

## **A Gender Perspective to ICTs and Development - Reflections towards Tunis<sup>1</sup>**

*I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.*

I begin with this quote from one of civilization's greatest human legacy – Mahatma Gandhi. And I have specific reason to do so under the theme – ICTs and Gender.

The information age has brought us closer and if there is a singular factor that has brought me the opportunity to meet fellow human beings in this part of the world, it is the closeness powered by technology, willed of course, by human agency.

### **Part 1:**

#### **The Global Information Society**

For women today, the greatest opportunity is in the windows that open into the virtual world, bringing new spaces for connecting and new platforms for solidarity; yet, the Gandhian ideal of local is almost Utopian. Within global institutional arrangements, women's traditional knowledge is being appropriated by a corporate controlled intellectual property regime that has privatised knowledge. The global information society stands upon the logic of capital, giving the poorest women little choice to make a claim.

And even as gender activists call for an inclusive knowledge society that respects diversity, recognizes the integrity of local knowledge and cultures, and allows the assertion of women's rights to information and communication, paradoxically, the articulation of such ethical foundations is circumscribed by economic frameworks that do not recognize the language of ethics. Global institutional frameworks like the WTO and national economic compulsions and priorities have seen the emergence of markets in areas that were considered the ambit of state responsibility like telecommunications infrastructure, with corporate players who are gatekeepers to the realms of information and communication.

States in the developing world are seeking to reinvent themselves to respond to the global regulatory environment and have been seeking to evolve ICT strategies that allow for FDI to build export- led ICT industries, to address development and poverty alleviation through ICTs under the advice of aid agencies and overseas consultants who may not best

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understand local realities, and to set up ambitious e-government initiatives that mimic governance strategies of MNCs ( A case study of Jordan explicates these aspects, although they can easily be generalised for many developing countries<sup>2</sup>.) At national levels, the macro economic scenario within which ICT strategies for development are sought to be employed is one where powerful corporations stipulate conditions, and therefore, social justice and equity goals are not necessarily within the radar of imperatives for the state which is busy maintaining the free market economy to stay competitive.

## The Underside of the Global Information Society

In the global information society, women's status is often discussed in respect of their location in the information economy – their status as knowledge workers – a dubious oxymoron that hides more than reveals. Less discussed is the status of poor women whose lives are trapped by and enmeshed in the digital economy, that runs over and destroys existing social and economic structures, and enjoys greater legitimacy vis-à-vis law and public policy. Path breaking analysis of the case of Bangalore city by Solomon Benjamin and R.Bhuvaneshwari<sup>3</sup> elucidates how the lives of poor women engaged in various traditional occupations in the city of Bangalore, are in constant contest in the urban terrain. Globalised connections to the city have dramatically altered the complex economic, political, and institutional relationships and structures that women attempt to shape in their favor. Their claims to land in the city are now peripheral to land politics (as IT corporates penetrate the city) and their spaces for claims are being rendered nonexistent in the changes being effected to law and policy. Meanwhile middle-class activism has usurped spaces in the urban terrain; prioritizing public-private partnerships for civic improvements that privilege middle-class agenda. This is the new age in the violence of development – not just a question of digital divide but of the impoverishment in the post-information society.

It is within these givens that we are talking about enabling women to experience an equal and democratic access to ICTs – where ICTs can bring the potent winds of opportunity.

What I would like to focus on today is to look at some of the current ICT strategies and approaches for development, the way they are being shaped by the key players, and posit the challenges for addressing gender issues in the IS.

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<sup>2</sup> Saheer Al Jaghoub and Chris Westrup, ICTs in Developing Countries and the Role of the Nation State – Building a Software Industry and Bridging a Digital Divide? The Case of Jordan, , See [http://is.lse.ac.uk/Support/ifip\\_wg82/Athens/RiP/25%20-%20A1%20Jaghoub.pdf](http://is.lse.ac.uk/Support/ifip_wg82/Athens/RiP/25%20-%20A1%20Jaghoub.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Benjamin and R Bhuvaneshwari, 'Women in the informal economy in Bangalore: A Consideration of Household, Neighborhood, and City wide factors', Background Paper for the ISST – ILO Programme, “Decent Employment for Women”, A one-day workshop: Bangalore, July 9, 2004

## **Part 2**

### **Gender Issues in the ICT arena - Morals of the Story**

#### **Efficiency and Empowerment – Not necessarily congruent**

The *raison d'être* of most ICT strategies today is efficiency. ICTs are used by most governments as an administrative tool to transact with citizens, at the most basic level. It is even viewed as a revenue earner for governments – ways by which public information can be provided to citizens for a user charge. For women and the marginalized, it is in the empowering possibilities to access public information, to be heard, and participate in governance as agents of change, that e-governance becomes meaningful. However, The IT policy of most governments in Asian countries focuses on growth, and is silent on what IT will do for social transformation. Gender is perceived as being unconnected with e-governance and with the architecture of a knowledge society. Even proponents of ICTs for development have mainly emphasized the efficiency parameters of ICTs as in the case of their use in micro-credit management. In ICT4D projects, most monitoring and evaluation parameters emphasise efficiency and quantitative indicators. The result is that in many ICT initiatives, development itself is constructed in the language of efficiency; notions get distorted and abused - like in the case of community telecentres where sustainability is constructed exclusively in terms of financial returns.

The logic here is not to dismiss the virtues of efficiency. The poorest women can least afford inefficiencies and historically have been most severely hit by inefficiencies in development delivery. The concern is that efficiency cannot be emphasised to the detriment of equity. Also, social equity requires commitment to women's equality. Therefore, when women's equality is sought to be integrated as a cornerstone principle of any ICT strategy, it is imperative that such a strategy translate into wider choice, equal stakes and greater autonomy for women.

#### **Equity and Social Justice – Not for the market**

Technology policy is indeed very much in the domain of social policy and has to be cast as a public policy instrument. Ongoing research being undertaken by IT for Change in India suggests that ICT mediated services that serve the development and empowerment goals of local communities can only be built if two conditions are met – one, the availability of affordable connectivity; and two, the presence of a catalyzing local level institution that leverages upon the connectivity infrastructure to set up a community of service points that enable the moorings of the network effect to take root, as well as provides contextualised services. Even as connectivity may be emphasized, its all-important value fades, if its utility remains untapped for exploring new horizons. In a country like India, many remote villages today have excellent dial-up connectivity. Yet, in most places, the connectivity per se does not imply transformative possibilities.

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Unharnessed, the ostensible privilege of connectivity may still be a “so-what” phenomenon.

However, these 2 conditions are not sufficient. The most striking finding of our ongoing research is that the interests of the marginalized in the community seem to be met only if the basic connectivity, and an innovative, contextually relevant basket of services is complemented by a process of evangelisation – a process with the essential ingredients of the active mobilization of people to get them to engage with ICTs, thrust on inclusion of the most marginalised; subsidization of certain services in the short to medium term, dynamism and flexibility in service design, and indeed a crystal clear vision of the social justice basis of technology diffusion.

For us, the obvious question is – whither women? The interests of women cannot be served unless all 3 conditions are understood and addressed in gendered terms, and connectivity is consciously delivered to women as a tool of empowerment. Women need to be equal stakeholders in community level processes of technology harnessing – over the spectrum from participating in the design of the service-basket (such as literacy for women’s groups and health information, including reproductive health, legal literacy, interactions with the government delivery departments), in service-delivery mechanisms (as kiosk owners or operators) and in using services and playing their role as animators to take technology to other women.

We need to remember that most communities in developing country contexts will never be able to completely own technology – as is implied in its infrastructural and hardware dimensions and facets. However, local institutions – either local governance bodies, or NGOs or cooperatives or collectives and self-help groups of women, with active policy and institutional support from the state, can certainly innovate upon the technology infrastructure and draw benefits.

The obvious needs to be stated here. One, the market cannot be expected to replace or substitute for the role of civil society and the state. Gains from ICTs take long to mature and investments in technology acculturation – a handholding of communities over time so that technology can be shaped to local priorities – are necessary. This process of technology acculturation that serves equity and social justice goals may not be a priority for the market. An interesting case in point is of the telecentres in Madurai that use CorDect technology. The centers operated by a local NGO – Dhan Foundation – extensively use video-conferencing for providing tele-health services, educational counseling for students, an audience with local government officials and the agricultural extension machinery – all at predetermined time-slots. The community animators of the NGO make sure that information is made available to the community about the video-conferencing sessions. Most animators and center operators are women. Most services are free or subsidized. The NGO has been working in the area over a long time, focusing on marginalized caste and community groups and in particular on women, reaching public information to the community, and facilitating people’s participation in development. The ICT strategy, for Dhan Foundation has essentially been an extension of

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their overall organizational goals. Interestingly, most private kiosk operators in the same geographic area using the same connectivity technology, have not found video-conferencing a commercially viable service, and hence do not offer it. Clearly, a technology like video-conferencing, that enables the building of a community media platform can be nurtured and developed only if it is sustained over a significant period of time on a non-commercial basis. Private operators will not have the commercial motivation to fund this gestation, until the service can become commercially viable.

The second is that in development delivery, the reach of the government is incomparable. Even the biggest NGOs cannot compete with the institutional infrastructure of the government. What this implies is that governments need to invest in developing software applications that take information on health, education, agriculture etc to women and the marginalized and thus expand e-governance in the direction of good governance rather than as an administrative tool. What the Akshaya experience in a backward district in Kerala state of South India shows is that a well thought out programme that is committed to people's participation can generate considerable social capital with long term payoffs.

The district administration in Malapuram, Kerala was keen to explore the terrain of ICTs and the seeds were sown for the Akshaya programme. The state government provided basic connectivity; local banks were roped in to provide loans to entrepreneurs and around 500 telecentres were started. The local government (the panchayat bodies) earmarked resources for the computer literacy of one member of every household. The Akshaya e-literacy campaign was hugely successful – every center handled the e-literacy of around 1000 trainees, local women's groups spearheaded the campaign, 68% of the trainees were women and the entire process was closely monitored by social animators. It has been nearly a year now that the e-literacy programme was completed in the district, and the community in Malapuram has been exerting pressure on the government to build upon the success of the e-literacy campaign. While entrepreneurs in the Akshaya centers currently generate revenues through telephony and e-learning packages, the state government is committed to using the connectivity infrastructure to network the centers as hubs of social development. The district administration has already used the ICT infrastructure for health mapping and water resources mapping. Applications in agriculture and health are also poised to be rolled out.

Even as Akshaya reflects the potential role for state-led ICT initiatives, the local contours of every Akshaya center will be shaped by many variables – what women get out of these centers depends not only on the opportunities that the government creates, but the involvement of the poorest women at the local level in engaging with the programme as citizens with an equal claim.

In the context of WSIS, these examples and this discussion need to be placed squarely within the ancient discourse of development financing. I emphasized at the start of this essay the context of the global ICT environment. For NGOs that work with women like Dhan Foundation and for Southern governments, like the state government of Kerala – the posture of development aid in respect of ICTs becomes central to the sustenance of

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their efforts. Unfortunately, financing for ICTs for development is still a hard bone of contention within the WSIS process.

### **Gender in ICT policy – Mainstreaming plus**

Development agencies have been exploring the ways and means to mainstreaming ICTs into sectoral activity and policy. ICT applications in education, health, agriculture, poverty alleviation, protection of cultural diversity etc are being emphasized. The policy process needs to recognize that the new ICTs are not only providing entirely new paradigms in education, health and governance delivery, in fact, it has to take cognizance of the specific opportunities presented by ICTs to tackle traditional obstacles to women's access to and participation in all these domains.

About the possibilities in governance, Vikas Nath<sup>4</sup> talks about how the new models of governance, aided by ICTs, open up avenues for a more interactive and proactive form of communicating with officials in the local governance spheres. New technologies would enable rural women to leapfrog to an altogether different platform where they can voice their opinions and communicate to the concerned person without additional burden on their time or commuting large distances.

Mainstreaming gender in ICT policy is an effort that lies at the synergy of mainstreaming ICTs (using ICTs as a tool for development) and prioritising women's empowerment (looking actively for how women's strategic interests can be promoted through ICTs.)

One important learning from gender mainstreaming efforts may be worthwhile flagging here. Policy often hides behind the convenient smokescreen of rhetoric. In particular, notions of empowerment, participation, needs, etc have been divested and emptied of meaning through the application of their neo-liberal versions. Women's needs are often culled through so-called participatory tools at the "community" level, but these processes rarely guarantee empowering outcomes for women.

Gender mainstreaming in ICT policy involves addressing gender issues in the context of a complex and less understood arena. Therefore the ICT policy process needs to involve the necessary expertise at many levels to clearly recognize the lurking opportunities for women's empowerment through ICTs. This cannot be left unarticulated or relegated as a task for "local communities". The policy process will have failed the goal of women's equality unless it consciously pushes for the expansion of choices for women, for new spaces that promote women's capacity, self-determination and autonomy. Equal access needs thus to be understood as a political notion – it means equal stakes in the gains from technology for the most marginalized women, within a given cultural context.

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<sup>4</sup> Vikas Nath, "Digital Governance: Building and Sustaining Democratic and Accountable Governance Structures using ITs," p.9. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/digitalgov/gov-menu.html>.

### Part 3

#### Seizing, Appropriating and Reshaping ICTs - The Task for feminists

The particular relevance of ICTs for women is contingent upon many things. As women, we are placed at different historical points and our economic, social and political realities are diverse. Our struggles derive from our contexts – and yet, in some manner or the other the most vulnerable among us seek to realize our rights to information and communication. Technology certainly did not predate women’s struggle for equality or self-expression. But technology can help our journey in empowerment - from where we are and in the manner we choose.

I read with great fascination about how in the early 90s, a water and sanitation project, in North West Frontier province in Pakistan, used “Woman to Woman Video” to give women the opportunity to speak across the physical boundaries of the purdah, discuss what water and sanitation infrastructure could be afforded and participate in choosing the best water supply option for their households. Women filmed women using a camera linked to a portable, car battery-powered monitor for playback, with no editing required (at the time, most villages had intermittent or no electricity supply)<sup>5</sup>.

A moving experience for me in recent times was a video film I viewed of women from Manipur who were protesting the rape and murder by the Indian army of Manorama, another Manipuri woman. Human rights violations in Manipur are, in fact, sanctioned by the state in the form of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, which gives enormous powers to security forces. It was not as if women had not protested such violations before, but this time, the mainstream media picked it up because among the forty Manipuri women -- twelve of them were naked—and they stormed the Army headquarters, holding signs that read “Indian Army, Rape Us!” “In their brave protest, Manipuri women shamed the Indian army by parading the very female body that brought humiliation and death to their sisters.”<sup>6</sup>. The video film archives these moments of protest and is more than a testimony to the violations of women’s bodies and to the courage of their sisters; activists from the region have been screening the film all over India to broadbase the debate over the Special Powers Act.

Abhiyan is an ICT initiative in Gujarat India, that has brought together more than 20 NGOs, many of them working with women’s collectives, to explore the ways in which information systems and processes can help them in their reconstruction efforts after a devastating earthquake in the region in January 2001.

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<sup>5</sup> Wickett, E. 2004. “Video for development communication”, The Drum Beat, Issue 256, 5 July, The Communication Initiative, [http://www.comminit.com/drum\\_beat\\_256.html](http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_256.html).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.countercurrents.org/hr-tukdeo241004.htm>, “Indian Army And The Legacy Of Rape In Manipur”, Shivali Tukdeo, 24 October, 2004, Countercurrents.org

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Women's claim over communications media and information technology has shown how we can connect across boundaries and differences, overcome isolation, publish our views, seek justice, build solidarity, exchange ideas and employ information for furthering social goals. These claims are terribly vital since the concerns, positions and identities of women in the South are increasingly being constructed and articulated by what Muthoni from FEMNET calls the ubiquitous foreign masters<sup>7</sup> – the transnational corporate media – for whom poor women of the South are esoteric objects or by conservative forces within our communities who have arrogated to themselves the right to articulate what women want.

Women's claim to the IS arena is essentially a political choice and the urgency is for us to be able to democratize the IS debate enough for the poorest woman to be able to exercise this choice.

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<sup>7</sup> L. Muthoni Wanyeki, Globalised Media and ICTs: their intersection with globalisation, fundamentalism and militarism, paper presented at the panel organised by ISIS International at WSIS – Geneva.