Chapter 10
Women Access to Computers and Internet:
A Malaysian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural society characterized by distinct values and norms about many issues including the role of women in society. Since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, Malaysian women have participated and contributed towards the social and economic development of the country. This was made possible by the policy standpoint of the Malaysian government which considers women are an important pool of resource that can be mobilized towards achieving the national development agenda. After fifty-two years of independence, Malaysia is one of the most developed countries in Southeast Asia. She has seriously geared its effort toward information and communication technology (ICT) by establishing the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 with the widespread use of computer in Malaysia women have been found to have benefited from the modern technologies. They enjoy greater access to computers and Internet. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes accessibility, delivering access to the computers and internet info-structure to women in Malaysia. A framework for analyzing Malaysian women accessing computers and the internet is presented and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) has entered the organizations, office and home, and indirectly influenced employees, individual and family life. *Information technology (IT)* comprises of hardware (e.g. personal computer, printer, and scanner) and software (e.g. application and system program) that allow us to access, retrieve, store, organize, manipulate and present information by electronic means. Meanwhile, *communication technology* consists of telecommunication tools that allow information to be accessed and sought, for example telephones, facsimiles, and modems.

The Malaysian government has heavily invested in ICT centers all over the country. IT and in par-

ticular the internet have become an important part of the Malaysian life. Malaysia has established its Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) in 1996 (NITC, 2004). The provision of ICT platforms resulted in mega implementation such as e-government and e-governance, besides the surge of multimedia industry and the existence of biotechnology valley. The very presence of IT has lead to ICT literacy and further accelerate human resource development.

Malaysia is a developing country that has integrated ICT into its grand narrative of modernity. The national development plan Vision 2020 is aimed at giving all Malaysians a fully developed and modern society by 2020. The Malaysian government has been an enthusiastic supporter of internet technology since the early 1990s, and has employed a range of policies to encourage Malaysian businesses to venture online. ICT is highlighted as a media to eradicate poverty and facilitate progress.

The story of the commercial internet in Malaysia began in 1990, when the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS, now MIMOS Berhad) launched JARING (Joint Advanced Integrated Networking), the first Malaysian ISP. It was not until 1992, however, with the installation of a satellite link between Malaysia and the United States of America, that Malaysian users gained easy access to the internet. Subsequently, Malaysia's second internet service provider (ISP), TMNet, launched in 1995. Since then, the market for both commercial and residential internet access has grown steadily. There are now eight ISPs within Malaysia offering both dial-up and broadband connectivity, namely TIMENet Central, Jaring, TMNet, Streamyx, Nasionet, Maxis Net, Silicon Central and Malaysia Online.

Digital Divide

Digital divide researchers have pointed out the critical gaps in society among different groups in the context of their access to technology (Dutta-

Bergman, 2005). Most definitions of the term 'digital divide' refers to access to ICTs (Harris *et al.*, 2007). Harris *et al.* (2007) reports that Malaysia has made considerable advances to bridge the digital divide. According to Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported that as of June, 2007, 59% of the Malaysian population are internet users. The majority are in urban locations, with 26% and 24% of internet subscribers from Selangor and Kuala Lumpur respectively, and less than one percent in less developed states of Perlis and Kelantan (Shah, 2004). Due to the disparity, the government has initiated many promising e-pilot projects to ensure people in remote areas have access to computers. The digital divide becomes an issue of access to ICTs in order to improve the social and economic well being of underserved sections of the Malaysian community. They include women, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, youth, those in the rural areas, and indigenous group.

Recognizing that ICT can contribute to the empowerment of women and to reduce gender inequalities, the Malaysian government has taken initiative to improve women's access to technology. Joshi (1997) relates that men are considered the first beneficiaries of innovations, while women follow and take over the positions vacated by them. The progress of women is hampered by widespread prejudices regarding their ability to learn and to apply new technology. Technological work including ICT are often regarded as masculine and mastery, and control are often in the hands of men (Joshi, 1997). According to Wajcman and Pham Lobb (2007), such opinion obstructs women from gaining access to information about how to use technology. Nevertheless, women too are considered to play an important in the ICT revolution empowerment that transcends stereotype beliefs.

The International Women's Day of 1997, establishes all Malaysians regardless of gender, recognizes full gender equality, hence instate the role of women in ICT development (Srinivasan,

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