

Gender Inequalities for Use and Access of ICTs in Developing Countries

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INTRODUCTION

Internet, wireless, mobile, multi-media (voice, video, 3D), broadband, and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are rapidly consolidating global communication networks and international trade with implications for people in developing countries. Extensive literature suggests that use of ICTs have a great impact on society for improving their economic means and life styles. However, various studies conducted in different regions of the world indicate that the advantages of ICTs have not reached all sections of society, particularly rural communities, and women. Women face many obstacles before they can harness the benefits of ICTs (Accascina, 2001; Alloo, 1998; The Commonwealth of Learning, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001).

Information and technology development, adoption, and access are far from adequate in developing countries. Large scale illiteracy and disabling environments, including uncompetitive markets, restrict opportunities to harness ICTs. For example; in India only 0.6% of the population uses the Internet and the penetration rate of the personal computer is only 1.2% (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001; Nath, 2001; World Bank Report, 2002). Information chasms follow socioeconomic divisions, particularly income and education disparities, separating well-connected elites from the less privileged who remain detached from information access and use. Most women within developing countries are on the lowest side of the divide, further removed from the information age as compared to the men whose poverty they share (Accascina, 2001; Nath, 2001; Tandon, 1998, The Commonwealth of Learning, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001). If access and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative that women in developing countries be taken into consideration while developing ICT diffusion strategies. ICTs can be an important tool in

meeting women's basic needs and can provide the access to resources to involve women as equal partners in socio-economic development (Cole et al., 1994). Addressing gender issues in the ICTs sector has shown significant results where women have been made a part of ICT use and access. For example, women have benefited greatly from South Korea's push to make higher education available online. In corporate South Korea, more than 35% of high-level IT positions are now held by women. In Africa, 70% of agricultural produce is handled by women (World Bank Report, 2002). By using farm radios, women farmers can obtain information in local languages on markets, agricultural inputs, food preservation, and storage without traveling far, or being dependent on a middleman. ICTs use and access by women can offer significant opportunities for them in developing countries, including poor women living in rural areas. However, their ability to take advantage of these opportunities is contingent upon conducive policies, an enabling environment to extend communications infrastructure to where women live, and increasing educational levels. It is now, particularly appropriate to ensure the inclusion of gender concerns in national IT policy, as most developing countries are either in the process of or about to start elaborating these policies (Accascina, 2001; Marcelle, 2000; Ponniah & Reardon, 1999; The Commonwealth of Learning, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001).

Women face considerably higher barriers in terms of literacy, access to education and information, productive and financial resources, and time. Many of the obstacles women face in accessing and using technology are entrenched in behavioral, cultural, and religious practices. Unless explicit measures are taken to address these divides, there is a risk that ICT will increase gender disparities and that the impact of ICTs will not be maximized. Integrating gender considerations into ICT strategies and poli-

cies will enable policy-makers and implementers to address these differences, which in turn will lead to remove gender inequalities for ICTs use and access (The Commonwealth of Learning, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001).

BACKGROUND

ICTs bring the promise of new and better jobs and businesses for women, fuller participation in the political process, communication with worlds outside the boundaries of home and community, easy access to information and resources that can change lives, and the ability to acquire education and skills and to transcend social restrictions. These all can empower and enhance the quality of women's lives in developing countries. The Internet and other ICTs are proving to be a powerful tool to empower women to inform and change global and local realities. The opportunities and the benefits as well as the challenges of new information and communication technologies, as a tool of communication and knowledge transfer to support development and advancement of women in social and economic arenas are proving critical to women's networking and political action around the world. Considering odds against women taking part in the information super highway, women's groups and even poor communities are making full use of the Internet to defend and advocate for their rights. A key strategy for women's empowerment, especially in marginal and poor communities, is to give women access to new information technology in appropriate ways that support women's everyday work and help them fight for and defend their human, social, economic and political rights (Green & Trevor, 2002).

Even as the power and potential of these technologies are recognized and celebrated in most policy circles, the fact remains that unless the poor and marginalized are actively involved they will remain marginalized. Hence, there is a need for actions that are explicitly aimed at introducing the poor/marginalized, of which women are the majority, to these technologies. The gender gap in the digital divide is of increasing concern; if access to and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women in developing countries understand

the significance of these technologies and use them. If not, lack of access to information and communication technologies becomes a significant factor in the further marginalization of women from the economic, social, and political mainstream of their countries and the world. Unless women are provided effective access to ICTs, they will be left behind in their participation in the global world of the twenty-first century.

BARRIERS FOR WOMEN OF ICT USE AND ACCESS

Most women in developing countries who use information technology use it at work. Except in upper-income enclaves, home access to a computer and the Internet is not a common. E-mail is the major ICT application that women in developing countries use. Also, since women are given roles to manage the home and kids and their school tasks, women find very little time to use ICTs for any recreational or communication purposes (Ranchod, 2000). Broadly speaking, the barriers to women's use of ICTs have been:

- General literacy and language
- Lack of technical training
- Lack of access to hardware, software or access to the technologies
- Cost of connections still high for the lower income women
- General "technophobia" among women
- Social and cultural barriers—women are still the primary care-takers for their children and carry the bulk of household responsibilities, therefore have less time to explore the uses of new ICTs
- Full Internet access is limited in the academic sector and in corporations to those who hold managerial and/or technical posts, and the number of women in these positions is relatively small compared to men

Many of these barriers arise directly from the status of national illiteracy levels and national connectivity information infrastructure. However, systemic problems of general illiteracy combined with infrastructural barriers work against women. Some

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