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Reflecting on Social and Gender Injustice In The Context of Human Development, Poverty and ICTs

Essay by Ineke Buskens, September 16, 2009 in response to A Dialogue on ICTs, Human Development, Growth, and Poverty Reduction

Introduction

In concerning ourselves about the role of ICTs for human development and poverty reduction, we take a position grounded in a sense of social justice, and we look through the lens of human agency at the economic potential of ICTs.

The concept of human development is grounded in social justice. A commitment to social justice in a gendered world means commitment to the practical application of gender justice. Social and gender issues are inextricably intertwined, yet gender justice is an end in itself. Women have the right to experience their being-ness for themselves, to perceive themselves as the most important reason for their own existence, and not to be defined mainly by what they mean to others: husbands, children and parents.

Having said that, social and economic empowerment of women will have a wider developmental impact than individual women's advancement, because women are "concerned with the well being of their children, their husbands and the economics of their villages" and wider communities. "Nothing is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of the political, economic and social participation and leadership of women" (Sen, 1999).

 "Research in, about and for human development" has to be grounded in the conscious acknowledgement of and reflection on the agency of the various parties that define its practice: donors, researchers and research participants. In this text I want to set the stage for reflection on the agency of two such groups: women who use Information Communication Technology for development and empowerment, and people like us who do research with such women or who set a research agenda for others to do so.

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices on the world.   The concept of choice cannot be discussed outside of the concept of consciousness and the interplay between consciousness and environment.

What seems important to me for our discussions over these two days, is attempting to understand women's rationalities for development action (or the lack of it) as grounded in their realities, and to share with each other the frames of reference we as researchers (and as the ones setting research agendas) entertain. Our perspectives, whether they are unquestioned assumptions or lived experience that got transformed into personal truth and wisdom, will define the knowledge construction processes that will impact on future research participants' and research beneficiaries' parameters for agency and choice.

I thus want to tell a story that was one of the case studies in the GRACE Africa Research Network's First Phase, contextualize it with insights gained within the wider research quest in which this particular research took place (Buskens & Webb), and respond to it from my own

theoretical, methodological and normative positions. This allows me to speak to the relationship between ICTs, human development and poverty reduction, while becoming transparent as a "constructor of knowledge".

Bahati's story

"Bahati was born in a rural area in Tanzania to poor parents. Her education was minimal - primary school and a few months of dress-making training. So Bahati decided to try her luck in Dar es Salaam, where she could live with an aunt who was supported by her children. Bahati first tried dress-making. Because the competition was too fierce to make a reasonable living, she turned to hairdressing instead. She worked long hours and made very little money because she worked in a salon owned by somebody else, but she persisted. She started saving of the little money she earned and after two years of saving was able to buy a mobile phone. Once she had this phone, she had her freedom: she shared her number with her clients and soon after, could establish her own business. Never did she use the phone for private or social calls; she only used it to receive bookings and inquire from clients what hair extensions they wanted. By the time the researchers finished their work with Bahati she had bought a house of her own and was able to rent out a room for extra income. With a monthly income of about 300$, Bahati lives well above the poverty line of less than a dollar per day. In all the years that Bahati has lived in Dar es Salaam, she has not been able to contact her family at home because of the fact that there is no connectivity in the area where she was born" (Meena & Rusimbi, pp. 194, 195).

Responses to Bahati's Story

The Fix-It approach...

Stories such as these take on a life of their own in our discourses. If, in listening to this story, one would react with: "Ah shame, let's send all our second-hand mobiles to Tanzania so people like Bahati would not need to save for two years to obtain a mobile phone", the meaning of this story for development research practice and discourse would be missed. Such a "fix-it" reflex originates from the listener's need to see a different reality than the one which presents itself. The emotions of judgment close the processes of analysis and interpretation prematurely, and should be held lightly and observed closely.

Humans can do anything

The story speaks to the grand narrative of the resilience of the human spirit. When one's dream is powerful enough to commit to personal change, the greatest of adversities can be overcome. As such, the story is an opportunity to understand the processes of personal change that a "poor person striving for wealth and security" sets in motion. From such a perspective, the two years that Bahati needed to save for her mobile phone were probably pivotal. Maybe those two years were essential not only to hone her hairdressing talent, but also to forge a disciplined mind, grow in self-confidence and prepare for a new life. And in those two years Bahati combined her "power within which pushed her to do things for her own advancement" (Meena & Rusimbi, p. 194) with the power to reach out for support and to receive it, the "power with" . The two "powers" together became the "power to" accomplish, and to realize her dream.

Beware of romanticizing the poor

Idealizing the survival power of the poor, which is deemed to be grounded in their social base and social organization, would be unethical. Bahati would not have succeeded in her quest if it had not have been for her aunt, and her aunt would not have survived and been able to support Bahati if it had not been for her children. That is all true. But one has to be cautious here. Gonzalez de la Rocha describes how the "myth of survival" (to which her earlier research had contributed) was abused by an international development organization to justify policies that put

breaking-point stress on the Mexican poor. She emphasizes empathically that social and economic policies should be designed and implemented with a view to strengthening the resources of the poor, instead of taking them for granted (Gonzalez de la Rocha, p. 62).

Poverty is expensive …gender discrimination more expensive still

One could raise the question of what Bahati's country and even the world at large are actually missing out on, with Bahati still living on the margins of her society: What would a woman like this, with the focus and discipline she displayed, have accomplished if educated well? What contributions could she have made to her society and to the world? CEO of a network perhaps? A minister? If she had been born a boy in that area of the world, her chances of receiving more education might have been better, and thus her contribution to her community more substantial.

It is about use of ICTs not about ICTs

The crucial research concept is not "ICTs", but "use of ICTs". ICTs do not do anything, be it alleviating poverty or creating wealth. In this particular case, Bahati worked herself out of poverty into some measure of security and wealth through the power of her disciplined mind, her willingness to change and take risks by leaving her family and familiar environment, and the wise and economic use of her mobile phone. Avoiding the pitfalls of personifying objects and objectifying human beings contributes to conceptual clarity and thus research quality. Furthermore, accepting "use of ICTs" instead of "ICTs" as the main research concept creates space for the concept of human agency.

ICTs as handmaidens of our divisive economic-financial-monetary systems

The story evokes the question as to why a mobile phone should cost almost two years of a hairdresser's salary in East Africa, while the same item would cost a hairdresser in the North or the West not more than a lunch or two. There is something fundamentally wrong with the economic-financial-monetary systems that we use to govern our world. These systems are not only instrumental in creating more disparity between countries, but also within countries. When ICTs are drawn into this financial-economical-monetary power field, the ICT users perpetuate its dynamics of division and exploitation. Abraham's research in Zambia reveals how the prohibitive cost of mobile phone use has a profound divisive effect on women who use their phones for the explicit purposes of connection, mobilization and social advocacy. The women users now speak of "callers" and "bleepers"; a "virtual class system" has been created. One can only wonder about the longer-term effects this will have on Zambia's women's movement and other social movements (Abraham, p. 102). There seems to be a limit to the empowering potential of ICT use within a profoundly divisive economic-financial-monetary system.

Sub-Saharan Africa as the benchmark for the developing world

Bahati may have been lucky that she was born in East Africa: if born to poor parents in India (Kerala excluded), Pakistan, China or North Africa, she might not have lived to reach adulthood. In China Bahati could have been thrown away as a female baby. In India she could have died from malnutrition as a toddler. In North Africa she could have been sold into slavery at 5 years old. The low female-male ratios in these countries indicate that 100 million women could be missing. With a female-male ratio of 1.022, sub-Saharan Africa is used as a benchmark for the developing world (Sen, pp. 99-110). The women that bear the heaviest burden of gender discrimination in this world may actually never get to a position where they can use ICTs for their development and empowerment.

Female and male work connotations and aspirations

Bahati's story also speaks to the power of the gendered aspirations for labor and

entrepreneurship prevalent in her community. She was exposed to ideas about dress-making and hairdressing and thus carved her future in line with these horizons. "Female" occupations are usually less lucrative than "male" labor activities, thus contributing to the feminization of poverty. According to Margaret Mead, the value given to gender attaches itself to the value given to labor activities. In other words, in a culture where men do the weaving and women the pottery, weaving would be valued higher than pottery. In a culture where women did the weaving and men the pottery, pottery would be higher valued. Evidence from recent times would support this observation. This would mean that women entering certain ICT arenas would automatically "devalue" those sectors and end up being lesser paid for their labor. So instead of pushing policies that aim to stream women into male-dominated fields, it would be good to investigate how images of "womanhood" and (economic) value impact each other at various layers of (un)consciousness, and design interventions that would influence such dynamics.

Using ICTs in gender-bending ways…

In using her mobile phone to start and run her hairdressing business, Bahati did not (have to) break any gender images about how a good and decent woman should behave. But then, she was not married…

Women operating village phones in rural Uganda reported to the researcher that they had to choose between their marriage and their economic advancement, since their husbands could not cope with their increasing economic empowerment and social independence (Bantebya, pp. 156-160). Some women divorced and some toned their businesses down. The "deviant case" (out of 9 case studies) attributed her acquisition of a husband to her improved financial circumstances and valued his support in her "gender-bending" work: "My husband knows the value of my phone business and does not complain about my prolonged absence from home and exposure to the public. This alone gives me strength and confidence, and resilience to continue with such work despite my Islamic faith, which does not condone such work, especially for married women. The fact that I am working against such odds makes me feel empowered" (Bantebya, pp. 156-160).

It seems that for women to make use of the opportunities for advancement that ICTs offer, they often need the capacity to stand alone and forsake the need for social approval. Yet there seems to be the potential for (more progressive?) companionship when such a revolutionary pathway has been carved out.

ICTs: Power and empowerment

ICTs are powerful tools that can be socially invasive and personally addictive. In order to use ICTs for empowerment and development, certain internal and external factors need to be in place; women need to be empowered to a certain degree in order to use ICTs for empowerment. Bahati is a case in point: she did not become a slave to her mobile phone, she remained in control of its use and displayed extraordinary discipline and constraint. While these powerful tools need a certain power to handle them to one's advantage, their use can be intrinsically empowering when handled well.

In their research at the University of Harare, Zimbabwe, Mbambo-Thata et al. found that the majority of female students would (or could?) not make use of the free access to the University library computers. They reported that this access conflicted with their other (gendered) responsibilities in terms of timing, and that they were running the risk of being shoved aside by male students when lining up. There was, however, a very small minority of female students who stood their ground (literally and figuratively). These students had previous experience in ICT use, realized that there was a discrepancy between the "theory of equal access" and the "practice of unequal access" and understood this situation as gender discrimination. The researchers wondered whether it was these students' previous exposure to computers and their confidence

in using them that motivated and enabled them to stand their ground and "become aware of the existing discrimination and inequality between women and men, and how it affected their lives" (Mbambo-Thata et al.)

Concluding remarks

ICTs are incredibly powerful tools that have affected and transformed all our lives in many and myriad ways. For social researchers, the use of ICTs and effects of the use of ICTs also function as "scratch cards": they reveal the dynamics and patterns underlying (apparently) blank surfaces of social and gender realities. When women in Zambia are killed by their husbands for using their phone to live a social life beyond their husbands' control, a gender reality that may have remained hidden before suddenly becomes starkly visible. This makes us as ICT researchers and as those setting ICT research agendas responsible for sharing what we see beyond a technical perspective: we have to highlight the social and gender injustices that become visible to us, even when we do not have quick-fix solutions handy.

The reflections shared in this text are merely my subjective selection. Many more issues pertaining to social and gender injustice could be shared in a context of human development, poverty and ICTs. However, I am also aware of the fact that there are many more aspects to these issues of which I am not aware, because I have not developed the eyes to see them yet. Ours is a sexist and deeply unjust world, and having been socialized in such a world, nobody - not even the most conscious among us - can claim to be totally free of gender and social blindness. There are only degrees of commitment to become free of such. It is thus pertinent both for reasons of women empowerment and general development to face up to our (inevitable) social and gender blindness in ICT research agendas and designs, as well as in ICT policy briefs and decisions.

Because we all still have so much to learn about such issues, a social and gender focus should be integrated in research and policy thinking from the beginning. This would also mean that space and time would have to be created for policy makers, corporate agents, researchers and practitioners to learn and become aware during processes of research and implementation of "what is really going on".

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