Access to and participant in ICT : catalyst in improving women's status

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Access to and Participation in ICT: Catalyst in Improving Women's Status

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The 1990s have brought winds of change all over Asia. A century ago, the print media lorded over communication. And then, radio took its place, bringing information to the most remote areas of the continent. With technological advancement and economic growth coming to Asia in the 1980s, television became the preferred if not the universal favourite medium of most people. And now, as we approach the 21st century, advancements in new communications technology are sweeping most of Asia and influencing traditional cultures and values, and causing profound changes in how we produce, use, distribute, and communicate information.

So profound are these changes that the contemporary world is now characterised by the development of technologies. Highly competitive knowledge-based societies and economies have risen as a result of these developments. And in these economies, information and communication industries are the new monopolies. Yet, paradoxically, the growth of information technology is making universal communication and flow of information possible at a pace and manner never thought possible. Access to these technologies gives individuals, communities, nations, and regions the capacity to interact and communicate on a global scale and level in a faster, potentially cheaper and more efficient way than a generation ago. If employed democratically, this technology can be powerful instruments for advancing equitable economic and social development, including gender equality.

However, this momentous change in the world's information and communication regime has created two totally opposite realities for women. On the one hand, there are new work opportunities as a result of new information technology. But parallel to this, women have reported experiencing increased unemployment also as a result of new information technology. New information technologies have reared greater possibilities for interaction and intercultural exchange. But it has, at the same time, led to deeper exclusion for some. For those who have access to and who have learned to use this new information and communication resource, their networks have multiplied in ways that were not beforehand possible. For those who are being left out, this resource has meant increased marginalization from mainstream information and communication spaces in a predominantly globalised world.[1]

The Impact on Women

But despite the changes that have swept the Asian mass media in the last decade, gender roles in the media workplace have remained basically the same. A 1997 10-country survey by Isis International-Manila, conducted in co-operation with women media professionals, media and communication scholars, and non-governmental groups concerned with media, showed that although the number of women entering the media continuously increases, women have not gained parity with men in terms of participation and decision-making in the news. Consider some examples:[2]

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- With women comprising 38 percent of media personnel, Fiji has the highest percentage of women journalists among the 10 countries studied in the report. Many of these women are in radio. Six of 11 news journalists in the Fiji Broadcasting Commission are women. But women holding management positions are few. "Although there are several women who hold senior positions with the media industry, management is still male-dominated and extremely patriarchal." Women who occupy senior positions have to work within this male hierarchy that has been known to exert censorship over young enthusiastic journalists interested in such issues as violence against women.[3]

- In the Philippines, 18 women occupy editorial posts outside of the lifestyle sections out of 80 editorial posts. Two nationally circulated newspapers have women in the top positions. [4]

- In China, women are "undesirably represented in the decision-making echelons of media organisations. Only 8.5 per cent of women are on executive and editorial boards of news organisations and only about a third of 87,000 middle level (editor or reporter) positions in the Chinese media are women.[5]

- The percentage of professional Thai women entering the media industry is low: 0.1 percent compared to 2.2 percent of male professionals. Of the 4,332 mass media professionals, only 17 per cent are women who have to face a deeply entrenched "sexual division of labour" that leads to women being assigned to cover social news and writing gossip columns while males cover political and economic news. Women are clustered in the general staff positions such as account executives and co-ordinators. Women media executives are usually the owners of the organisation.[6]

  "Since gender bias is implied in any division of labour, women placed in less significant jobs will receive less opportunity for promotions. As a result, the number of women reaching the executive level is much smaller than the number of men. Women who reach a high executive level are not the norm; they generally have a more difficult career path than men and often require special conditions or financiers to help broker their success."[7]

- In Japan, women comprise 15 per cent of those employed in both print and broadcast media but almost half of the women are part-time workers. Those who hold managerial positions comprise about 5 percent of media personnel in the print and broadcast media. Women work mostly as announcers, newscasters, or office workers but are rarely in the technical fields. Newscasters and announcers are usually chosen based on their youth and looks. [8]

- In Indonesia where women are regarded second to men with regards to salaries and job positions, women can take top positions only if they have a big share in the ownership of the media organisation.[9]

- In Sri Lanka, there are very few women journalists in the print media. A few are sub-editors "with no specific powers within the editorial structures." There are a few regular women columnists and no women photographers.[10]

- In Nepal, none of the 12 percent of women employed in state-owned media organisations are placed in decision-making or even senior positions. The private sector also reflects a similar trend in the employment pattern of media organisations.[11]

- In Cambodia, women are deterred from joining the media on account of traditional social values, society's and women's general perception of journalism as a male profession, family responsibilities, low education (very few have university education), and non-acceptance by husbands and co-workers. Thus, only 10 percent of Cambodian media are women and most work in government-owned media as translators and writers, not as reporters. Most are 30 years old, high school graduates or college undergraduates. Although there are no statistics, older Cambodian women journalists attest to the fact that there are fewer women media practitioners today than in the 1980s.[12]

- In South Korea, a survey of 21 dailies, a news agency, and two broadcasting networks found that the percentage of women journalists in the major dailies has decreased from 8.2 per cent in 1990 to an average of 5.5 per cent in 1995. However the proportion of women journalists is higher in special dailies such as the English and economic papers: 42 per cent in English papers, and 9 per cent in economic papers. The reason for the difference is explained by the pay scale. "Women journalists who are equally qualified as male journalists are hired by less paying media,"

  While graduates of some 60 mass communication-related departments in college aspire to enter major media organisations since journalism is a well-paying job, it is "extremely difficult for women to become journalists in major dailies and broadcasting networks because of implicit and explicit discriminatory measures against women in various levels of decision-making processes of media organisations." The women who do get through the entry barriers complain that they "do not get fair treatment in assignments and promotions in predominantly male-oriented media organisations."[13]

Increasing the number of women in media is crucial for improving the situation of media women and increasing their abilities to help improve the status of all the other women in society. This aim is stated in the Platform for Action, a global agenda drawn up by states, international organisations such as the UN, civil society and media representatives themselves during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing. One of the critical areas in the platform is media and In relation to it, the platform identifies two interrelated strategic objectives:

- The first is to "increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication"

- The second is to "promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media"

It has been five years since the Fourth World Conference on Women and we have seen positive changes happening in terms of more women getting formal education and training, and working in media. The climb in the number of women working in media is important in challenging long-

established media practices, routines, and standards for news reporting because it creates pressure within media themselves. There is evidence everywhere that when women constitute a numerical force, they can and do make a difference. Some cases where women had affected a positive change in media's reporting and portrayal of women:

- In Japan, the word "rape" used to be avoided in rape stories. Instead, the word used is the Japanese term for "violence" in cases where the victim was an adult woman and the Japanese term for "mischief" when the victim was a young girl. This practice supposedly protected the victim from social stigma. Yet, it was also common practice for media to name the victim.

    But because of women's protests, some newspapers have begun to name rape as "rape" and kept the names of victims anonymous. This is a strategic improvement because it naming the act of rape is equivalent to recognising rape as a crime against women, a violation of women's human rights. In other words, the use of the language allowed Japanese society to recognise rape as a problem and helped eliminate denial in Japanese society. [14]

- In the Philippines, pressures from women journalists and activists after a series of violent rape cases in 1993 were made sensational in print and radio by tabloid as well as the mainstream press led to a workshop that formulated the Guidelines on the Coverage of Crimes against Women and Minors. Many Philippine newspapers have adopted these guidelines.

    But prior to this, the media's reporting as well as some of the commentary reflected inherent prejudice against women victims, a tendency to sensationalise, and a lack of understanding of the nature of rape as abuse of power and a crime against the person. Up until 1993, the media community had not stirred to gender issues. Except for a few advocates writing columns in newspapers, gender inequality was not recognised as an issue in most newsrooms. It had no name and no place in the news agenda. Women were covered but in the manner that anyone or anything makes news: by being celebrities of politics, show business or entertainment, by being involved in controversy, or gaining notoriety through mischief or serious crime. To get into the news, women had to be seen as "vamp or villain." [15]

- In China, domestic violence was seldom discussed in the media until 1992 when the first comprehensive law to protect women's rights was enacted by the National People's Congress. But China's traditional value that regards family scandals as private seemed incompatible with the legislation. On 3 April 1992, *China Women's News*, the only national Chinese newspaper devoted to women's issues, broke the taboo and reported a case of domestic violence in central China's Henan province. Wang Xiulin, editor of CWN (circulation: about 200,000), said her newspaper exposed the case to test how the law would function. *The Workers Daily* (circulation: over 500,000) devoted even more space to the news which described the tragedy and explored the root of the neighbours' indifference and challenged the traditional norms.

    Since then, the media, especially those devoted to women, have become more concerned with domestic violence issues. "So long as it becomes an issue of violence, it goes beyond the

domestic limit," says Wang Li, deputy editor of *Women's Friend* (circulation: about 300,000), a monthly magazine in China's northern province of Heilongjiang.[16]

But attention also needs to be drawn to the fact that, by and of itself, increasing the number of women in media alone is insufficient to transform both the working conditions of media women and the quality of media content.

- For instance, the Capitol Women Journalists Association of China reported that despite the law on gender equality and equal opportunity in work, and the encouragement to cover political, economic, and legal affairs, some women journalists still tend to have a narrow range of interest and focus their attention on culture and the arts.[17]

- In the Philippines, although many Philippine women journalists have taken over beats previously seen as male domains and have proven their journalistic competence, their understanding of gender sensitivity and of women's issues continue to be constrained by more traditional definitions of what is newsworthy and what is not. These standards have contributed to the marginalization of most women's themes in the mainstream media.

Equally important to increasing the number of media women is for them to gain access and participation in decision-making in media organisations. But even today, gender roles stereotype women media professionals for certain beats or for certain types of work and limit opportunities for career advancement and promotion even when they are as competent as their male counterparts. These gender roles persist because of patterns of discrimination within the workplace and society at large. But the pattern can be changed and one way of doing this is for women to access, use and participate in new information and communication technologies that is now a central force in media and society at large.

ICT: Potentials and Barriers

The potential of new information and communication technologies for the advancement of women in the media profession is considerable. Research and the formation of analyses, the cross-checking of facts, networking with sources of news and information, and the sharing of ideas could all be made infinitely faster and easier through relatively affordable computer-mediated technology such as e-mail, internet, hypertext and hypermedia.[18]

However, we must recognise and be aware of the barriers that prevent the full appropriation of information and communication technology by women. Gender-differentiated data on access to new technologies are scarce but those available indicate that women are more reluctant users of new information and communication technologies than men. The barriers that prevent women from accessing information and communication technology and acquiring the skills in this area are formidable. Such obstacles include:

- Less access to financial and technological resources
- Reduced access to training and technical assistance

- Social and cultural barriers for women and girls to access technology
- Educational short-comings
- Misconceptions about the technology and its use
- Language barriers

Larger issues frame these obstacles. The Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Program outlines these:

- Basic connectivity and infrastructure needs

  While new information and communication technologies are being promoted and pushed, basic communication infrastructures remain missing in many places. Communication infrastructures and systems must be designed to include tools that are locally appropriate such as solar, radio, video, and tape recorder.

- Access and participation issues

  - Women need to be consulted to ascertain opportunities and constraints in their particular work situations and communities.
  - New information and communication technology projects and policies must be accountable to women's needs through gender assessment and evaluation.
  - More women should be involved in regional policy initiatives and international institutions (such as the ITU) which focus specifically on gender.

- Cultural issues

  - There is a lack of gender and culturally-sensitive educational and training approaches that will enable women to better adopt information and communication technology.
  - Priority must be given to initiatives that support the production of information, especially in languages other than English.
  - Priority must be given to initiatives that support the production of information that are relevant to women, particularly in the areas of health and reproductive rights, violence and poverty.[19]

These issues represent needs which must be reviewed and addressed as the world prepares to analyse the progress made by women in the past five years since the Fourth World Conference on Women. The barriers need to be knocked down for women to enjoy their right to acquire the necessary skills and technology to participate in media and public communication.

In connection with this, The Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Program has proposed actions to be taken by governments, civil society, and private institutions. The strategy and actions the APC recommends aim to enable women to overcome obstacles and guarantee women more equitable access to new and emerging communications technologies and electronic information sources:

1. Promote the access of women to new and emerging communications technologies and computerised information resources.

- Raise awareness among women about the advantages of new information technologies.
- Assign budgets to facilitate access especially in areas with less technological infrastructure.
- Governments to support initiatives that facilitate women's access to these technologies, to give legislative and infrastructure support and reduce cost barriers.
- Women and their organisations to use these technologies and seek ways of adapting them to their needs; those organisations that have access should support those without.

2. Support women's access to training in using computer networks and promote a gender perspective in training and methodology in the field of new technologies.

- Assign budgets for promoting and developing training courses and gender-sensitive training materials.
- Women's organisations should develop proposals related to the specific needs of women in the field of technical training in computer communications and appropriate methodology.

3. Support the development of women's and citizen groups' initiatives in the field of computer networks that promote the advancement of women and gender equality.

- The UN, its agencies, and aid organisations to assign budgets to assist with such initiatives, in particular those that focus on women from the South, economically depressed regions and marginalized groups, and which promote South/South and North/South dialogue between women's organisations and women communicators who promote gender equality throughout the world.

- Women's organisations should further develop networking initiatives in order to strengthen their capacity for international actions for the advancement of women.

Transforming Political Will into Action

Earlier we talked of changing the pattern of gender bias and discrimination at the workplace through the use of information and communication technology. But apart from technology, political will needs to be present of course. In political will needs to be transformed into action.

This is of great importance especially after considering that women all over the world recognise the crucial role that media women play in transforming culture and society. Given present day realities, this role begins with media women's increased opportunity and participation in new information and communication technologies. To be able to wield this technology is to be able to make a difference in defining the news. Defining the news from a woman's perspective is crucial in naming and eventually addressing the problems faced by women in various societies.

Meeting in Manila in June 1998, the International Women in Media Foundation (IWMF) urged women working in media to exercise pressure from within to change and improve women's work situations in media, including their access and participation in decision-making and training.

But pressure from within media needs to be complemented by pressure from outside. In many countries, women media associations exist but their primary purpose is to defend women's professional interests as media workers. The efforts of these associations thus need to be complemented by the efforts of lobbying groups. As Margaret Gallagher pointed out, the paradox of the move towards market-led media systems is that this also places more power in the hands of the groups outside of media.

Specific to the concern of media women, women's non-government organisations that belong to the international women's movement—the Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Program, Isis International-Manila, International Women's Tribune Center, to name a few—have exerted and continue to exert pressure for policies and guidelines against gender discrimination in hiring, promotion and training especially in this new field of information and communication technologies. The international women's movement realises that, in today's reality, without communication anyone is at a disadvantage in the face of any initiative and as women we cannot add another variable to the range of obstacles that discriminate against us.

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