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Gender, ICTs, Human Development and Prosperity

Essay by Nancy Spence, September 17, 2009 in response to A Dialogue on ICTs, Human Development, Growth, and Poverty Reduction

Plus ca change! Much has changed in the past 6 years since the first Harvard Forum. In particular, mobile phone access has jumped in every region and in most countries of the World. From research sketched in the Forum's background paper, and research starting more from a gender lens, phone access for women, mostly mobiles, is greatest where total access is greatest – highest in Asia, next in South and Central America, and lowest in Africa. In Asian countries, mobile phone access and use is becoming universal – through market supply and demand and, particularly for the poorest of the poor, also through the provision or support activities of non-profits.

Many exciting examples abound since we last met, particularly from Asia where ICT has transformed the way women "do" their business, whether it is at a personal level or at an employment one; whether it is in the home, at the workplace or in the field. I recall:

- The village phone, developed by Grameenphone, transforming over a quarter of a million shy women villagers to commercial mobile phone use with savvy.
- An ADB-funded Plant Doctor program that transformed Ms Piyara Begum from a housewife with a green thumb, to a businesswoman advising Bangladeshi farmers on how to address crop problems by mobile phone.
- Community Learning Centers set up across rural India by SEWA to provide IT training to grassroots women in villages to better manage their productive systems through interactive training in forestry, water conservation and leadership.
- ICT tools to provide sexuality and life skills education that empower adolescent women in Chennai, India.
- With most women in full time work outside the home, an E-Homemakers virtual network that supports more than 10,000 SEA women, through self-help innovations to better balance home-work issues. [1]

These are only a few examples of how ICT has enabled Asian women to break through the so-called digital divide. It is posited that, despite the mainstream opinion that technology is gender neutral, cultural values and practices have more tended to exclude women from access to and power over different technologies.

So does this mean all is well, and we can let the for-profit and non-profit sectors take care of access, services, and the human development, innovation and poverty reduction potential of ICTs and communication especially *when it applies to women?*

I fear not. 'The more things change, the more they stay the same' is a saying which carries truth. Access and services depend also on public policy and regulation in markets and on policy and investment in ICT infrastructure and public e-services provision. The human development and capability approach, in particular, stresses the intimate relationships among *power, politics and policies.*

> "Public policy involves a course of action and a web of decisions, and cannot be associated with only one moment, one actor, one decision and one action. Policy is

political: the policy process is closely connected to the nature of power itself. [2]

As Bridge (Cutting edge Pack on Gender and ICT's) suggests:

> *"The ability to harness technology is political. It involves a shift in power relations that reflects women's needs interests and aspirations. Engendering ICT is not merely about the greater use of ICTs by women, but about transforming the ICT system itself to relate more to women and their needs".*

One of the greatest challenges in harnessing ICTs for the social transformation of women is to see them as ICT *producers, developers and decision makers*, not simply consumers, in order to ensure further equal participation of women in the Information Society. [3]

However, information and communications at every level of prosperity, including the bottom of the pyramid, themselves have impacts on power relations and on policy. You have only to look a large and growing body of research - the GRACE studies for example, or LIRNEasia's video cases of mobile use at the BoP, to be convinced that access to mobiles and other ICTs is creating opportunities for women in every area of capabilities and freedoms.

Social: Research can conclude that use of mobiles is mainly 'social,' and thus in some way not 'economic,' not sufficient to justify the cost. This is economic nonsense. In the human development and 'happiness' literatures, family and social relationships are among the highest contributors to wellbeing. People clearly value communication, spending surprisingly high shares (15%) of income – in the BoP. It is not hard to argue that women have high demand for social relationships and networking relative to men. It is also a base for building other roads to empowerment.

Economic: Case study research is clear; in countless specific ways, mobiles and ICTs increase opportunities and benefits from economic activities including agriculture and fishing, marketing and trading, small business, time management, access to economic services – banking and credit in particular – and access to public services – particularly health and education.

Other: The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) highlights several missing dimensions of prosperity/poverty – currently missing in measurement and public discussion – including security, dignity and empowerment. Taking just security, benefits of mobiles and ICTs in disaster warning and management and in personal security enhancement are of major importance to women.

What then are the main challenges? I put forward a short list for discussion, recognizing that others with greater specialized knowledge are in a better position to recommend and prioritize – and that each country and society is unique.

1. *Access*: Countries with low access and/or high cost need to change; continued research and activism on policy and regulation is one key ingredient. Many countries, especially in Africa, need more financial support for basic public ICT infrastructure (and services) investments. Many (poorest) localities need some combination of market, non-profit, self help and public access provision. [4]
2. *Public services*: Gender-Budgets research, in most countries, provides a framework for assessing over time the outcomes of public service provision for women and men. It would be useful to draw together country research on health and education (e- and non-e) in particular – to identify how telehealth and distance learning could be better designed (content and delivery) for women's needs and benefit. Women in many countries also have a strong motive and ability

to manage disaster warning and management mechanisms – with sufficient communications capabilities.
3. *Economic services*: Mobile banking and financial services merit nurture and oversight, often in opposition to vested interests. The successful initial cases like the Philippines suggest widespread adoption and adaptation soon. Saving 5-10% on foreign and internal remittances would benefit women greatly and save some $40 billion a year on foreign remittances alone. Development of existing and new micro credit mechanisms through SMS-based mobile banking could be transformative for women.
4. *Everything else*: There are a host of gender-ICT activities undertaken by women, ICT initiatives, gender organizations and others. The background paper covers some in gender, rights, governance, empowerment, conflict, environment and energy. These are fundamentally important, to continue, study, improve and support. They relate most often to the development of public dialogue and argument, as Professor Sen so strongly emphasizes, particularly in countries and localities where it least exists.

[1] IDRC flyer, Information and Communication Technologies for Development: see www.ehomemakers.net

[2] An Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Human Development, Ch. 12: http://www.ophi.org.uk/pubs/Textbook_Ch12.pdf

[3] Gender and ICT-E primer Angela M. Kuga Thas, Chat Garcia Ramilo and Cheekay Cinco UNDP (2007)

[4] The socio-economic return on these investments is even (considerably) higher if ICTs and communication foster and enable development of functionings, capabilities and freedoms. Further research on this front is needed.

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