A Feminist Agenda for Reducing the Gender Digital Divide

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INTRODUCTION

There is little shared understanding of the term "digital divide," but this has not prevented the international community from investing a great deal of effort in projects that aim to reduce the digital divide by reducing disparities in access to information and communication technologies (ICT) (European Commission High Level Group, 1997; International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 1984, 2003; United Nations Economic and Social Commission [UN ECOSOC], 2000). The divergent rate at which ICT diffuses—the digital divide—is a reflection of broader socioeconomic divides, many of which exist within societies. The divide between men and women, rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural, literate and non-literate, also manifests itself in the digital world of media, computers, telecommunications, Internet, and jobs in software production. Information and communication flows carried by ICT are increasingly becoming an integral factor in international, institutional, and political processes. Lack of access to ICT therefore impacts on opportunities for developing countries' economic growth, wealth distribution, social empowerment, and development. It is the digital divide which largely prevents the equal sharing of knowledge worldwide and leads to "information and knowledge poverty" among certain groups. If only a select number of countries, and within them certain groups, reap the benefits of ICT while others continue to lag behind, the digital divide will continue to grow and the virtuous cycle that ICT can create will not be enjoyed by many (Millward-Oliver, 2005).

There is little acknowledgment and even less acceptance that gender constitutes an important influence in the structure of the "digital divide." At first glance, this failure to admit context may seem strange and out of step with common sense. Why should gender relations, such an important and pivotal element of social structure, that is known to influence differentiated access to financial resources, employment opportunities, education and training, water and sanitation, health care, legal status, and enjoyment of human-rights not affect access to and control of ICT? This article will explore some of the key factors that lead to gender blindness in the digital divide debate and articulate a strategic response.

ROOT CAUSES OF GENDER BLINDNESS

The first is the prevalence of the myth of *technology neutrality*. Despite evidence and academic theorising related to the social construction of technology (see, for example, MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1995) in the ICT sector, the prevailing dominant culture of scientists, technologists, and policy makers insists that ICT are universally beneficial *tools*. Although this dominant narrative flies in the face of research and lived reality, this tendency is well and truly entrenched in the mainstream of the ICT sector, and has been accompanied by hyperbole about the unprecedented contribution that ICT can make to all our lives. What is more, the assumption of technology neutrality sits as one of the unquestioned bedrocks of much ICT policy making and programming, including in the efforts of multilateral organisations that ought to know better (European Commission High Level Group, 1997; Department for International Development [DFID], 2002; ITU, 1984, 2003; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2003; UN ECOSOC, 2000; UNDP, 2003; World Bank, 2002, 2004), especially given their rhetorical commitment to "mainstream" gender equality.

The second factor has to do with differential access to power and influence in the ICT sector. Women are significantly underrepresented in positions of power and influence within ICT producer

firms, policy making institutions and knowledge centres. Men in those positions have not worked very hard as champions of gender equality. As a result, the promotion of gender-equality in ICT is not a priority. For both men and women in the ICT sector, paying attention to gender equality issues is not considered to be an issue that leads to career advancement and certainly does not dominate real politic and tough negotiations (Marcelle, 2000a, 2005). Gender analysis confirms that over the last decade (Hafkin 2002a, b; UN-DAW, 2003) those with power and influence do not consider and give priority to gender-equality in ICT policy. The issue either falls off the list completely, or is included with tokenism and patronisation when the influential bodies set out the determinants of ICT policy (G8 Dot Force, 2002; Gilhooly, n.d.; World Bank, 2002; WTO, 1998). This applies to both the international and national levels; in the latter, gender-equality machineries are often not considered to be important contributors in defining an agenda for the Information Society. Further, there is also a disparity in access to financial and human resources. For the most part, gender-equality in ICT is championed and spear-headed by campaigning and advocacy organisations and scholars. This community organises its work through networks and other loosely structured formations. Conversely, ICT powerbrokers that have a vested interest in the status quo are much more likely to occupy staff positions of well-funded organisations and to use these positions to shape the agenda. There is much still to do to transform power-relations in the ICT sector.

The third and final factor is the absence of focus on ICT and development by the broad gender equality and women's rights movement (Marcelle, 2005). It is fair to say that the women's movement has not yet prioritised these issues. Matters to do with access and control of technology are still seen as the narrow concern of "techie" women, rather than as part of the overall struggle for peace, equality, and development. This situation arises partly because there are many candidates for priority attention and the international women's movement faces many challenges. However, in addition to the clamour of other sometimes seemingly more pressing issues, some features of the gender and ICT community also contribute to this state of affairs. With the gender and ICT movement, there has been a failure

to define legitimate and priority advocacy issues. This lack of focus can be in part explained by the heterogeneity of women across the globe and varying perspectives on gender-equality and women's rights. Some advocates suggest that the intersectionality of class, race, sexuality, and religion is the appropriate lens for analysis and action, while others adopt a more pragmatic stance, and suggest use of the reform objectives of gender-mainstreaming. This lack of consensus also extends to strategies and tactics (Radloff et al., 2005). There has also been a tendency to draw quite sharp lines around the boundaries of the gender and ICT community and to be less than enthusiastic in building linkages with other gender advocacy communities—trade, labour relations, human-rights, economic reform, and peace— and learning from their successes and failures. This has to do, in my view, with a misdiagnosis of what is at stake. If the gender and ICT agenda ends with improving women's non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) ability to use ICT and to increasing women's access to ICT services and facilities, and does not tackle fundamental transformation of the ICT sector, it is unlikely to attract the interest of a wider community and to be considered to be relevant, legitimate, and important.

STRATEGIC RESPONSE

Feminism is what feminists practice; in building a global feminist movement that is relevant to all women, their development and human rights, we should ensure that there is more involvement in Information Society debates at the strategic level. It is possible to reclaim Information Society discourse and programmatic actions. To do so one would need to place feminist theory and its perspectives on globalisation, power-relations, and economic reform (Kabeer, 1994; Sen & Grown, 1987) at the centre of efforts to imagine and define strategies to develop a people-centred Information Society.

Feminist perspectives provide an insightful point of departure for the radical transformation of the ICT sector. It is essential that representatives of women's organisations and advocates of social change are included in strengthening a movement for change. Transformation of the ICT sector requires more than a concern about increasing access

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