

Chapter 80

ICTs and Their Impact on Women's Roles and Evolution within Developing Societies

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is definitely the most complex and dynamic technical and cultural phenomenon that humanity ever experienced. Nevertheless, despite its positive impact on the Western world, Web 2.0 has yet to prove its power in the undeveloped regions of the globe, where the Internet Era is still at its dawn. In developing countries, the barriers that women face, such as poverty or social imbalances, establish significant challenges that hinder connectivity and access to modern technologies. In this context, the chapter discusses the evolution of gender speech in relation to new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The authors determine whether the declarations and plans for action that were issued subsequent to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing enhanced the establishment of gendered policies on ICTs, particularly in the undeveloped regions of the world, and whether, in this way, they empower women, contribute to combating women's poverty, and promote gender equality.

Every mental act is composed of doubt and belief, but it is belief that is the positive, it is belief that sustains thought and holds the world together - Søren Kierkegaard

INTRODUCTION

As stated in the title, my chapter discusses the importance of ICTs for women's evolution within the *information* millennium, in an optimistic, yet realistic note, pointing out both the advancements

and shortcomings of the developments in this field. It may seem to some of you that this paper is a celebration of ICTs - especially the Internet. However, I prefer such feedback, rather than thinking later that young girls' fear to approach technologies in their careers, for example, is due also to my failure to point out and to explain the enormous potential of ICTs for women empowerment.

In addition to providing unlimited freedom to track down and to share information *in real time* (Flew, 2008), the Internet - a space less influenced by social norms and pressure compared

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with the outer world - transcends the biases of the traditional communities, enhances the creation of social capital and fosters relationships, ideas promoted extensively in the ICTs literature from the last 20 years (Rheingold, 1993; Stoll, 1995; Watson, 1997; Wellman, 2001).

The impact of Web 2.0 translates in the so-called cyber culture, a concept linked to the use of computer networks for communication, entertainment and business. Defined by its cognitive and social characteristics, rather than geographic ones, the cyber culture relies on establishing identity and credibility, while both concepts - desirable results of online interaction - are being used as pillars of the virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993).

I aim to highlight that for women all over the globe the online networking is liberating, as many of the relationships initiated through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) do not limit to a virtual realm and transcend to a real-life setting (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Yet, developing countries have only 21.1 Internet users per 100 inhabitants as opposed to 71.6 Internet users per 100 inhabitants in the developed countries. The most severe situation is encountered in Africa, where only 9.6 users exist per 100 inhabitants (United Nations, 2011).

The perspective of this chapter is rather social, than technical, as I aim to emphasize the revolutionary potential of the Internet for human relations. Web 2.0 enhances interactions, impossible in the outer world and connects vast networks of individuals, across large distances, at very little cost (Laurie et al., 2005; Girard, 2003). Subsequently, means of communication like e-mailing, online forums and discussion boards or blogs have contributed to raising awareness on women's rights both in the outer and virtual world.

Of course, gender is not a new topic or the belief that Internet enhances social equality (Miller, 1991; Veysey, 1978). However, such concepts are taboo even today in some parts of the world. While physical borders are cancelled online, women connect to discussion forums from everywhere

and form trans-national communities via virtual networking to fight gender stereotyping and combat the social exclusion of a predominantly male-dominated world. The Internet enhanced women's ability to create their own information and share it online, and in real time, to control the content and distribution channels, and to propagate their messages to large audiences.

The purpose of this article is to provide a thorough analysis of the relevant literature in the field - feminist studies of new information and communication technologies, reports by international organizations such as UNESCO, United Nations or the International Telecommunications Union - and to create awareness for and identify solutions to overcome barriers that hinder women's access to and use of ICTs, while revealing the immeasurable potential of technologies for their empowerment.

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO AND USE OF ICTs

In addition to being a socially designed system of knowledge, technology is shaped by historical, cultural and political contexts (Edley & Houston, 2011). Technology, often understood as a technical tool that society can utilize and not like something that in itself is influenced by society, is considered to be gender neutral, although it affects differently the various sections of society. However, the gendered approach argues that technology is not neutral, but depends on cultural beliefs (Stahl, 2008) and wealth (Lee, 2006a). While opening new horizons, ICTs produce and perpetuate gender stereotypes and the corporate colonization of private and work life (Deetz, 1992).

Women's access to technology depends on their allegiance to different social identities such as class, ethnicity, caste, race or age which interact with gender. Reports on women and ICTs point out how having Internet access at home can empower women and influence their participation within the

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