

Media Brief

PADDLING IN CIRCLES WHILE THE WATERS RISE: Gender Issues in ICTs and Poverty Reduction *by Angela M. Kuga Thas*

This brief is published for the Gender and ICT Awards knowledge-sharing session where the winners and guests deliberate the issue, “Can ICTs really help in women’s economic empowerment?”. This session is being held at the 10th AWID International Forum on Women’s Rights and Development in Bangkok, Thailand from 27-30 October, 2005. This brief is a condensed version of the issues paper with the same title which was commissioned by the Association for Progressive Communications Women’s Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP).

Summary

In 2003, the United Nations’ World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) officially recognised the emerging importance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as the main impetus for developing nations to achieve economic growth. To underscore ICT’s role in development, the WSIS prioritised issues of infrastructure, connectivity and access in its Plan of Action and enshrined its importance in the Declaration of Principles. Where the WSIS failed was to adequately lay down the political framework and global platform for a gender perspective and analysis on ICTs and poverty reduction. Despite decades of development theory and initiatives aimed at relief and eradication, poverty continues to be a growing phenomenon. This paper presents a number of different angles to this persistent problem – from the definition

of poverty to systemic causes of global poverty. These aspects are then related to the tools used in addressing poverty – from the various approaches, measurements and indicators of poverty, to issues of political will, both within national and international contexts. The paper concludes with several key recommendations to help facilitate a stronger gender perspective in poverty reduction through the application of ICTs.

Overview

ICTs, like other types of technology before it, are being heralded as the much needed impetus for the economic growth of a nation, and hence the thrust behind ICT for development (ICT4D). The first phase of the United Nations’ World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in 2003 witnessed this global consensus and unsurprisingly, prioritised issues of infrastructure, connectivity and access (WSIS Plan of Action 2003). What the WSIS failed to acknowledge is how integral information and communication have been to the development of human society, even prior to the recent “discovery” and availability of the new ICTs, and that throughout generations, women have been the natural guardians of local and indigenous knowledge at the community level.

In traditional knowledge systems, women were recognised and respected for their competence and local knowledge, based on experiments and

experience, on crops, seeds, medicinal plants and health care. Today, information is most often developed and disseminated by those outside existing local knowledge systems, usually without the participation of local communities. Thus, information may or may not reach rural women and rural women's knowledge systems often become obscured and undervalued.

In spite of the general awareness and acknowledgment of women's role in traditional knowledge systems and the importance of such systems in development, there has been considerable lack of understanding and appreciation of power dynamics and gender inequality that is suffered at all levels of society. As a result, women were marginalised in the final documents of WSIS (WSIS Declaration of Principles 2003).

Technology, like money, is equivalent to power. In the wrong hands, ICTs can do more harm than good; it can exacerbate poverty, inequalities and disempowerment and reinforce discriminatory and oppressive structures, systems and practices which are particularly harmful to women and girls. In the right hands, and driven by the right motivation, ICTs can contribute to eradicating women's economic, social and political isolation. ICTs can be used to empower women not only through access, but control over the kind of information they access, receive, obtain, and collect. More importantly, women can use ICTs to adapt and innovate collected information into new or localised knowledge for further sharing with others in the community – contributing towards their self-empowerment, self-determination and well-being. In order to ensure this, an enabling policy and regulatory environment is critical and can only come about if all stakeholders genuinely work together to address existing gender inequalities that perpetuate the discrimination and subordination of women. To be truly relevant, ICTs for poverty reduction must incorporate a gender perspective and analysis.

Reducing Poverty

The UN Statement of Commitment of the Administrative Committee on Coordination for Action to Eradicate Poverty defines poverty as follows:

"Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society... It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal and fragile environments without access to clean water and sanitation".

Poverty, while primarily identified as poverty of income, requires a number of different measures in order to alleviate it, let alone eradicate it. Most know that to address poverty, issues of access to and affordability of

education and health are key aspects that must be addressed. However, with globalisation and the move towards a more borderless world, these measures are no longer sufficient. This is because poverty is rooted to power imbalances, which are in turn, rooted in gender inequality dynamics that stem from issues that cut across race, religion, status, culture, and geographical location, among others. Without addressing the different ways in which men and women are socialised and subverted, poverty is bound to remain and manifest in a vicious cycle.

Economic development that addresses poverty can no longer be measured merely in terms of financial income. Over the years, other non-income measurements have been identified to determine economic development levels.

These include the Quality of Life index as measured through literacy rate, infant mortality and life expectancy. Another is the Human Development Index which combines longevity with living standards and educational attainment. A third measurement focuses on the provision of basic needs such as adequate nutrition, primary education, health, sanitation, water supply, and housing – services which the poorest segments of the population should have access to. Finally, there is the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) which also measures life expectancy at birth, access to education and per capita product – but more importantly, focuses on the differences between men and women in these areas as a way to measure the economic status of the female population in each country.

Related to the GDI, the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) also measures gender inequality, but in the economic and political spheres of activity. The GEM captures gender inequality between men and women in three key areas: political participation and decision-making power, economic participation and decision-making power, and power over economic resources, as measured by estimated earned income. A higher value indicates a higher level of gender empowerment.

Since they were launched in 1995, GDI and GEM results have shown significant progress in closing gender gaps in the last quarter of the 20th century. However, a trends analysis of the same results shows that progress towards gender equality is not dependent on the income level of a society; but rather more dependent on political will. The UN noted that governments have made the most progress when they have been willing to put women's concerns at the heart of their policies, and champion the necessary changes in order to achieve real progress.

If we intend to address poverty in its broader definition of "a denial of choices and opportunities which results in disempowerment and further impoverishment," then there is a need to design economic/development

plans based on indicators that measure lack of empowerment and the extent of realisation of basic human rights.

The international human rights framework is designed to address discrimination and oppression that could arise from power differentials. The International Bill of Human Rights of 1948, for example, serves as a reminder to all that these human rights are the minimum (not the maximum) standards we should aim to achieve for all human beings in the world.

Rights and needs are intimately linked, as are economic/social rights and civil/political rights. However, with the liberal interpretation of rights came the tendency to consider some rights to be more important than others. This practice of selecting and prioritising rights in a hierarchy for implementation continues within and among nations, despite the fact that the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, held in 1993 in the wake at the end of the Cold War, had endorsed the principle of universality and indivisibility among the different kinds of rights – meaning that rights are to be applied equally to all persons and one type of right (e.g. right to clean water) is not to be regarded as more important than another (e.g. right to freedom of opinion and expression).

The separation of rights is counterproductive, especially when seen through a “gender lens”. It is necessary to go beyond the idea (and practice) that rights and needs are opposing policy options – there cannot be one set of rights for women within the household and in her personal life, and a different set of rights for the larger society.

Using a “gender lens” requires the State and others to analyse the situation as to how it affects women and men differently. A situation of poverty for a community does not mean that all individuals in a community suffer the impact of poverty and its vicious cycle in the same manner and degree. Women, more than men, bear the brunt of poverty.

Seeing Poverty through a “Gender Lens”

The “gender lens” is like a pair of spectacles that allows the viewer to see both the forest and the trees. This means the individual not only understands the big picture but also understands how the big picture came about – viewing all social phenomena from a gender perspective, probing into hierarchical, unequal and unjust relationships between women and men. In an individual level, this requires a consciousness that continuously challenges socially accepted roles of women and men which directly or indirectly result in harmful health practices or secondary or minor roles for women.

Poverty is multidimensional. It relates to aspects that are economic (income, work, ownership of assets, credit, etc.), human (health, education), political (power, rights, vote), and socio-cultural (status, dignity, social exclusion)

which have an impact on the individual’s protection (against insecurity, risks and vulnerability) and overall well-being and integrity.

Reducing the gender gap in education is important because cultural tendencies favour boys over girls. Left unchecked, the conscious or unconscious promotion of stereotypes will ensure gender inequalities to persist in the next generations which will in turn perpetuate existing power imbalances between men and women, keeping women in subordinated and oppressed roles.

On the economic front, actual figures show that in most countries, women actually do twice as much unpaid work as men – amounting to 10–35% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – and work longer hours than men. Women bear an average of 53% of the burden of paid and unpaid work in developing countries, and 51% in industrialised countries. Roughly, 66% of women’s work burden is expended on unpaid activities. For men, the reverse is true where unpaid labour makes up only 25%.

The significant contribution of women’s paid and unpaid work to global production continues to remain invisible today in indicators that we use in economic development planning. This is one of the reasons why poor women are often seen as “mere housewives” rather than as breadwinners. Looking through the “gender lens”, it is quite easy to “shatter the myth that men are the main breadwinners of the world”, as it allows us to fully acknowledge the value of women’s unpaid work and women’s work hours.

Applying Our “Gender Lens” in Using ICTs for Poverty Reduction

Five key erroneous assumptions first expounded by Ingrid Burkett in 2000 remain very much relevant today, because they prevent a better understanding of inequalities in today’s global information society:

These five key erroneous assumptions claim that:

1. Give the poor a computer and they will move from being information poor to information rich.
2. Information inequality is a North/South issue.
3. Access to more information enriches people’s lives.
4. The “information society” will be more democratic and participatory.
5. Given enough information, we can solve all the world’s problems.

Access as experienced by the poor, particularly women, goes beyond providing for a computer. Access means putting into place the necessary physical infrastructure such as electricity, phone lines, computer hardware and software, and servers. It also means establishing social infrastructure such as computer literacy, local content, training, political will (including the legal framework) and economic ability. Given the problems of access,

especially for the poorest and most marginalised communities, the relevance and practical outcomes of ICTs are harder to demonstrate. Since it is necessary to show more direct practical outcomes, ICT-related programmes or initiatives can end up initially serving only the practical gender needs of women, which in turn would more likely reinforce socio-cultural expectations of women and their traditional roles in society. If we are to alleviate poverty using the "gender lens", the issue of access must include addressing the roots of poverty that lie in the social, political and economic dimensions of access and the gender disparities within each.

Information inequality is hardly a North/South issue. It is a market/social issue. This is a stark reality even in the USA, the most internet "literate" country that pushes for market liberalisation of developing nations, but also the land where those with the least access to computers and online services are people who live in rural areas with low incomes, those in poorer central city areas, black people, single-parent households (particularly households headed by women), and those with limited schooling. Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) exacerbate these inequalities, ensuring the information-poor remain deprived of information that can help alleviate their poverty.

Access to information alone does not enrich people's lives. However, how people make sense of it, evaluate it, reach their own understanding of it and transform it into knowledge, and then use it, certainly can. While studies have shown that people tend to seek information and groups on the internet who will support and reinforce their points of view (immaterial of how bigoted, biased and misinformed they may seem), in the developing world, ongoing projects have also shown that the poor know what kind of information they need in order to make their lives easier.

How ICTs are used mirrors the power structure in the real world. The production of information and who controls it is about power, and we need to understand these power relationships by closely examining the origins of information to its purposes and consequences if we are truly committed to eradicating inequalities in the "information society". Since the organisation, presentation and origins are all inscribed with cultural, social and political messages, this essentially means that both the medium and the message are socially constructed and hence, cannot be gender neutral but could be gender blind, and can very much be gender biased. It is important for local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and local content developed by women be made available as widely as possible since these are valuable to development and poverty reduction.

Information alone is not knowledge. Information becomes knowledge when the local context is added, linking information to the user's environment and particular situation. Very often this link has to be made by the user herself. A wealth of information that tries to measure and address poverty already

exists. But what is needed to resolve real problems is not additional information, but rather, political will, recognition of personal and social responsibilities and ultimately, action on the part of governments, private sector and civil society that prioritise social and gender justice. In a non-partisan enabling environment, ICTs can and are making a difference.

Recommendations

Current strategies and approaches to address poverty are choices based on lessons learned garnered through imperfect efforts. Gender mainstreaming is increasingly being dismissed as an approach to address poverty because the approach has not been able to show the required results. And yet, gender mainstreaming has not been able to be as effective as it is expected to be because it has yet to be meaningfully implemented. The ineffective implementation of gender mainstreaming is largely due to lack of political will in using the "gender lens" and ensuring a very integrated and cross-sector analysis of the situation. This has subsequently led development agencies to stop insisting on the gender equality approach but rather to insist on the development of poverty reduction strategies, which in recent years have included a stronger bent towards the formation of public-private partnerships in the absence of efforts and resources towards effective formations of multistakeholder partnerships (MSPs).

Recommendation: Guarantee a gender analytical approach in national ICT4D policies

ICTs are being used to put incomes in the hands of the poor, which in turn, can generate the growth impulse needed to expand the global economic pie. This is the "bubbling up" theory of growth, i.e. the growth engine will bubble up from the production and consumption of the poor – redirecting the economy to their capabilities. However, while the poor may initially start by looking for direct material benefits when ICT centres are designed as conducive spaces for ICT use, these same participants will find themselves engaging in processes of innovation and exploration whose benefits are more subtle and long-term. National ICT4D policies need to ensure a conducive environment not just for the technological aspects of ICT4D, but must also provide guarantees (from human rights and gender equality perspectives) as well as for the social, economic and political spaces that come with the use of ICTs.

Recommendation: Ensure a pro-poor enabling environment

While an ICT4D policy framework that is well-tailored to the needs of the country and integrated into its poverty reduction strategy is needed, poverty alleviation realistically requires an overall conducive environment for economic and political governance.

Rather than a one-sided focus on the private sector as a whole, policies, mechanisms and programmes aimed at poverty reduction need to focus on two broad areas related to enterprise: 1) the capability-building and market linkages development for micro, small and medium entrepreneurs, particularly women; and 2) the establishment of policies, mechanisms and programmes that would both promote and strengthen social entrepreneurial efforts of both women and men, young and old.

- Rules and regulations need to be made more favorable to small, medium and social enterprises, and ensure that women are not further discriminated out of gender blindness, ignorance or neglect in the program design and implementation.
- Guarantee of freedom of expression and the right to information. The poor can protect themselves from oversights of and inefficiencies within the State if they are able to get their concerns heard and access the right information in a more timely manner.
- Plurality of independent media. Investigative journalism that is independent and non-partisan can be the most effective mechanism in ensuring the rights of the poor, particularly poor women. Independent media can play a more effective role in establishing alternative ways of bringing the views and concerns of the poor to the negotiating table, allowing leverage to the poor in their bargaining power.
- Promotion of open source software will strengthen developing countries by ensuring that information becomes and remains a global public good for all.

Recommendation: Strengthen and increase the number of collaborative partnerships

Although partnerships are strengthening around a greater sense of common purpose, there is much to be done to close the gaps in understanding and increase cooperation. A clearer understanding of mutual rights and responsibilities between the State and civil society is required. Partnerships have too often been adversarial rather than collaborative. The pace of sharing of experiences and good practices fall far behind the growth rate of poverty. There is a need to develop mechanisms that would make partnerships more inclusive of all stakeholders, particularly those who are institutionally small and community-based. This need becomes particularly pertinent when taking into account the fast pace of change in the area of ICTs and their application.

Recommendation: Renegotiate relationship agreements between international agencies

The Relationship Agreements that currently link the World Bank and IMF with the UN should be renegotiated, and a similar Relationship Agreement to link the WTO and the UN should be created. All of these institutions either already are or are becoming major influential players in the area of ICT4D. These agreements should: 1) clarify the responsibilities of the IMF, World Bank and WTO to the UN, and 2) enhance the ability of the UN to ensure that international financial and trade institutions fully respect the jurisdiction of other agencies, funds and bodies, including UNIFEM, for ensuring compatibility of trade, economic and financial policies with gender policies and women's rights; and the ILO for ensuring compatibility with its decent work agenda, with labour rights and social protection provisions. Women who have a role in all of these sectors are affected by the level of use of ICTs, the nature of these technologies, and the manner in which these are applied.

Recommendation: Review the existing economic and development framework, and establish systemic practices of cross-data gender analysis

There is a need to develop a more comprehensive economic and development framework that concretely takes into account gender – from a “gender lens”, to a gender geography, to gender transformative policies and strategies. The current economic and development framework is a male model. Like the traditional health model that treats the man and his situation as the universal standard without looking at the specific and very different health needs of women, the male economic development model is exactly the same. In health, gender equality and women's rights advocates have shown through various studies that doctors would provide considerably less consultation time with women compared to male patients. Likewise, our current economic and development framework behaves in the same manner.

Poverty strategies which primarily focus on fighting poverty in monetary terms may be effective for men, since male poverty may be chiefly attributed to economic factors and sometimes to ethnic discrimination – but are only partly directed against symptoms and causes that concern women's vulnerability which is exacerbated by gender inequality issues. Hence, what is needed are measures in the legal area to overcome women's vulnerability and institute other changes, such as establishing stronger and obligatory interconnections between the MDG reporting by countries and their progress reports on achieving gender equality that are heard by the CEDAW Committee.

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A great deal of knowledge about female and male poverty is already available, but this is not always in the form of hard economic data but are reflected in legal and other forms of discrimination regarding access to and control over resources, decision-making. For example, most women are restricted in their mobility because of cultural and religious beliefs. Restricted mobility produces restricted social networks for information, support and interaction. It also involves very material reliance on others' social networks from which one is excluded. It is known how women lack "spare time" and how women's unpaid work is not seen as "economically productive". For development planning to successfully reduce poverty, this knowledge must be acknowledged and incorporated within the financial and trade regimes to be effectively applied. Widening the social networks of women should be prioritised if women are to be empowered because it is through the informal power networks and gender stereotypes that women are disempowered. At the minimum, governments need to be supported in the collection of sex disaggregated data and tabulating this to enable a deeper analysis and a statistical system of cross-data comparisons (GDI, GEM and beyond) for policy formulation, national budgeting, and monitoring of progress.

Recommendation: Ensure accountability of TNCs and MNCs

Of all the products and services in the world, those that are ICT-related are probably the ones with the highest sales turnover and margin of profit, and TNCs and MNCs are fast entering this field of profitability, not necessarily limited only in the direct selling of products and services, including ICT infrastructure, but also in selling value-added ICT-related products and services, anywhere from banking to media. However, the lack of financial and social accountability of TNCs and MNCs to the country where they conduct their operations has been an ongoing problem faced by many developing nations. Governments in developing countries, particularly LDCs, are increasingly losing their ability to negotiate with these corporations, opening themselves up to and inviting further entrenchment of corruption within their ranks. Measures and mechanisms that have been mooted and accepted are facing a variety of

problems in implementation.

A key concern with regards to MNCs is their highly mobile nature. The highly centralised nature of MNCs allow them to stimulate the flow of investment, technology, profits, and more, but they tend not to experience a sense of loyalty to, or responsibility for, the citizens of the countries in which their subsidiaries reside. They establish subsidiaries in countries where conditions are most favourable to their business operations. To the disadvantage of the host country though, MNCs are better able to negotiate favourable terms and conditions for themselves, because of their ability to just pack up and leave, producing internal economic shocks in the sudden rise of unemployment. Hence, they are often more likely to close branch plants in times of economic downturn. As a result, concerns for the well-being of the citizens of the host government will tend to take a backburner to investment concerns.

While globally, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been promoted, this remains largely rhetoric, and corporations will only respond more positively when there is stronger regulation and closer monitoring by NGOs, trade unions and consumer groups. This is a paradoxical situation that can only change when international binding rules for corporations are established.

International rules governing investments and economic activity are not new ideas or practices. We can devise a similar set for ensuring the accountability of corporations, where the host country and parent companies, are responsible for the socio-economic crimes they commit elsewhere. Governments can be kept informed through a number of existing international reporting mechanisms, particularly country reports to CEDAW. These measures can range from imposing global social taxes, fees and fines which can then be re-channeled into gender transformative development programmes; to enforcing transparency rules, and enabling information to be collected on the investment, trade and employment practices of these corporations.