplicable in this context.

Case Study Source: ONI website, www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/

E-mail and online discussion fora are the main means in which women are known to communicate over the Internet once they have some basic ICT skills. The "I on the Mouse" report which documented the findings of a research carried out in Asia and the Pacific on the use of ICTs for women's advocacies and networking in the year 2000, show that the dominant use of ICTs by women's groups is in the area of e-mail [70], using it primarily for the dissemination of information.[71] Surveillance and filtering carried out by governments on Internet activities can severely affect the online spaces in which women and women's groups have managed to use for mobilizing around women's rights and gender equality issues.

It is not just access to ICTs and information per se that is critical. The two case studies below show how information can be withheld and manipulated, hence who controls the medium through which information is disseminated is equally important. Both the case studies below highlight the need for the plurality of media in all nations, and for an independent media.

Case Study of Broga, Malaysia

When withheld, the lack of information alone can have a devastating effect, with the ability to disempower and further impoverish people. This is a pending case for citizens in Broga, a small unheard of town near Kajang, which was home to about 300 families and an *Orang Asli*[72] village in Malaysia.

Citizens in Broga are mainly Malaysian-Chinese, Mandarin-speaking, vegetable farmers, with basic literacy levels, and had very little command of English. When the decision was taken to shift a 1,500-ton capacity incinerator to Broga, no information was shared with the community in Broga of the health dangers that the incinerator would pose. Although Broga is comparatively less populated, it is a hilly, forested zone and a water catchment area supplying drinking water to over 333 residential housing estates of about 2 million people, and clearly the decision to shift the incinerator to Broga—"an environmentally sensitive area" broke all national environmental regulations. However, one woman in Broga, Alice, who had very little understanding of English, and was better versed in the Malay language, but more so in Mandarin, took the lead in obtaining the information that she and her farming family needed through the Internet on Ebara Corporation, the company which held the contract to design and construct the gasification-type incinerator in Malaysia that is disturbingly still in a pilot stage in Japan and in much smaller capacities. Alice networked and gained support of the nearby communities in Semenyih and

70Shivdas, Meena (ed). 2001. I on the Mouse: ICTs for Women's Advocacies and Networking in Asia and the Pacific. Manila: Asian Women's Resource Exchange. p.8.

71 Shivdas, Meena (ed). 2001. p.84.

72 Indigenous people

lawyers for legal aid. Her efforts are bearing fruits today as the issue is no longer one that concerns only the poor Malaysian Chinese farming community in Broga but it has become an issue that concerns all Malaysian races within and around that area. The Prime Minister's Office has now asked the housing and local government ministry to clarify certain points raised in a memorandum submitted by Kampung Broga residents demanding that the 1,500-tonne incinerator plant project nearby be permanently scrapped.[73]

Broga in Malaysia is an example of how the private sector seeks markets at the expense of the poor. It is also an example of how the lack of media freedom and lack of diversity of media ownership impacts what and how information is presented.[74] This is the impoverishing reality of globalization. In this particular case, Japanese companies, with backing from their government[75], were seeking new markets outside Japan for their incinerators[76], deceivingly selling them as "sustainable" and "environment-friendly" solutions for handling waste. If it had not been for their ability to access information through the Internet and analyse it to their contextual situation, the citizens of Broga in Malaysia would have probably been doomed to further impoverishment at the expense of their livelihood, potential income, health and social inclusion.

Since the completion of a 25-minute documentary entitled "Clean Shit" (now renamed "Alice Lives Here")[77], the hearing of the suit has been adjourned once more. Alice Lee's *locus standi* to represent the people of Broga has been disputed. She is not a land owner, although a resident of Broga. Their interim stop work order has also expired and work on the project has been revived. Recently, the Land Office has aggressively begun the process of acquiring people's land for the project. A total of 68 land owners including Alice's mom has been directly affected.

Case Study Source: Kuga Thas, Angela M. "Paddling in Circles while the Waters Rise: Gender Issues in ICTs and Poverty Reduction". APC WNSP (forthcoming, 2005).

The case study of Broga shows that while English can be a barrier, it is not necessarily a barrier that women cannot overcome if their rights are being threatened. Alice's ability to seek out information over the Internet on the Japanese corporation is a case in point. However, her rights and the rights of the community who live in Broga are threatened by political and profit-making interests. Having access to ICTs is insufficient in empowering women, if support, legal, financial, and political, is not provided to women.

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73 Theophilus, Claudia. 2005. "PM's Dept tells ministry to clarify points in Broga memo", in Malaysiakini.com, 21st February 2005. Also available online at http://www.suaram.net/display_article.asp?ID=199, accessed 22nd April 2005. The citizens of Broga hope to go one step beyond the efforts of Kampong Bohol, i.e. to ensure that the problem does not get shifted to an even poorer community and that incinerators of that capacity are never built in Malaysia.

74 At the time of the controversy, big advertisements were taken out to promote the establishment of the incinerator as "safe and for the good of all".

75 It is not clear to what extent the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, Japan International Cooperation Agency and other related offices are supporting such private sector "initiatives".

76 Incinerators, including those depicted as "state-of-the-art," endanger public health and the environment with toxic emissions, destroy huge quantities of valuable resources, burden importing countries with unbearable debts, weaken recycling, hinder job creation and community development and concentrate financial gains in the hands of big businesses.

77 "Clean Shit/Alice Lives Here" (2005) is directed by Ong Ju Lin and produced by Reel Power Productions. The film came first in the amateur category and won the Justin Louise Award at the Freedom Film Festival held in August 2005 in Malaysia.

Case Study of Supinya Klangnarong, Thailand

Supinya Klangnarong, a WACC scholar, journalist and freedom of speech and media reform campaigner, is a 32-year old woman who made the mistake of publicly noting, in an interview published in the Thai Post, that Shin Corp, a Thai media and telecommunications company, had experienced a three-fold rise in profits between 2001 and 2002 since Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had come to power, and had questioned the relationships between politics and commercial interests. Supinya asserted that the information she used in her statement was in fact based on the firm's own press releases. Therefore, what she did was constitutional and in public interest. Shin Corp was founded by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and was owned by his family until recently sold to a Singaporean company in February 2006. Supinya had faced a US$$10 million (400 millions Baht) libel suit filed by Shin Corp. Shin lawyers offered to withdraw the suit if Supinya apologised for her comments, but she turned down the offer and called on the company to acknowledge the public's right to scrutinise its activities. Supinya and the Thai Post were acquitted of libel on 15th March 2006.

Case Study Source: WACC website, http://www.wacc.org.uk.

The case study above of Supinya Klangnarong is a clear case of media ownership and control. What does it say if a young woman cannot question issues surrounding accountability and transparency of her government? What does it say if a US$10 million libel suit can be filed against an individual young woman when all she asks for is transparency and accountability of her government's transactions? How can governments remain accountable to their citizens if the citizens do not know or are not allowed to know what their governments are doing?

While the three case studies above are about access to information, they provide three very different scenarios, yet all three have power as a central theme. The first is where the public may never know that their private e-mails and online activities are under surveillance or being filtered, hence empowerment through use of information if it happens at all within such a controlled environment, happens almost in an indoctrinated manner—"empowered" only by the information that one is "allowed to have", without any recognition of the individual's right of self-determination and integrity. In this particular case study, the people have access to ICTs and information, but they were not the decision-makers on the suitability of the information they were allowed to access. The appropriateness of the information is decided for them by the authorities concerned. The second is where information is purposely kept from the people and manipulated, yet empowerment takes place because "the truth" is found through access to ICTs and other information channels (e.g. networking, word-of-mouth, etc.) and as a result, little spaces conducive for the claiming of rights had opened up. The third shows the need for plurality of media ownership and control to allow a more conducive atmosphere for transparency of information, as well as political and legal environment that supports empowering use of information for enforcing accountability. Globally, there is a growing concentration of media in the hands of less than ten corporations, and while there is an increased presence of women in media, particularly as journalists, women are still a long way from achieving equality with men in

the newsroom.[78] This has affected how women are portrayed and how women's concerns are not prioritised in media.

The case studies above further exemplify how the provision of ICTs alone is insufficient for women's empowerment if such access remains unaccompanied by an enabling political, legal, economical and socio-cultural environment. ICT interventions for women need to be informed by empowerment and not only instrumentalist perspectives. This does not mean to say that access to ICTs cannot empower women. It certainly can, but the whole process of ensuring access has to be closely linked to increasing women's ability to use ICTs as they deem fit. This is the first level of empowerment that women can have according to Sarah Longwe (1995).[79] Access as defined by Longwe is when women improve their own status, relative to men, by their own work and organisation arising from increased access to resources. For example, women farmers may improve their production and general welfare by increased access to water, to land, to the market, to skills training, or to information. But were they "given" information considered appropriate by "higher authorities"? Or did they increase their own access? If the latter, then this suggests the beginning of a process of conscientisation—of recognising and analysing their own problems, and taking action to solve them. This is clearly illustrated in the second case study on Broga.

Making the Links for Women's Empowerment in the Information Society from Local to Global

The changing circumstances around the evolution of the global information society is best understood in terms of the politics of trade and the decreasing sovereignty of developing countries in the global political and socio-economic context. Even though there are a number of internationally agreed documents that promote women's rights and gender equality (in particular, the Beijing Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing; and the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women), these commitments remain largely only on paper, as governments in developing countries find themselves further disempowered to negotiate better terms and conditions surrounding trade. Experience has shown that signed bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) between the USA (and/or developed countries) and developing countries have undermined the ability of developing countries to pull themselves out of poverty and in fact, have further impoverished them. Significant and profound impacts have resulted in the lack of food security, loss of employment and job security, the obliteration of access to and ability to develop generic drugs and therefore the inability to ensure cheaper access to healthcare, a weakened resilience of the domestic industry and service providers, the decreased viability of small farms and firms, and the list goes on. For women and the poor, FTAs by their governments with the USA and/or developed countries can mean, among others:

1) the inability to use open source and free software due to software patents;
2) the inability to develop local content without high costs; and
3) the inability to ensure transfer of technology and technical know-how.[80]

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78 Toro, Maria Suarez. [200_]. "Where is women's J spot?" Available online at: www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?w=a&x=91139.

79 Longwe explains that the highest level of women's empowerment when For more information on Sarah Longwe's women's empowerment framework, see at APC WNSP's website on the GEM tool, http://www.apcwomen.org/gem.

80 For further reading, please see "Undermining Development: The Threat of Free Trade Agreements", Resurgence, No. 182/183, Oct/Nov 05. Also published online at Third World Network's website, www.twnside.org.sg.

In short, bilateral FTAs facilitate a neo-colonisation of countries that is subtle but can be equally discriminatory and violent in outcomes. All of the above "inabilities" will have significant negative impact on the application of ICTs for development—the key thrust of the WSIS. However, the WSIS did not address these issues since the WSIS is about the "information society" and not about trade.[81] Instead, Phase 1 of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) encouraged and tried to support a multistakeholder approach that included the private sector and civil society in discussing issues surrounding the global conceptual framework of the information society. Dominating the discussions was "the digital divide" and issues of infrastructure and access to ICTs. In the negotiations towards the final documents, the main country who would be vocally supportive of women's empowerment and gender equality issues was Canada. During the regional preparatory phase leading up to the Phase 1 Summit in Geneva, Philippines was the country women's rights advocates relied upon. Other East Asian countries were relatively silent on issues surrounding women's empowerment and gender equality, citing that there were already international consensus documents for that purpose.

Even though the first Human Development Report in 1990 put people back at the centre of development which was grounded in Amartya Sen's "human capabilities" framework, during the first phase of WSIS in 2003 and in subsequent follow-up discussions and meetings between governments and the private sector in particular[82], the market has again been relied upon as the only feasible solution to sustaining[83] development. The role of the private sector (where the big players are the transnational corporations) has not shifted to one that upholds social responsibility in promoting and encouraging the development of the "a more equitable" information society. One example that illustrates this absence of a substantive social role by the private sector in a country is Myanmar (Burma). In launching their report on Internet filtering in Myanmar entitled "Internet Filtering in Burma in 2005"[84], OpenNet Initaitive (ONI)[85] provided a press release (dated 12th October 2005) which stated:

> Burma's system of Internet controls places the country among the world's most restrictive Internet regimes, and it appears to offer the clearest example yet of a Western company offering filtering technology that permits censorship of political speech to an authoritarian government for use upon its populace.[86] The combination of expensive access, harsh laws, and software-based filtering makes the Internet largely a state-controlled space in Burma.[87]

It is not just the role of the private sector that has come under critical review by academics and activists alike, but also the growing threat by commercial interests to the original values and intentions behind the development of the Internet.

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81 In thematic summits, government representatives are reluctant to touch on issues that fall outside their Ministries' portfolio. This results in international declarations and consensus documents that are sometimes very weak in an integrated analysis and approach to the issues of concern.

82 The role of civil society as a key stakeholder in the information society has, as expected, dissipated since Phase 1 of the World Summit on the Information Society, and civil society currently struggles for rights, proper representation and financing for Phase 2 in Tunis in 2005.

83 This should not be equated to any notion of "sustainable" development.

84 The full report can be found online at: http://www.opennetinitiative.net/burma/.

85 ONI is a collaborative partnership between the University of Toronto, Harvard University, and the University of Cambridge.

86 According to the Press Release by ONI, dated 12 October 2005, the filtering software was reportedly obtained from the open source DansGuardian project and purchased from U.S.-based vendor Fortinet. Fortinet denies that it directly sold such software to the regime, while a May 2004 article in a Burmese newspaper features a picture of the company's local sales director presenting a gift to Burma's prime minister at a ceremony commemorating the sale.

87 Myanmar is not the only country that conducts Internet filtering. China is reported to have one of the most sophisticated systems of Internet filtering (report available online at: http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/ONI_China_Country_Study.pdf), and Vietnam is involving corporations to take more concrete steps to block the net (see http://www.vermontguardian.com/global/0904/BlockingTheNet.shtml).

> While it is not surprising that a country under military rule attempts to stifle freedom of speech and access to information online, what is surprising is that the tools used by Burma to do so are provided by the knowledge and expertise of Silicon Valley's best and brightest. As with an increasing number of other states where basic human rights are denied, such as Iran, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, the leaders of Burma have turned to western commercial technologies — in this case, the U.S. company, Fortinet — to do the job of censorship and surveillance. There was a time, not that long ago, when the Internet's greatest entrepreneurs focused their talents on unleashing freedom of speech and access to information through technological innovation. In the case of Burma, regrettably, those entrepreneurial talents are being exploited by a military regime to do precisely the opposite.
>
> - Ronald Deibert, Director of the Citizen Lab, University of Toronto[88]

However, in opening the international processes to civil society, Phase 1 of WSIS did begin to push for a new global governance environment in information and communication. As Marc Raboy notes in his article entitled "WSIS, Communication and Global Governance"[89]:

> The global governance environment in communication (as in much everything else) is based on the interaction and interdependence of a wide array of actors and policy-making arenas. Needless to say, power is not equally distributed among actors, and some sites of decision-making are more important than others. National governments still wield tremendous leverage both on the territories they govern and as the only legally authorised participants in international deliberations. Here again, the disparities are enormous but in all cases, national sovereignty is no longer absolute. Multilateral bodies, transnational corporations, and international treaties powerfully constrain the role of every nation state. Global governance is increasingly referred to as a multi-stakeholder process. The WSIS experience has transformed this framework most notably by sanctifying the place of civil society as an organised force in this process.

Yet, the question remains, where are women in this proposed new global governance structure? Because:

> Each major institutional arena is gendered it its male bias . . . [which] is then deeply reinforced-institutionalised through the formation of social networks, or shared understandings and conventions of inclusion or exclusion, justified ideologically, which privilege the participation of a particular social group.
>
> - Anne Marie Goetz, 1997[90]

Figure 3 below shows what exactly lies behind international ICT decision-making, and at all levels, women's strategic gender interests[91] are the least represented and increasingly diminishes in importance with each level below.

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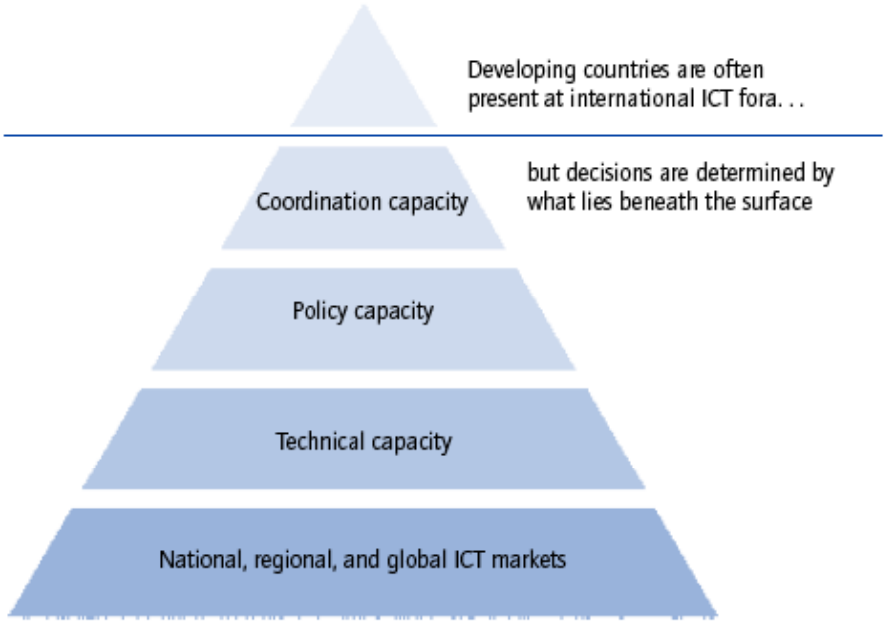
88 ONI's press release of 12th October 2005.

89 Available online at: http://www.wacc.org.uk/wacc/publications/media_development/2004_3/wsis_communication_and_global_governance.

90 Excerpted from quotation in "Unravelling Institutionalized Gender Inequality" by Aruna Rao and David Kelleher, Convenors of Gender at Work, Occasional Paper No.8, October 2002. Available online at: http://www.awid.org/publications/OccasionalPapers/Unravelling_Inst_Gender_Inequal.html.

Figure 3: International ICT Decision-making: The Tip of the Iceberg



Source:
Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation and Panos London. 2002. *Louder Voices: Strengthening Developing Country Participation in International ICT Decision-Making.* Published online at: www.cto.int/publications/louder_voices_final_report.pdf. p.16.

At the close of Phase I of WSIS, two critical issues remained unresolved among the participating governments—financing and Internet governance. This was not surprising since WSIS had failed to adequately contextualise its discourses to the basic issue of who actually wields power and how exactly is that power used. WSIS failed to recognise that the bartering that happens at international public policy levels is very much tied to the economic and unfortunately, military leverage of the country concerned, and issues of gender equality have no place here, let alone issues of women's empowerment.

Future Challenges

To date, the success of gender initiatives or gender mainstreaming has been measured by an increase in the representation of women in employment, politics or education, raising the awareness of gender issues within the population and the establishment of committees for the advancement of women. While each of these initiatives incorporates policy change at some level, these changes are not being supported by other changes within institutions. Future initiatives

91 Maxine Molyneux's analysis of strategic gender interests and practical needs is vital in our discussion on women's empowerment. Women's strategic gender interests enhance women's power of choice over politics, reproduction, work and income. This is where interventions are needed in order to change institutions.

must seek to couple policy level changes with organisational changes that are designed to reform the traditional and often patriarchal cultures of institutions. These include formal institutions such as trade unions, non-governmental organisations, parliaments and business associations. Rao and Kelleher (2005) have flagged the possible challenges we face in bringing about institutional change. Four of the challenges highlighted include:

- The difficulty of implementing attitudinal change on the ground;
- The ideological split between gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment;
- A lack of skills and support at the leadership level; and
- The difficulty in measuring the success of changes due to a lack of tracking mechanisms.

These are challenges that are quite universal since no country has yet managed to close the gender inequality gap. What is particularly interesting is how the movement for gender equality has effectively made invisible "women's rights and empowerment", as if one half of the population has vanished from that equation.

Policy Recommendations

Having touched on examples from the local context, visited the global context and reviewed the future challenges that East Asian countries will have to face, what kind of policy recommendations can be made to help ensure that women are better able to keep their governments accountable—to their internationally-made commitments and to women, as citizens?

1. Development policies and plans must build on global consensus agreements/ documents and deploy an inter-sectional approach. Gender mainstreaming needs a nuanced approach that takes into account the diverse needs and perspectives of women emanating from differences in geo-political, historical, class-based, racial, ethnic and other contexts. This means that the development of the ICT policy in any country must also closely examine implications to the country's international trade policy, foreign policy, etc. For gender issues to be effectively addressed, strategies and solutions for achieving gender equality must strike at the root of unequal power relations—not just between men and women, but more fundamentally between rich and poor, North and South, urban and rural, empowered and marginalised.

2. Development policies and plans must be people-centred. Only development that embraces the principles of social justice and gender equality can be said to centrally address women's needs and redress fundamental economic and socio-cultural divides. Market-based development solutions often fail to address more deep-rooted and persistent subordination that the poorest and most marginalised women face. In short, place priority in addressing gender inequality first in order to reduce poverty rather than prioritise addressing poverty first and then hope that there will be a trickle-down benefit which will address gender inequality somewhat.[92]

3. Ensure a conscious adoption of the rights-based approach in development policies and plans. A human rights framework needs to be applied in the issues analyses, strategies and solutions in addressing access to ICTs. Women's human rights instruments, and crucial communications

92 Louise Chamberlain (2002) in her paper on "Considerations for Gender Advocacy vis-à-vis ICT Policy Strategy" says that, "A recent infoDev study found that projects with greater focus on poverty reduction were more likely to address gender". But she also added that "The World Bank study, that found projects with gender components to be more effective overall, also recognises that such projects may also reflect better identification of the target population, design and implementation".

rights such as freedom of expression, the right to information, and the right to communicate need to be promoted and protected. Emerging concerns such as "information security" on the Internet should not in any way infringe on people's privacy and right to communicate freely using ICTs. Policies that seek to redress the growing use of the Internet for trafficking, violent adult pornography, and pedophilia rings, must not under any circumstances be used for centralist control of all other content development and communication exchange over the Internet.

4. Ensure and safeguard the diversity of media and the plurality of media ownership. Traditional and indigenous forms of media and communications more accurately reflect the information and communications needs and preferences of the diversity of cultural, linguistic, ethics and value systems in East Asian societies. Respect for this diversity needs to be reflected in the diversity of solutions and strategies, since the focus on one solution, i.e. the digital solution is antithetical to human opportunities and to the notion of democracy overall. E-solutions must always be complemented with equally effective non-e solutions. Portrayal of issues must allow for different perspectives.

5. Support local solutions that are affordable for all. The current framework of infrastructure development of ICTs is heavily reliant on "creating stimulating regulatory environments and fiscal incentives" to encourage investments from multinational IT, media, and entertainment corporations from the North in countries of the South. National ICT policies must encourage local, low-cost and open source solutions, and South-South exchanges that prevent the growth of monopolies in the ICT sector. There is also an urgent need to encourage local content producers, through public funding support to ensure the promotion and protection of local languages and cultural diversity.

Concluding Remarks

The examples from East Asia show that achieving gender equality is not as simple as providing some basic ICT skills and providing access to ICTs. Programmes, no matter how well-intentioned, will not be able to bring about permanent change as resources run out and nothing is left to further persuade and sustain initial efforts. More thought, effort and particularly resources need to put in place in order to ensure women's self-empowerment, as this internalisation of empowerment is the real sustainable driving force towards change. However, these requirements only form a small piece of the bigger picture. Women's empowerment, whether through the use of ICTs or not, cannot be addressed without addressing the issues of power. The strong political power play that takes place behind the scenes of "who gets to use ICTs, when and how, and what they get to access" are further complicated by the fact that there is one superpower—the USA—which has the loudest say over what can or should happen in the world, yet is in fact, at the end of the day, only accountable to its citizens.[93] One big but may be impossible step towards ensuring that gender equality is better addressed through international platforms and human rights instruments is to see the USA finally ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Convention) and its Optional Protocol. Expansion of the powers and purview of the International Criminal Court may also be necessary considering how trade is increasingly about political power plays that result in discrimination, exploitation, violence and increased suffering.

93 But not necessarily equally accountable to each citizen since the USA's policies and programmes are not that well-known in addressing the inequalities and inequities within its own borders.

It should also be acknowledged that many countries are aligned with the USA's stand on cybercrime issues and issues of Internet security, using the USA's stand as a convenient tool, only because terrorism in most of these governments' understanding is defined as anything subversive to their existing power regimes. So while we can criticise the USA for many of the political power plays behind finance, trade and development aid, we cannot keep excusing our governments from their rightful accountability to its citizens either. Women on the ground must be empowered to keep their governments accountable through the access, discernment and use of information, if we are to ever witness the "utopic" information society.

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