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HAS IT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

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Introduction:

In the literature in the disciplines of Women's Studies and Sociology, the relationship between gender and technology is complex and multi faceted. The liberating aspects of technology are obvious. On the other hand, the highly contested space of what constitutes gender freedom is itself caught up in the complex relationship between technology and culture. Here the basic question, of course, is : do the cultural changes accompanying technology change unilaterally create greater space for women's liberation? These questions are, obviously, anchored in some aspects of the post-modern critique of modern societies as overly individualistic, atomized, consumption oriented. Extended to questions of gender, the critique has been, (briefly, and at the cost of over-simplifying complex arguments) that while advanced industrialism has brought in some obvious dimensions of women's freedom, the commodification of women under a capitalist system is deeply violating of women's essential rights as human beings and as women.

In developing societies, the large majority of women suffer multiple handicaps relating not only to gender but to overlapping categories of oppression such as caste and class. In such a context post-modern critiques of industrialism and technology from a gendered viewpoint have only limited relevance. The ways in which modernity and industrial technology, and the emerging edifice of global capitalism can affect women's freedom by commodifying their bodies and self images is now part of feminist studies in India, but only in a limited way. Most of these critiques have looked at the ways in which modern media, advertising technologies and a predominantly western-influenced consumer culture shape the self image, needs and profile of the modern woman, urban, professional, upper middle class. The point of such critiques has frequently been that these factors underlie a process wherein a capitalist political economy and the female body and psyche become intertwined through the expanding consumption of newer products that appear everyday in the urban vision (Thapan: 2004).

In this paper we take a look at the relationship of technology and women from a slightly different, though related, angle. In India, technology's most recent and perhaps most dramatic impact is indeed felt in the area of ICT. In the case of women, broadly, this has meant an expanded area of access to information as computers have found their ways into almost every middle class urban household in the last one decade. More specifically, ICT has indeed drawn a large number of women into the workforce as computer professionals, as employees of call centres and other IT related organizations. In this sense, then, ICT has acted as a direct catalyst of creating women's employment in a large cross section of the urban middle class. In what ways has this change affected women's roles within the household? This paper will examine, on the basis of a questionnaire and informal interviews, in what ways, if at all, the IT revolution, which has brought out a large number of women into the workplace, has impacted on their roles within the family,

their self image, their conception, or even awareness, of what constitutes their freedom and equality as women.

The conceptual framework that guides this research is the following: subordination – explicit or implicit -- in every day life, within households, is anchored in customs, rituals, roles, relationships and a myriad other institutions. Is there a discernible way in which women, who now have access to a technology that introduces communication and information at an unprecedented scale, are attempting to, at a conscious or unconscious level, to change these institutions, to reshape their relationship within the family, the community? Does this particular technology have an impact in terms of enhancing the individualistic preferences of women, and is there then a tension between these evolving preferences and a still largely traditional family system? What are the forms of these tensions, and the dynamics of their negotiation? For example, is there an attempt to replace or modify the close network of family with email contact with friends, with women's groups, and so on? What are the discernible changes, if any, in everyday lives, and can these be linked, or do the women link these changes to, their access to IT? Or, is IT only a professional instrument, used in the office, if necessary at home, but which leaves the other institutions of family life untouched? In this specific context, what are the boundaries between technology and culture, and what are the overlapping spaces?

A small survey of about 50 women was made on the basis of a questionnaire, and some interviews. Most of the respondents were married women, working in the IT sector in Bangalore, in the age group 30-50. As the sample size was small, the data, combined with the information obtained from interviews, is presented in qualitative terms. Both the data and the analysis is tentative in nature.

Women's Work, freedom and equality

In the larger context of women's subordination, within the family and broadly in society, the relationship between work on the one hand and gender freedom is not easily established. As is well known, women in lower economic classes who are forced to earn a livelihood, often being the only earning members of large families, nevertheless continue to be in highly subordinate roles vis a vis men in the household and in the community. Thus such women – women who work as domestic servants, construction workers, agricultural labourers, in industries like beedi, garments, -- bear the double burden of having to provide for a family as also put up with structures of traditional male dominance where the men are frequently unemployed, given to drinking and violence within households. Such stories are too common in the Indian setting to need any rehearsing here. Nevertheless the point to be underlined here is that in the lower economic strata economic earnings do not translate to economic independence or to a sense of empowerment for women.

The relationship between economic independence and gender roles is actually much more complex the higher one goes in the socio economic hierarchy. There are indeed various related levels at which one could look at this question in the context of middle and upper class women. In the first place, there is of course the fact that education and employment do not necessarily change certain practices, such as the taking and giving of dowry, and of domestic violence associated with dowry. Dowry emerges from deeply patriarchy related notions of women as commodity, and is now linked increasingly to market- driven legitimation of a highly consumerist ethic of social living; dowry, as an extreme form of gendered behaviour is outside the purview of this paper, but what needs to be noted in passing is that the fact that even educated and employed women do participate in the practice of dowry

At another level, education/employment and gender equality and freedom are obviously linked. There is the freedom to step out of the household to an autonomous life, that is, life at the workplace, which is not merely the space for earning a living, but also for interactions, relationships, friendships, career mobility, professional and personal fulfillment and so on. This alternative space has also of course meant a redefinition of the space for women within the household. To what extent has this spelt gender equality? Perhaps more importantly, to what extent has this supplied women with a self conception that might enable them to effect substantive changes in relationships within the household to create a context of equality.

The question of equality here must be seen at different levels. In the first place, where educated and employed women are concerned, a certain level of equality has been reached in the workplace, and frequently within households, there is a certain coating of relationships with a colour and flavour of equality. Thus women are not at the receiving end of abuse and exploitation in any obvious way. But while much has been written about the limits of gender equality in the workplace (whether it is the glass ceiling, workplace sexual harrasment, inability to control male subordinates, and so on) there is relatively little research on middle/upper class womens' position within households. Here, as mentioned before, the obvious trappings of freedom and equality, or the absence of overt forms of oppression may in fact create a context where more subtle but continuing structures, norms and practices of inequality are concealed. Such inequality is seen here not only as the consequence of certain structures, for example, that women remain the primary providers of child care, and to that extent have a disadvantage vis a vis men in terms of time to be invested in work during crucial years of career building and child rearing which coincide in the case of most women. But inequality is also the consequence of the way in which culture and socialization create the mind-sets through which women see themselves, the sanctity of their homes, and the centrality of marriage. Womens' lives therefore to some extent become a story, with a subscript that is not readily visible. In other words while the obvious trappings of freedom and equality constitute the daily structure of life, the partly invisible creases reveal the spaces in which freedom and equality are both substantively

constricted. Thus high levels of education, professional degrees, employment with high salaries and bright career prospects, in many cases marriage with a similarly qualified and employed person, and the onset of a life that combines home and work in largely fulfilling ways. This macro picture, represents a significant shift in the status of women from what was there a hundred years ago, or what goes on in the lives of many who are much below in the socio-economic hierarchy. But is there another micro script to these lives, which would reveal a different story.

Women in IT

Addressed in this manner, the case of middle or upper class women working in the IT sector would not be significantly different from women employed in other professions. There are, however, two points of departure here, first, that IT has been a catalyst in providing employment to a large number of women, and continues to be a potential employer of even larger numbers, and second, the possible liberating effects of a particular technology on women's lives and mind sets.

As far as the first question is concerned, the positive impact of IT on women's employment could hardly be denied. The question of the quality of employment has been dealt with in several studies (Kelkar et al: 2002). Broadly speaking, it would appear that IT has employed a large number of women but the quality of employment has given rise to many misgivings. Summarizing these briefly, one could say, that many IT firms offer women jobs at the low end of the service sector, in call centres and BPOs, with little or no scope for career enrichment. In many cases, this is the reason for preferring women/young girls, as they are seen to be in the job market for a limited time, and not really looking for a career. Secondly, in a large number of firms, women are employed in positions subordinate to men, thus strengthening rather than dissolving gender inequalities in the work place. As in other professions, there are a few women at the higher echelons of IT, but the large majority are unable to reach the highest management positions. Thus the fact that a large number of women are employed in IT needs to be balanced with these impressions that the structure of employment in IT has not produced a context where gender stereotypes are challenged in any substantive manner.

In many ways, these stereo types continue in the home, as well as in the workplace. And it was in fact within the home that the duality of status, outlined above, became most apparent. The text book type conflicts that working women face, between home/child care and career continue to create the obvious dualities in women's lives. But in talking professional women in the IT sector, one received the impression that these conflicts are now handled in a more or less structured, systematized manner, by making use of family or hired help. There also appeared to have occurred some shifts in the manner in which men regard their roles within the household, thus child care is now seen more as a joint function by men, than it used be the case a generation earlier. Women in the IT sector thus talked about work-home conflicts, but in a manner that conveyed the impression that in their perception, handling this conflict is also part of their job description.

The other significant area of autonomy appeared to be in the sphere of financial, investment and other related decisions. Here it seemed that women had an equal say as men in deciding matters relating to selling or buying of property, investment and so on.

It was, however, in the more imperceptible, less tangible areas of human relations and self perceptions that women appeared to be locked in situations in which their location in a high technology driven, dynamic profession seemed to have made little or no changes. Perhaps the one most significant area of subordination appeared to be in areas where its manifestation appeared in the most subtle forms. A significant percentage of the women who responded to my questionnaire said that they felt that in many areas of the household/family's life, they felt that they did not have enough control. These areas of life ranged from the ways in which the children are being brought up, including which school they are being sent to, where the family lives, social interactions, entertainment. Many of the women said that their lack of control in these matters was sometimes a foregone conclusion, much less frequently the result of a struggle.

A central area of concern appeared to be, in the case of married women, whether they live in a nuclear family or in a joint family which in most cases meant including the husband's parents in the household. It seemed that most of the married women would prefer to live in a nuclear family, whereas many were actually living with their husband's parents. This was a decision on which, it appeared, they had little control as their husbands, whatever their own preferences, appeared to be bound by the norm of taking care of elderly parents, sharing space, and so on. Thus the very arrangement of the living space, a vital ingredient of well being and empowerment, seemed to be an area over which these women did not have substantive control. This was also an area over which the conflict between traditional values and the more modern individualistic concept of space (both physical and psychological) appeared to be a critical one. On the one hand, these women felt beholden to the traditional value of taking care of elderly, dependent parents. On the other hand, given the context in which they live, of high pressure jobs, demands from household and children, their desire for privacy and individual space was also intense.

In another significant area, of the family's attitude to their work, the women systematically gave a response that indicated that societal approach to women's work has an instrumental, utilitarian content, rather than a positive content. Most married respondents stated that their husbands and their in-laws were supportive of their decision to work, in some cases it was assumed at the time of marriage that the women would be working. Therefore, the fact of working per se was never an issue. However, somewhat deeper probing revealed that many of the women thought that the family's interest in their job was not grounded in an interest in their personal/professional growth; many respondents said that their families were also interested in their income, or only interested in their income. Family members treated the women's job as a nine to five occupation where other members of the family were not willing to make any adjustments or sacrifices for the woman to put in more time, to travel, and so on. Thus IT had appeared to many households as a source of additional income via the employment of a woman in the family, and sometimes also added to their social status. But there was no

sense in which families saw this as a context where the women could broaden their professional and personal horizons.

The women's own approach towards this new sector of employment was still more revealing of mindsets entrenched in a gendered universe. Of the 50 respondents, only 10 said that they were working because they are interested in a career. The rest were working to pass time, to make some extra money, or working until marriage. About 50% of the women thought that they would be willing to give up their positions if family situation so demanded. These possible situations were, husband's transfer, care of children and elderly, husband's promotion, or in the case of single women, a possible scenario was if they get married and their husband's family does not want them to work.. The ultimate role model seemed to be two kinds of women. In the first category were women who have made it to the top of the corporate ladder, managing to balance this with family responsibilities; but most of the women said that they realized how unrealistic an expectation this was. Thus the second, and more realistic role model appeared to be a woman who has tried to balance family and work and has made some compromises in the work place. This sense of realism speaks to several themes. Thus not only is the structure of family and society such that women continuously need to make adjustments/negotiations in order to sustain a professional profile, but perhaps more importantly that women themselves have not envisioned a self that goes beyond the need to make such adjustments. In other words, women have not seen themselves as free to pursue a professional career in the same way in which men typically do.

This paper certainly does not take the view that women must model themselves as men in their professional lives. The point however is that a certain role conception of themselves as women appear to limit their own possibilities in the workplace. In other words, it is not a question of emulating the model of professional men, but of evolving a conception of oneself such that role conflicts do not become limiting. In this sense however, the new technology did not appear to have made any significant contribution towards the evolving of a new self image.

Thus many of the women agreed that although men and women have equal access to information technology, in some ways IT has reinforced men's power over women, for example, that more women are now working under men, and that a subordinate status in the workplace reinforces a subordinate status in the household. What was significant, however, was that, there is absolutely no sense in which IT, as an employer of women, has generated a sense of collective unity among IT women. Thus, the obvious indicators of gender inequality in the workplace, indicated above, was something that the women were prepared to live with/did not take it so seriously/ were too busy to do anything about/there were other compensations, such as a high salary and perks. In this sense, while the IT sector has a potential to employ more and more women, it seemed that the potential for women to redefine their roles towards greater equality and empowerment was not significantly present in this sector.

Conclusion

The revolution in Information Technology is of course an integral part of the ongoing globalization process. One could not imagine globalization in its present forms without the unprecedented scale and speed of communication that the IT revolution has brought and continues to evolve. The negative impact of globalization on women, particularly on poor women in third world societies, has been highlighted many times in the critical research on globalization (Currie et al: 1999; Bunch: 1993). This negative impact is seen not only on the exploitative use of women's labour in high export promotion industries like garments, but also in the burden on women of falling incomes, loss of jobs, lowering state attention to health care and so on, which have attended the globalization process.

Women in the IT industry have, on the other hand, been able to ride on the rising tide of economic opportunities and prosperity that globalization has created for some sections in developing countries. If this rising tide has not taken them towards clearer definitions of autonomous selves, the larger context of a social structure which remains tied to traditional norms and practices must of course be taken into account. Whether women in IT can generate and spearhead movements linked to larger women's movements is of course a question for the future. But the positioning of these women in a system that is intrinsically linked to global capital obviously raises the question, what kind of critical activism can be expected from this sector.

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