<u>Project Development for Expanding Women's Digital Opportunities :
Some Reflections</u>

*Anita Gurumurthy, IT for Change*

**The Macro Picture on Gender and ICTs**

The dominant theoretical basis for women's inclusion in the gains through ICTs is now rather old. It is however mostly built on shaky assumptions – of trickle down theory, wherein new opportunities through emerging markets are seen as delivering greater equity. In the information society, opportunities for women have been seen as emanating from "plugging in" or connecting to the global network - making the best of outsourcing, telework and e-commerce.

This macro picture has been analysed well in recent times. There has been extensive research on call centres - the work conditions, associated work stress and questions about monotony and deskilling of the workforce. The positives and negatives of telework have also been written about, and there is reasonably good research about the inherent biases and gender-based segmentation of the software industry. While job creation has happened in some developing countries, both directly in software, hardware and ITES industries, as well indirectly through greater application of IT in the manufacturing sector allowing greater globally distributed manufacturing, this phenomenon is not without problems. The weakening of social policies that protect the interests of labour and national economies, and the impact of this on the interests of women have been much discussed and are issues of concern.

**ICTD Projects – The micro context and gendered distortions**

Equally important, and along another dimension, are the developmental impacts of ICT, especially with respect to the interests of women, at project or micro levels. Women's inclusion into projects originated by and large in an 'add some women and stir' approach, which itself is situated in the history of how ICTD, as a new area of development, was colonized early by the neo-liberals. Development aid for projects at the community level was not really guided by tried and tested concepts in gender and development theory. Most interventions were not embedded in existing processes and projects for women's empowerment but were based on a first-come-first-served allocation of resources, where 'innovation' was assessed only by the degree of novelty, which often meant lack of connectedness with existing developmental activity. Many rural communities, in this era, saw pilot projects that often crash-landed into local contexts, seeking to evangelize the 'miraculous' potential of ICT for generating revenues and bringing possibilities to sell information against local demand. The impact of such interventions is not adequately researched.

While there is a general acceptance of the fact that ICTs as a democratic media do enable bottom-up and peer-to-peer communication, giving the possibility of a voice to the excluded, it is not quite clear how the digital technology infrastructure triggers changes through livelihoods and information at the community level. The media face of these

technologies seems to be better understood than the ways in which ICTs, through the new institutional and structural design they provide, bring about changes in social organisation. This, where ICTs have been used in community based projects – through mobile phones or telecentres - there seem to be more hypotheses than actual results, and mostly inconclusive outcomes.

Many projects have also simply failed to address gender equality concerns. Such a failure of positive outcomes for women goes back to one fundamental anomaly - projects are atomized and do not arise from new and progressive policy frameworks, nor are they linked to the creation of new institutional structures and mechanisms that can address the emerging opportunities for equity and social justice in the digital era. This has resulted in a paradox whereby grassroots projects in ICTs have by and large followed a linear path and a blinkers-on approach, in which policy prescriptions informed by dominant ideologies have guided ground-level action. Often pilots have not addressed systemic and structural issues – and we know that gender issues are essentially both – and these interventions have often accentuated socio-economic differences rather than bridge them.

Projects are sought to be moulded and fitted into an interpretation of digital opportunity that is based on an apolitical, techno-deterministic, market-oriented paradigm. The emergent social system, the dominant version of the 'information society', seems to be pre-determined, and the only issue that is seen as requiring to be sorted out is ensuring more widespread connectivity into the emergent system. The digital divide is sought to be bridged through "alternatives" that are but a linear extension of the dominant paradigm; a simplistic rearrangement at the margins that does not target fundamental power shifts. Many of these projects ride not on the opportunities for gender equality in the digital era, but are based on an "opportunism" that does little for the reconstitution of social relations. The degree of cooption has never been as threatening to gender equality struggles as now.

Distortions antithetical to equality and social justice arise in the manner in which Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives of corporates dominate project design, often mandating the adoption of proprietary software, or in other ways using the projects for their marketing purposes, that, in the long run, could potentially disincentivize access to technology opportunities because of increased monopolistic control over prices. At the community level, projects, motivated by the 'value' of opportunism, seek entry through members of dominant sections of the community in order to ensure 'success'. Women are the add-on object of many such initiatives, but women's empowerment may not be a concern at all.

Multilateral development aid in the ICT arena has also produced some problematic trends. In the year 2005, an important UN agency announced awards for FOSS applications, but invited nominations only from those using Intel's hardware platform. This situation points to a contradiction; it signals an effort to fight software monopolies, but through an endorsement of a hardware monopoly! The insistence on an Intel platform in order to qualify for the awards in FOSS obviously brings in conditionalities that promote private interest, and further monopolies, and this is quite ironic

considering that the philosophy behind FOSS is to discourage vendor lock-ins and promote a collaborative production approach. The connection here to gender and women is not as obscure as it seems. The ethical frameworks of feminism are directly opposed to market fundamentalisms and hence these stances of opportunism, where the woods are missed for the trees, are directly opposed to gender equality.

## The Policy-Project connection

ICTD opportunities for women are dependent first of all on policy responses in two critical areas - connectivity and content. Most projects today build on connectivity paradigms based entirely on market ideologies. For example, provision of mobile telephones to women in the informal sector is seen as a significant opportunity. Indeed, it is, but the potential of such an initiative can be infinitely more, if connectivity was based on internet telephony, which is much more cost effective. However, policies in the area of telecommunications do not privilege poor women, but telecom MNCs, who have very high stakes in resisting innovation in telephony, which would bring prices down. Also the benefits of digital technologies need not translate only into telephony-based interventions or projects. The opportunities are much more multi-faceted and greater with the Internet. However, there seems to be a consensus in some quarters, especially the ones which are most influential in shaping global policies, that market-led diffusion of mobile telephony is the most logical trajectory for realizing the digital opportunity. However, if digital opportunities connote much more than telephony, which indeed they do, a public goods approach to connectivity is more appropriate, and is urgently needed.

Few infrastructures have such a multiplier effect on all round productivity, and are of such high social value, and at such low investment levels, as connectivity (The South Korean example of public investments driven universal broadband connectivity is a case in point). And basic connectivity meets all canons of a public goods provision, as is also evident from many community based initiatives in this area in developed countries. A public goods approach to connectivity immediately expands possibilities at the project level, which do not then have to depend on subsidies or revenue models for connectivity. Also, in this case, the services development processes can clearly address, and need not be skewed away from, core socio-developmental purposes. A public goods approach to connectivity can enable the architecture of new and locally relevant digital platforms, new service networks, and easy sharing of content. Where this architecture is designed specifically to promote women's interests, it can lead to major shifts that herald new avenues and possibilities for empowerment at the local level for women.

The approach to content at the local level is a good example of how policy is driven by extraneous and self serving ideologies, and not by project objectives that relate to empowering excluded groups. Even though we have years of evidence that hardly any telecentre project earns enough for itself in the initial years, and that an early emphasis on revenue streams distorts the socio-developmental purposes of the intervention, the business model mantra remains the chief conditionality and test of ICTD projects. This is because it serves the dominant ideology that markets, with probably minor adjustments, are perfect instruments to lead development activity even in areas of poverty and

disadvantage. On the other hand, real parameters of success and sustainability as they arise from project experiences do not get taken up because the solutions here may lie in approaches which clash with the dominant ideology. While socially relevant content is trumpeted as the most crucial element in the success of telecentres, even educational and other developmental content is mostly not shared under open content paradigms. Differential treatment even for publicly funded and socially important content is considered an avoidable dilution of strong IPR regimes that are seen as sacred. We see a paradoxical situation where a recognition of the central place of content in expanding digital opportunities does not translate into progressive policies on content sharing. Many ICTD projects suffer because they do not have easy access to content which can be freely shared, copied and distributed.

Unfortunately, connectivity is not seen by most governments as a public infrastructure, with qualities of a public good. Neither do most governments recognize the digital era for its radically different possibilities for sharing content. Open connectivity and open content paradigms need to underpin any ICT project designed to make power shifts happen, and we do of course recognize gender relations as an important arena for power shifts.

However, public investments with respect to digital technologies are often derided within existing frameworks. Despite evidence to the contrary, financial sustainability of projects is often pushed as the summum bonum of all success – compromising heavily the possibilities for including disadvantaged groups, and for pay offs for equity, and even overall economic gains, in the long term. Initial investments at project level often need to go beyond investments in technology – with a vision of what is needed for systemic leaps. These investments concern the creation of a new social infrastructure employing new ICTs. For example, information about market prices on the internet is not going to change the relationship between poor producers and the market. However, complementarities in other areas can combine to create a change. This may mean setting up new ways to buy and sell, for instance linking up women's cooperatives, thus creating new and unbiased community owned market structures and mechanisms through digital platforms. Typical telecentre initiatives steer clear of this complex but necessary design for a new digital institutional arrangement that is pro-women. What we have, in most projects like these, within the net of beneficiaries is the rural elite.

Echoupal is one of the most famous private sector led ICTD interventions in India. It is the project of one of India's largest commodities company, ITC, which very incidentally is also India's largest cigarette company and has been involved in one of the biggest ever excise tax evasion cases in India. Telecentres have been set up under this project to reach out to farmers with agriculture information, and also as the nodal points of direct purchase of agriculture produce from farmers. Echoupal is seen as a success for eliminating middlemen and therefore securing a better price for the farmer. However, such initiatives need to be critiqued for creating structures of dependence and new relationships of inequity. As the traditional procurement system collapses and ITC consolidates its control as the owner of the 'channel' or the 'marketplace', the directions that the producer–procurer relationship will go towards is somewhat predictable. Farmers may still have information about prices at other places, but without an

alternative system of procurement in place, farmers may continue to be locked in with Echoupal as the only procurement agency. Another problem with Echoupal is that the telecentre operator is invariably a rich educated farmer of the dominant caste, and so new power structures enabled by ICTs are merely being built over the old ones. The long term consequences of models that promote the monopolistic capture of markets by private interests purely for their profit maximization need to be seen in perspective. Such systems are not ideal for promoting local control over technology and social institutions, nor are they desirable for equitable outcomes. Such 'private developmental systems' also provide an excuse to governments to withdraw public interventions which are based on equity and positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged. A contrast to such an experiment is in the use of ICTs by SEWA, a women's trade union of informal sector workers, connecting women to markets through the cooption of new market possibilities for women's empowerment, building from their experience of cooperative marketing. Another example is the e-Krishi initiative of the Akshaya project, a state government initiative of Kerala in India, which facilitates ICT-enabled market platforms run and owned by farmers' cooperatives.

## Public Policy in ICTs – Setting standards for project implementation

Projects cannot proceed from a need to validate ideologies that are untenable; they need to feed into policies that recognize social imperatives. The market may be seen as the ideal arbiter of resource allocation and value maximization within mature institutional frameworks, but it cannot lead institutional change in times of flux. Progressive public policy needs to guide the market, especially if ambitious projects that concern changes to social relationships are sought to be promoted. Women's opportunities through digital platforms span a wide spectrum from livelihood concerns to networking for political and social mobilization, access to development entitlements like soft credit, etc., and one can be reasonably sure that markets by themselves cannot meet them. Linking digital opportunities to other empowering frameworks – like the right to information – also provides new avenues for addressing social goals. But realizing the new opportunities will depend on what our vision is for technology and society, what kind of investments - financial, human and social - we are prepared to make, how we see ICTs as catalysers of new social processes, and as rejuvenators of existing institutions. We do have organisations and projects that have harnessed the opportunities of the digital age with a strong embeddedness in existing struggles of women – for livelihoods, for health, for entitlements. These have meant conscious choices – to target socially disadvantaged women, attempting socio-technical innovations that are subsidized by public money, investments in new institutional arrangements that balance public private roles, linking connectivity access to innovative platforms for communication and exchange, easy access to content, with a strong underlying focus on equity and local development. These projects are few and far between and need to show the way for new policy frameworks that expand women's digital opportunities..

While digital technologies are reconstituting social arrangements, transforming social relationships and institutions, there is a need to critically assess the dominant frameworks of technology diffusion. It is important to recognize the corporatised, anti-poor, anti-South, racist, and patriarchal character of this dominant framework as it has

evolved to strengthen older ideologies of exploitation. Yet, the flip side is that these technologies constitute the new building blocks for new structural frameworks of society. They provide a potential basis for more democratic and socially-just arrangements. This is where the opportunity for women lies.

However, the structural basis of the exclusion of women in the digital era cannot be dealt with through projects that are built only on market compulsions to test technical innovations, market impulses that pursue profit often by stifling competition and collaboration, and market imperatives that may defy public interest. Opportunities for women in the digital era can materialize only if technology is embedded in an ethical framework, which rewards progressive social change processes, however time and resource intensive they may be. Fundamental shifts are not possible unless social transformation through digital technologies at project levels is acknowledged as a public policy issue with a strong role for deliberate design towards progressive goals. Principles of gender equality and social justice must shape the way digital technologies are defined, deployed and governed, if projects are meant to promote sustaining and empowering alternatives. Polices therefore, need to serve project objectives, as much as they determine them.