Third World Feminist Perspectives on Information Technology

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, information systems (IS) researchers have conducted empirical studies of gender and information technology (IT) in business organizations. These studies cover a wide range of topics such as the under-representation of women in the IT workforce (von Hellens, Nielsen, & Trauth, 2001) and the educational pipeline, which prepares women for careers in computer-related fields (Camp, 1997; Symonds, 1999). IS researchers have generally embraced an essentialist approach to examine gender differences in the adoption and use of IT (Gefen & Straub, 1997; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000), career selection (Joshi & Kuhn, 2001; Nielsen, von Hellens, Greenhill, & Pringle, 1998), employment experiences (Gallivan, 2003; Sumner & Niederman, 2002; Sumner & Werner, 2001), and employment outcomes (Baroudi & Igbaria, 1997). More recently, however, researchers have adopted anti-essentialist stances and extended IS gender studies to include individual differences among women (Trauth, 2002; Trauth, Quesenberry, & Morgan, 2004), as well as race and ethnicity (Kvasny & Trauth, 2002; Tapia & Kvasny, 2004; Tapia, Kvasny, & Trauth, 2004).

In this growing body of scholarship, a few researchers have argued persuasively for the inclusion of feminist epistemologies in IS research (Adam & Richardson, 2001; Henwood, 2000; Kvasny, Greenhill, & Trauth, 2005). These proponents contend that feminist epistemologies provide theoretical and methodological insights for studying gender as a complex and multidimensional construct for understanding the use, management, and regulation of IT in multiple domains such as business organizations, households, reproductive health, built environments, and the military (MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1991;

Ormrod, 1994). Feminist scholars have also called for research that considers not only gender, but also the intersection of racial, ethnic, and class identities (Kvasny, forthcoming).

In this article, we adopt a third world feminist perspective to examine perceptions of IT held by black women in Kenya and the U.S. In what follows, we defining third world feminism, especially as it relates to women in the African Diaspora. Next, we discuss our research methodology, which consists of interviews with women in both settings. We conclude by presenting our findings and implications for future research.

BACKGROUND: THIRD WORLD FEMINISM

The term "third world" captures the discourse that typifies women of color from around the globe as an oppressed group having relatively less formal education, higher birth rates, and lower incomes. These discourses generally employ "emblems of oppression", that is, the use of single practices such as foot binding in China, veiling in the Middle East, and female circumcision in Africa as emblematic of the totality of women's experience in a particular culture. In doing so, women's experiences are collapsed into a single, "victimizing practice" which ignores the multiplicity of ways in which these practices are experienced by women and the ways in which women exercise their agency (Lorde, 1985).

Third world also carries the connotation of colonized populations located in geographically distant nation-states under the economic and political control of so-called developed nations in the West. However, women of color in Western contexts have

embraced a third world identity by applying the term "third world" to themselves and their politics to call attention to similarities in locations of, and problems faced by, their communities and communities in third world cultures (Narayan, 1997). It is a call for feminism without the boarders of socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. To silence the voices of diverse women is to deny the opportunity to realize the connections as well as the differences among women. It constructs women of color as voiceless victims who are spoken about and constructed by privileged women in the academy. It is unfair to merely assume that working-class women, middle-class women, lesbians, women in developing countries, and women of color share a common oppression based upon a shared gender. This colonialist stance, according to Narayan (1997), replicates the problematic aspects of Western representations of third world communities, and thus poses an obstacle to the need for feminists to form communities of resistance.

For Smith (1981), "Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women—as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement." Much of the gender and IT research has been about the under-representation of highly paid, college educated women employed in the primary IT sector. There are relatively few IS studies which employ an anti-essentialist epistemology for the study of the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged women of color engaging with IT to improve their life chances (Kvasny, forthcoming).

RESEARCH APPROACH

To gain a third world feminist perspective on IT and to understand what specific differences IT has made socially, politically and economically for black women, we interview 40 black female participants in IT training programs in the U.S. (8) and Kenya (32). The women in the U.S. were participating in a community technology center located in an inner-city neighborhood. The women in Kenya were enrolled in IT bachelor's degree program at a univer-

sity. These training programs provided women with their initial entrée into the domain of IT.

Using Cameron's (1992) notion of empowering research, we conducted interviews to understand their motivations for participating in their respective IT programs, and expectations for outcomes resulting from this training. In what follows, we focus exclusively on the women's motivations for participating in IT training programs by recounting the common themes which emerged from their narratives.

FINDINGS

Even though women in Kenya have traditionally been active in the informal economies around agriculture and local trade, and the women in the U.S. had limited formal educations and held low-paying jobs in the service sector, they both perceived IT as a panacea for acquiring desirable job skills and employment that would lift them out of poverty. For instance, nearly one-half of the women in Kenya participated in the IT educational programs because they perceived substantial job opportunities upon graduation. The IT sector was described as "an upcoming field," and as "a new field in Kenya and a very dynamic field which affects all aspects globally." They also believed that there were few IT professionals and therefore skilled people have a competitive advantage. One woman remarked that "not many people in Kenya have this sort of information [and] this is because currently in Kenya there lacks professionals in this field." Not only were there "job opportunities that come with this vast growth," the jobs were seen as well paying. "I think IT is a field that will provide me with a means of earning good income in future." "IT program have proved to be better paying careers than other technical careers in the country."

Many Kenyan women remarked specifically about acquiring skills which would enable them to integrate IT into business organizations. For instance, "the integration of business in the IT program made it even more attractive for me." "This course is not a technical course. I am not interested in details about technologies…I am interested in how I can use IT more efficiently and a broader view." U.S. women mirrored this belief about leveraging IT skills in the

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