

# Gender and ICTs in developing countries: some issues

# Why a concern for gender equality in ICT?



ICT as development enabler:

- ICT offer flexibility of time and space, end isolation, access to knowledge and productive resources.
- Women suffer most from limited time availability, social isolation, and lack of access to knowledge and productive resources.
- Connection between ICTs and poverty alleviation
- Use of ICTs to empower women and promote gender equality

# Overall aims of gender and ICTs



- Ensure that women as well as men, at all social levels and in all countries, can access and use emerging information technologies
- Full inclusion of women in all aspects of ICT
- Possibility of more women globally to be technological innovators

# Gender and ICTs: what do we know

- Women's participation generally lags behind that of men
- Gender divide more pronounced in developing countries
- Few reliable statistics available from developing countries (e.g. no ITU stats on India)
- Even countries with high infostates have gender inequalities in use
- The gender divide and the overall digital divide do NOT move in tandem
- Disputes argument that you don't have to take care of gender; it will take care of itself.
- Specific attention must be paid to gender to achieve gender-positive results.

# What are the obstacles to gender equality in ICT projects?

- Women are less likely than men to have requisite education and knowledge
  - Literacy
  - Language
    - Need for multilingual tools and databases, interfaces for non-Latin alphabets
  - Computer skills
  - Information literacy
  - Lack of science and math education
  - Gendered socialization on technology
  - Technophobia

# Access

- Physical access related to gender: more women live where infrastructure is weak



Less disposable income to access facilities

Difficulties posed by culture, gendered division of labour in accessing public access facilities

Difficulties in mobility

Women's hours and skills levels need to be addressed in providing access

- Losing out, even in the classroom

# Policy-level constraints

- Absence of women from IT policy
- Belief that IT (and all technology) is gender neutral
- Policy makers lack of knowledge of gender aspects of technical issues
- Gender advocates unawareness of IT issues

# Content



- Little content available to meet women's information needs in developing countries
- Available content may not be in usable form
- Language/literacy barriers
- Numerous projects tackling obstacles to women accessing needed content- e.g. Village Knowledge Centres



# Capacity building



- Women have less access to education, to scientific and technical education
- Support needed for women in IT skills development
- Leaky pipeline prevents women from tertiary-level S&T education

# Sexual exploitation of women on the Internet



- Trafficking of women through the Internet
- Pornography
- Sexual harassment
- Use of Internet to perpetuate violence against women
- Women need secure spaces online
- Delicate balance: protecting women's rights without instituting censorship

# Knowledge society

- Examples of Philippines, Thailand  
[http://www.i4donline.net/articles/current-article.asp?articleid=2039&typ=Features.](http://www.i4donline.net/articles/current-article.asp?articleid=2039&typ=Features)
- Framework for Measuring the Participation of Women in Knowledge Society  
<http://wvd.orbicom.uqam.ca/fr/recherches/62-engendering-the-knowledge-society-measuring-women-s-participation.html>

# New technologies

- Gender, Development, Technology focus has turned to cellular technology
- Enormous usage compared to Internet
- Mobile broadband growing
- Mobile networks coverage becoming near universal
- Technology developments:
  - Falling costs of smart phones
  - Voice access to web
  - Supercedes mobile disadvantage of limitation to known contacts

# Opportunities for women?

- Positive impact on women's employment (South Africa)
- Willingness of poor to spend large income % on communication
- Women see it as increased freedom, decreased tolerance of domestic abuse
- But, reassertion of patriarchy: negative reasons of men to women and communications technology

## Two e-health projects: lessons for Gender and ICTs

- *India Health Care Project – Use of Information Technology for Delivering Quality Health Care to the Rural Population (Nalgonda district, Andhra Pradesh)*
  - to provide support tools (PDAs) to allow Auxiliary Nurse-Midwives (ANMs) to reduce time spent doing paperwork and spend more time giving information and care to community women on family planning and reproductive health.
  - to increase the accuracy of the data flowing up from ANMs through the healthcare reporting structure.
  - to provide a means for getting health care data at village level into electronic form.
  - to provide ANMs with information that helps them provide more effective service to the villages within their responsibilities.

Gender was not an articulated part of the objectives of the project. Target groups (the ANMs and the population they work with) were not involved in planning and design of the project. Only the government health workers were informed of it; the community was not even aware of it.

Almost as soon as the project started, gender issues arose. When the PDAs were distributed to ANMs, male counterparts (Male Health Workers – MHWs) protested not being given PDAs. Following the protest, PDAs were also made available to MHWs.

# UHN e-Health Project: Uganda

- Project: to improve healthcare service delivery in Uganda by improving health workers' access to health and medical information and by supporting data collection and analysis through the use of small, mobile computing devices interfaced with the local GSM/GPRS cellular telephone network via wireless access points (WAPs)
- Most collectors were women
- Women found them to be time saving, leading to greater efficiency
- Gave them more time to be with their families
- Introduction into families improved family bonds and conjugal relations in an area where domestic violence had been widespread
- Spouses not threatened by women's use of information technology
- Women learned skills, widened horizons, developed positive attitudes to technology
- Gender relations- men tried to take control of PDAs for reasons unrelated to women's abilities, desire to learn more complex computer skills
- Passed on skills and technology-positive attitudes to girl children
- Increased their community and work status as a result of connection with technology
- Disseminators of technology, trainers, managers must be gender aware
- Training needs to be sufficient, with content related to women's interests

# Gender Lessons from ICT projects

- In virtually all ICT activities in which women were involved in the projects reviewed, the women emerged not only with greater knowledge but also with enhanced self-esteem.
- The tremendous importance of the socio-cultural context of technology was apparent throughout.
- It is nearly impossible to find a project without gender issues.
- “If you don’t ask for gender, you don’t get gender.” Nearly all the reviewers reported that the project designers had not incorporated gender into their analyses and design because project proposal guidelines had not asked for it.



# More lessons

Specific attention must be paid to gender in order to achieve gender-positive results.

- Gender considerations need to enter from the beginning of project design and not be added in hindsight or as mid-term correction.
- Projects in technical fields (including meetings and technical training), need to be pro-active to ensure the participation of women as well as men, because the pool of eligible women may be small.
- All-women projects do not equal gender awareness nor do they necessarily bring gender equity.
- The societal context is of overriding importance in ensuring the participation of and the distribution of benefits to both men and women.

Finally . . .

- ***While technology empowers, it also affects and alters gender relations.***
  - Diffusion of technology needs to be seen in the context of gender relations.