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Gendered, Wired and Globalized—
Gender and Globalization Issues in the New Information and Communication Technologies*

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Abstract

Globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon. It is largely the same exploitative relationship between colonizers and their colonies. The new element in present-day globalization that makes it distinct from imperialism in the days of yore is the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). These new information and communication technologies have become the primary engine of growth for a globalized economy and have affected the way we live in an unprecedented manner. Women are one of the groups that have been hugely affected by ICT-powered globalization. The gender divide within the digital divide is one of the most significant forms of disparities that resulted from the digital revolution. However, there are also certain groups of women who have benefited from the opportunities that the new information and communication technologies offer. This paper examines the advantages that the new ICTs bring to women. It also analyzes the social, economic, political, and cultural challenges that women confront in an ICT-driven globalized world.

New information and communication technologies comprise the driving force behind globalization. Multinational business corporations are able to operate with great efficiency and reap unprecedented profits because information and communication technologies make it possible for

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them to conduct business anywhere without the boundaries of time and space.

The present day globalized capitalism is not totally new. It is largely the same imperialism that has created major socio-economic inequities between the colonizing countries and their colonies. The control of markets and their expansion, the pillaging of natural resources, and the exploitation of labor are still the primary ways through which the elite minority rules. However, certain new elements also make today's globalized capitalism different. It is no longer limited to the ties created by colonialism. It is everywhere and it thrives anywhere where profits can be made. It is much more aggressive and far reaching.

More interestingly, it is fueled by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The new ICTs make it possible for multinational business entities to identify and expand the productivity base, set up new organizational forms, and construct a global economy that transcends state regulations and boundaries. This new globalized economy revolves around the operations of such multinational business corporations and global financial markets driven by a continuously accelerating technological research and development. Similarly, this globalized economy relies on the business corporations' ability to build and sustain networks that allow them to link up everything that is valuable according to corporate values and interests, while disconnecting everything else that does not feed into the profit-driven corporate value system.

Networks are a group of people with similar interests and concerns who interact and remain in formal or informal contact for mutual assistance and support. Such human networks are backed by a sophisticated computer setup that also forms part of the network. Communication technology scholar Manuel Castells stresses that

> ... networks may have hierarchies, but they have no center. Relationships between nodes are asymmetrical, but they are all necessary for the functioning of the network—for the circulation of money, information, technology, images, goods, services, or people throughout the network. The most critical distinction in this organizational logic is not stability, but inclusion or exclu-

> sion. Networks change relentlessly: they move along, form and re-form, in endless variation. Those who remain inside have the opportunity to share and, over time, to increase their chances. Those who drop out, or become switched off, will see their chances vanish (1998).

The key to the survival and success of networks is their ability to restructure and adapt as fast as the economic and socio-political environment demands. Such restructuring often demands changes in leadership, organizational composition, membership, organizational roles, functions, and tasks. Unfortunately, people, states or territories, whose economic sources and activities are very much defined by their location in such networks have a number of factors to consider before they could adapt to new structures. There are family and personal relations, community and cultural practices, as well as internal social and political relations that need to be taken into consideration. This seeming inflexibility or lack of capacity to adapt quickly puts women, indigenous people, the grassroots sector and other marginalized groups at a disadvantage.

When the business environment slows down, capital shifts and disinvests, top level managers transfer, software developers migrate, networks mutate. In many cases, "networks adapt, bypass the [current business environment] and re-form elsewhere, or with someone else. But the human matter on which the network was living cannot so easily mutate. It becomes trapped, or devalued, or wasted. And this leads to social underdevelopment" (Castells 1998). A concrete example of this is the collapse of dot com companies in Silicon Valley in 2000 which left many IT employees without jobs. The same could happen with the thousands of call center workers in the Philippines and India if new cheap IT labor sources will be tapped in the coming years.

Who Benefits?

Access to the new ICTs is extremely uneven among the different world regions and among countries within regions. According to the 2005 Internet World Stats, only 2.7% of Africans have access to the new ICTs as op-

posed to 9.0% Asians and 68.1% North Americans (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm).

English remains the dominant language in the ICT field as evidenced by the fact that computers are English-oriented, programming language is based on English, and most of the contents available online are in English. This does not come as a surprise because the USA is an ICT pioneer and the Internet was first developed in the United States. After English, German , French Japanese and Spanish are the other most-used languages in the Internet (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet). Unfortunately, none of these languages is spoken in countries in the Global South.

If access and usage of the new ICTs is concentrated in the Global North, it is no accident that three of the world's richest men, namely, Bill Gates–Microsoft owner and founder; Paul Allen, Microsoft co-founder; and Lawrence Joseph Ellison–Oracle (another software development firm) founder, are all key players in the IT business and are all Americans (http://www.forbes.com).

The representative of Saint Lucia who spoke to the UN Second Committee (Economic and Financial Committee) in a meeting in 2000 could not be more correct when she said: "When three billionaires were worth more than 600 million people in 48 countries, no more evidence was needed that globalization is not working. ... This form of globalization [is] a crime against humanity ..."

It is not surprising therefore that the information and communication technology revolution appears to have bypassed the poor.

Women and ICTs

The new ICTs have dramatically changed the ways women inform and communicate with each other and with their respective geo-political local, national, regional, and global communities. They have also been instrumental in dismantling the barriers to media entry, thus allowing more women to produce and distribute media productions that accurately and adequately articulate their issues, concerns, and aspirations. They have

enhanced the reach of established communication media such as community radio. In addition, the new method of electronic networking has enabled women to acquire new skills. It has allowed them to identify new contacts and consolidate their networks. Evidently, the new ICTs have and continue to be important tools in solidarity building and in facilitating the setting up of structure in support of people's struggles for genuine peace and gender justice (http://www.kit.nl/specials/html/it_women_and_internet.asp - Top#Top; Cabrera-Balleza, 2005).

However, while the new ICTs offer a wide range of opportunities, they also contribute in widening the gap between those who have access to resources and those who do not. There is a widening gender divide within the digital divide. Across the world, women are confronted with economic, social, cultural, and political barriers that limit or prevent them from accessing and benefiting from the new information and communication technologies. (*Ibid.*)

Issues

There are several issues that feminist activists contend with in gender and ICT policymaking and program implementation. Following are some of them:

1. Access

The issue of access is fundamental in gender and ICT discourse. Access to ICTs is made possible by the availability of the necessary infrastructure such as electricity, and telephone lines. However, in most countries in the Global South, communication infrastructures are only available in major cities and other urban centers. In rural and urban poor areas, where majority of women live, the necessary infrastructure is mostly absent. As UNIFEM and the UNU/TECH noted: 'Women, with their special responsibilities for children and the elderly, find it less easy than men to migrate to towns and cities. The urban bias in connectivity thus

deprives women, more than men, of the universal right to communicate" (UNIFEM and UNU/TECH 2000 as cited in Hafkin 2004).

The issue of access is also regarded as the most concrete manifestation of the gender divide within the digital divide. This is evident in the lower number of women who have access to ICTs compared to men. With the exception of the United States and Canada, "majority of the world's women do not use the Internet and therefore are excluded from the World Wide Web. The digital divide within countries broadly reflects the gender divide ... The trend for differentiation in use starts early, as seen in the United States where boys are five times more likely than girls to use home computers and parents spend twice as much on ICT products for their sons as they do for their daughters" (UNDP 1999: 62, as cited in Gurumurthy 2004).

There are also economic and socio-cultural barriers to overcome in relation to women's access to ICTs. These include illiteracy, lack of familiarity with English and other dominant languages of the Internet, absence or lack of computer training, domestic responsibilities, and the fact that the information delivered by ICTs is not that valuable to women. In addition, women generally earn less than men and they have less disposable income to spend on communications than men. Furthermore, telecenters and Internet cafes are located in places that women may not be comfortable frequenting or that are culturally inappropriate for them to visit. Frequently, telecenters and similar communication facilities in countries in the Global South are public spaces that operate during office hours. Given the gender-based multiple roles and reproductive responsibilities assigned to them, women hardly have the extra time and such public access centers may not be open when women are available to visit them. In cases when some telecenters are open in the evening, a lot of women opt not to go to them either because of cultural restrictions or safety considerations when going out at night. Obviously, some accommodations and enabling conditions need to be created to ensure gender equity in access and use of ICTs for women.

2. Education, Training and Capacity Building

Across the world, women are culturally conditioned in such a way that discourages them from pursuing science and mathematics. Historically, science and technology are also regarded as masculine fields and if there was any role for women, it was as free labor on boring experiments that required great patience, reliability and a capacity to undertake tedious tasks for long periods, where they exercised "feminine" qualities of perseverance and patience (Cabrera-Balleza 2005).

The fact that women and girls have less access to education is a major contributing factor that prevents them from equally benefiting from the opportunities that new ICTs offer. For example, of the 300 million children without access to education, two-thirds are girls (*Ibid*). Similarly, women comprise two-thirds of the world's 880 million illiterate adults (UN Population Fund 2000). Sophia Huyer, executive director of the Gender Advisory Board of the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development, describes the steady attrition of girls and women throughout the formal science and technology (S&T) system, from primary education to S&T decision making as the leaky pipeline (Huyer 2002). Nancy Hafkin, director of Knowledge Working Consulting Firm and former chief of the Development Information Section, UNECA elaborates that

> ... the leaks are found at every stage of the process, resulting from a series of barriers to girls and women, and can be categorized in four categories:
>
> - Cultural and attitudinal barriers, such as perceptions about the role and status of women;
> - Situational barriers that include lack of family commitment, lack of partner support and living in rural or isolated areas;
> - Qualification barriers such as lack of formal math and sciences education or experience in computer programming skills often perceived ... both by admissions departments and by the students and teachers; and
> - Institutional barriers that block women's access to S&T education. These include the lack of female teachers and assumptions of male teachers about capabilities of women students; inflexible admissions, selection and entry requirements which do not take into account women's varying

> educational backgrounds, approaches and abilities; and heavy attendance requirements for practical skills and laboratory work which are more difficult for women to meet in view of their family and domestic responsibilities (Hafkin 2004).

Willie Pearson Jr., chairperson of the School of History, Technology & Society at Georgia Institute of Technology's Ivan Allen College, validates Huyer's and Hafkin's observations. "It is obvious why women won't come to our faculties. We expect them to work twice as hard as men, to serve on committees, to be nurturing, and a hundred other things while carrying out their research, mentoring graduate students, and having a personal life," Pearson remarked during the American Chemical Society national meeting in Chicago in August 2001.

3. Employment

The ICT industry employment landscape is male-dominated. In general, women work at lower levels and are relegated to data entry, word processing and transcription work. This is reflective of the ICT education and training patterns where young women tend to be the large majority of those enrolled in office application computer courses, but a small percentage of those studying programming or computer engineering. In the United States, women are roughly 20% of IT professionals, receive less than 28% of the computer science bachelor degrees and comprise only 10% of associate professors and 6% of full computer science professors (Tech Savvy 2000 as cited in Pinard 2005.)

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), the service segment of ICT work, is currently the single largest technology-enabled employer of women. It refers to the outsourcing of business processes and functions in the areas of administration, finance, human resources, distribution logistics, manufacturing services, sales, marketing and customer care to locations that can provide these services at a lower cost through high-speed data communication links, which guarantee timely delivery of the data and services (UNCTAD 2002).

There are different types of work in BPOs including those of customer service call centers, email help providers, medical transcribers,

and insurance claim processors. Debates on the implications of employment in BPO firms—in particular its implications on women's lives and work—are increasing. The main question being raised is: Does BPO employment constitute gender-responsive participation of women in the information society? There are opposing views on this topic. On one side, critics say that work in BPOs, particularly in call centers, focus on the self-denying cultural aspects, where the pressure is on acquiring American or British accents, popular speech and culture as well as adopting American or English first names. One cannot be Lakhsmi or Deepa and therefore has to adopt names such as Anne or Debbie. Kalyani Menon-Sen of Jagori, a feminist women's resource, communication and documentation center in India refers to this employment trend as the "dumbing down of a generation" because "it is mind-numbing and de-skilling—the knowledge and skills acquired in school and college are inapplicable here. The work itself is boring and stressful, and girls are expected to retain their composure and patience even in the face of verbal assaults by irate customers" (Gaerlan 2004). The main reason for setting up BPO firms in India, the Philippines and (for the Spanish-speaking world) Brazil is to lower costs of multinational operations. Reports indicate that salaries that women receive in BPO firms in developing countries are up to 80% lower than those in developed countries (UNCTAD 2003). Indeed, this is a good incentive for multinational companies to maintain, if not increase their profit margins.

Another form of BPO is what is generally termed as home based technology work. Women working in such areas are worse off than those working in call centers because they receive lower wages relative to those working in the organized sector and are under insecure employment contracts—if contracts exist at all. These women, referred to as virtual assistants, are found in substantial numbers—again in India and the Philippines because of the English language facility and relatively more advanced computer skills. They do medical and legal transcription and maintenance of daily accounts for small businesses located in northern countries. While they seem to benefit from the flexibility of being able to work at home

in a less time-bound schedule, the multiple burden on women becomes more defined as they perform their job in addition to all the standard domestic chores expected of them. Women working in this techno-based industry also have to make substantial investments to get employed. They purchase their own computers, pay for electricity and Internet connectivity. Women in this home based type of BPO comprise the majority in the emerging ICT-based informal economy.

Generally, women are still not in management and decision-making positions in the IT industry. Neither are most of them considered IT professionals since BPO employment is not professional information technology employment. Hardware and software development are the ones regarded as professional work and these areas are undoubtedly male-dominated. Unquestionably, work in Business Process Outsourcing firms work perpetuates the devaluation of women's labor. Moreover, patterns of gender-based discrimination are being reproduced in the IT industry where men hold the majority of high-skilled, high value-added jobs, whereas women are concentrated in the low-skilled, lower value-added jobs (Cabrera-Balleza 2005).

On the other hand, gender and ICT scholars such as Swasti Mitter regard offshore outsourcing of information processing work as a major opportunity for the economic empowerment of women, pointing to "unprecedented benefits" offered to women working in these areas in India, Malaysia and the Philippines, with salaries generally running at the $5000/year level-a near fortune for women in poor countries where the per capita income is less than $500 per year. According to Mitter, "this is one of the cases where it is possible to say with confidence that globalization has yielded gains for some developing countries and women in them" (Mitter 2004:3 as cited in Hafkin 2004). Aware of the burnout syndrome, where women quit from the stress, anxiety and mental fatigue of BPO work, Mitter maintains that the benefits to women in such employment are higher than the costs. She cites BPO as a positive dimension of globalization for which ... "national governments should create a policy environment to capture a greater share of the global market in information

processing and ensure its sustainability and replicability" (Hafkin 2004).

As Mitter emphasizes, "For gender advocates, the challenges are to be aware of the pitfalls in such employment, to support women workers in their desire for decent working conditions and to ensure that women retain an equitable share of employment in each phase of technological change" (Ibid.).

4. Content

The field of designing and developing online and new media content is largely male and North-dominated. This defines the quality of information that is available on the Internet and other digital-technology based media such as video games. It is no surprise then that the dominant women's images we see on the Internet and new media productions are stereotypical, highly sexualized and often sexist and reflective of the popular culture and lifestyles of the content developers. Women's voices that convey women's experiences, knowledge, issues and concerns are not sufficiently reflected. Moreover, majority of the world's women do not speak the dominant languages of the Internet—i.e., English, French, German, Japanese, and Chinese. It is not only online content that is written in this language—even programming language is largely based on English. This lack of proficiency is a major factor that limits the benefits that women are able to draw from using ICTs—if not totally excluding them (Cabrera-Balleza 2005).

Individual women producers and women's organizations across the world have confronted this challenge with much creativity and resourcefulness. The Feminist International Radio Endeavor's Internet radio bridges the gap between non-literate communication and the new ICTs. Broadcasting in Spanish, English, and occasionally in other languages such as Portuguese and French, "it reaches wide audiences without the need for a fully equipped studio or even a license to use the airwaves. FIRE's Internet station combines the Internet with other media to create an interactive space which aims to maximize the involvement of women listeners through

letters, email lists, re-broadcasting arrangements with community radio stations, and linked websites" (Sever and Suarez 2004).

The International Women's Tribune Centre produced an innovative and interactive CD-ROM or "computer book" for rural African women entrepreneurs who have access to a computer through a telecenter but no experience in using one. The CD-ROM gives advice on ways to improve yields from crops and livestock, how to market what is produced and helps the women think about new products they can make and sell. Dubbed in English and Luganda, the content of the CD-ROM is also available online for direct use, free of charge, by those who have access to an Internet connection. During international events such as the 10-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action in New York in March 2005, members of the Asia-Pacific Women's Watch translate their onsite reports into Russian and Kyrgyz and distribute these to their networks. Despite limited resources, women activists continuously produce diverse and relevant content and find ways to make ICT usage effective and meaningful to women's lives (Cabrera-Balleza 2005).

5. Sexual Exploitation and Harassment

One cannot speak about women and Internet and new media content without addressing the issues of pornography, e-mail harassment, "flaming" (online verbal abuse), and cyber-stalking. A number of cases have been reported where men use web sites to harass women and violate their privacy. As one author reveals:

> It is estimated that 10% of sales via the Internet are of a sexual nature, whether in the form of books, video-clips, photographs, online interviews, or other items. New technical innovations facilitate the sexual exploitation of women and children because they enable people to easily buy, sell and exchange millions of images and videos of sexual exploitation of women and children. These technologies enable sexual predators to harm or exploit women and children efficiently, and anonymously. As a result of the huge market on the web for pornography and the competition among sites, pornographic images have become

rougher, more violent, and degrading (Rich as cited in Primo 2003).

Furthermore, "Affordable access to global communication technologies allows users to carry out these activities in the privacy of their homes" (Hughes 2002 as cited in Primo 2003). Worse,

> The Internet has also become an instrument in the prostitution and trafficking of women. In 1995 an estimated 1.8 million women and girls were victims of illegal trafficking, and the numbers are growing. It is used to advertise prostitution tours to men from industrialized countries. The men then travel to poorer countries to meet and buy girls and women in prostitution. (Hughes 2001: 2 as cited in Primo 2003)

In addition to creating new websites, sex traders and traffickers use online job announcements and dating service sites to post and find information on girls and women in prostitution across the world.

Women's groups have articulated their demand for online safety and security in many instances. They have urged IT industry players and governments to take action. However, women who work on gender, media and ICT issues are also wary about putting in place legislative measures because these might be used as a ground for state intervention and censorship over the new information and communication technologies.

6. Gender in ICT Policies

Lobbying and advocacy around policy making on ICTs is one area where women's media and information and communication organizations are taking an active role. Women see this as imperative because if gender analysis and perspectives are not reflected at the policy level, there is no way that a gender lens will be used in program implementation.

Currently, women have relatively little participation in and influence on the policy and decision-making processes around ICTs due to their under-representation in the private sector, government and intergovernmental bodies that control this arena. A six-country research (Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, Philippines and the Republic of Korea) commis-

sioned by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) in 2001, to map a regional ICT policy framework and legislation environment

> ... demonstrated the lack of attention to gender equality goals and women's advancement in national ICT development frameworks and strategies.
>
> The key result areas that are common in the policy frameworks of all the countries covered in the study were: provision of networking and telecommunications infrastructure, facilitating e-commerce and job opportunities, human resource development, and promoting good governance and citizens' participation. (Ramilo 2002)

The research revealed that most of the existing national IT policy frameworks and strategic plans do not contain specific provisions on gender. There are a few positive developments that must be noted, however. The Republic of Korea has taken steps to integrate gender equality agenda into the national IT policy framework. In the area of policy planning and management, the Australian government implements gender-aware statistical and data gathering methods in relation to its IT and e-commerce policy.

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the first world meeting that discusses the impact of the new ICTs and addresses the digital divide, is one of the major international events where women activists are least engaged. Scarcity of funds to attend the preparatory meetings could be one of the reasons. However, the more compelling reason is the lack of understanding of the process and appreciation of the relationship between the issues and the overall women's struggle for gender equality.

Even in government delegations, there is hardly any women's representation particularly of national women's machineries. This would have been an ideal time for women to engage in gender and ICT policy making since ICT policies at the national and global levels are currently being formulated and, in countries where there already are existing polices, being reviewed.

Essentially, both ICT policy makers and gender advocates need to be aware of the importance of gender in ICT policy. Policy makers need to realize that policies will be more effective and responsive to the needs of their constituents if gender is fully integrated. On the other hand, gender advocates should learn not to disregard ICTs, particularly ICT policy, as a technical area that does not concern women, particularly grassroots women. They need to continuously work to put on the agenda of ICT policy and strategies the issues that concern them, such as those discussed in this paper as well as literacy, poverty, women's images in the new and the established media, violence against women and women's human rights in general.

It is imperative for gender advocates and feminist activists to understand the technological as well as the socio-economic and political discourse in ICTs. It is essential for them to continuously examine the potentials and impacts of the new ICTs in order to use these as effective tools in feminist organizing and in broader social activism.

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