

Chapter 6

Gender and Public Access ICT

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that due to systemic gender biases in the use of and access to ICTs and their applications, as well as socio-cultural norms that position computing as a predominantly male activity, women in developing countries are more likely than men to face barriers to reaping the benefits of ICTs for their personal and community development. Gender analysis “asserts that power relations in class, race, ethnicity, age, and geographic location interact with gender, producing complex and hidden inequalities that affect social change” (APC WNSP, 2005). A review of recent literature on gender and ICT, and the results of the Landscape Study, suggest that there are both personal and collective benefits to women through the use of ICT, as well as barriers that prevent marginalized groups in society, and women in particular, from realizing these benefits. What are these barriers? What benefits does ICT offer women? Throughout this chapter, we will explore these barriers and benefits through examples drawn from our findings in the Landscape Study, embracing a cultural approach in analyzing the ways in which women transform their lives through the use of ICT, with a particular emphasis on ICT use through public access venues.

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that due to systemic gender biases in the use of and access to ICTs and their applications, as well as socio-cultural norms that position computing as a predominantly male activity, women in developing countries are more likely than men to face barriers to reaping the benefits of ICTs

for their personal and community development. Gender analysis “asserts that power relations in class, race, ethnicity, age, and geographic location interact with gender, producing complex and hidden inequalities that affect social change” (APC WNSP, 2005). A review of recent literature on gender and ICT, and the results of the Landscape Study, suggest that there are both personal and

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collective benefits to women through the use of ICT, as well as barriers that prevent marginalized groups in society, and women in particular, from realizing these benefits. What are these barriers? What benefits does ICT offer women? Throughout this chapter, we will explore these barriers and benefits through examples drawn from our findings in the Landscape Study, embracing a cultural approach in analyzing the ways in which women transform their lives through the use of ICT, with a particular emphasis on ICT use through public access venues.

Earlier in this book, we discussed what a typical user of public access to ICT looks like: young, with some formal education, and low-to-middle income levels. While there weren't huge discrepancies in the gender proportion of users across all venue types in all countries, use of ICT is not gender neutral. Technical, social, and cultural barriers emphasize women's exclusion from the benefits of ICT.

When women use ICTs, not only can they experience significant personal benefits, but their communities can benefit as well. In the following sections, we will explore the personal and collective benefits that result from women's use of public access computers in developing countries, as well as the barriers hindering their use of this technology. We compare what is reported in the specialized literature on gender and ICT with data from the Public Access Landscape Study. Based on these results, we suggest that development policies around ICT take the following three-pronged approach to improving ICT access for women: provide ICT training for women, establish partnerships to raise awareness of ICT benefits for women, and produce content relevant to women users.

The details discussed in this chapter are informed both by the findings of the Landscape Study and by a review of the literature of gender and ICT. The literature review did not precede the study but was done simultaneously with the analysis of a gender dimension of public access

to ICT. The findings may not be an exact reflection of any single country, but they represent a meaningful source of trends and patterns about gender and public access ICT for community.

Let us first define gender, as we will use it throughout this chapter. We frame our discussion following this definition offered by the Association for Progressive Communication (APC):² gender is defined as "a concept that refers to the social and cultural constructs that each society assigns to behaviors, characteristics, and values attributed to men and women, reinforced by symbols, laws and regulations, institutions, and perceptions" (APC WNSP, 2005). The concept of gender is not synonymous with "sex" – it does not simply refer to the biological traits men and women are born with. Rather, gender is used to understand how the concepts of femininity and masculinity are constructed (APC WNSP, 2005; Gillard, Howcroft, Mitev, & Richardson, 2008). Further, traditional gender roles are often oppressive to women and limit their opportunities (APC WNSP, 2005), including their use of ICT.

It is important to put this discussion of gender and ICT in a brief historical context. Present-day tensions are often a result of what has happened over time in the field of technology. Early feminist studies of women and information technology focused on women's under-representation in IT occupations and their over-representation in operator and clerical jobs. These studies drew attention to the disparity between men's and women's salaries in the information technology industry; the proposed solution was to increase the number and proportion of women in the IT industry (APC WNSP, 2005; Henwood, 1991a, 1991b). In the 1980s, feminists turned their attention to the gendered nature of technology itself and began calling for a technology based on women's values: "Feminists from this perspective promote women's greater humanism, pacifism, nurturance and spiritual development and seek a new vision of technology that would incorporate these values" (APC WNSP, 2005; Griffin, 1983).

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