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ABSTRACT

The Capability Approach, as developed by Amartya Sen, has been criticized for an overly individualistic approach, while simultaneously being re-framed in alignment with the dominant social structure. We situate individual agency within the frame of social power structures, examining agency and empowerment gained by mobile phone usage from 26 Vietnamese foreign brides in Singapore. We use an intersectionality perspective from gender studies to find that, while facing multiple grounds of discrimination from the dominant group, the women constantly negotiate at the intersections of gender, ethnicity and social class, leading to two active strategies for positive well-being and empowerment: Essentialization of gender and Aspiration. The mobile phone was found to be an active agent in facilitating their aspiration for individual changes, autonomy, and more powerful decision making roles in domestic and social domains - a variety of communicative practices developed their capabilities. On the other hand, Mobiles also mediated the enactment and practices of the foreign brides’ essential beliefs of their own idealized femininity and traditional gender roles, in contrast with the dominant development discourse of women’s empowerment. The socio-cultural contexts influencing processes of technological appropriation is discussed from the perspective of development, particularly re-framing Western notions of gender equality within the agentic framework.

Keywords

ICT4D; mobile phones; gender equality; women’s empowerment; restricted agency

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Amartya Sen’s capability framework [1, 2] has been widely applied in the ICT4D scholarship to examine a broad range of impacts of ICTs (Information Communication Technologies). Sen [2] defined agency as one’s freedom to pursue one’s own interests, to make choices

and to lead the life he/she values. As a consequence, research examined, beyond economic and instrumental gain, the role of ICTs in empowering individuals to achieve development outcomes of their own choice [3]. However, the capability approach has been typically criticized for its overly individualistic approach [4], and in alignment with the dominant social structure [5, 6] and has been reframed in terms of social exclusion [7, 8]. Peter [5] emphasized the notion of situated/restricted agency, arguing for consideration of the motivations and constraints under which an individual acts, and that in the very situated nature, contingency and individual circumstances that shape strategic negotiations of agency are observed. In other words, the author sees restrictions as situated/restricted agency, and “what may, in terms of manifest behavior, seem like submission, may hide more subtle strategies of resistance” (p. 27).

This paper elaborates upon the frame of situated agency to investigate the relation between the mobile phone use and women’s empowerment among a group of marginalized transnational migrants, Vietnamese foreign brides (FBs), in Singapore. We raise the questions: What strategies of empowerment do foreign brides develop in their specific life context, and how they negotiate situated agency through the use of the mobile phone? Going beyond the framework of situated agency, we use an intersectionality lens to understand lived experiences of the marginalized women simultaneously shaped by their multiple identities and social positions of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status. We argue that while facing multiple grounds of discrimination within a dominant patriarchal power structure, the women not only negotiate the mobile phone use to achieve autonomy and equality, but also commit themselves to traditional social norms. Furthermore, Vietnamese foreign brides negotiate unequal power relations strategically to gain gender equilibrium and empowerment as an enactment of restricted agency.

1.1 Women’s Empowerment, Agency and Development

Women’s empowerment has been considered one of the top development goals [9], while simultaneously being emphasized as a critical tool to achieve poverty reduction and other development outcomes [10]. Sharma [11] contents that “societies that discriminate by gender pay a high price in terms of their ability to develop and to reduce poverty” (p. 1). Nonetheless, the pathways to achieve the goal are less obvious since the definition and measurement of empowerment has remained unclear or varied by socio-cultural context [12].

Up to now, development scholars and practitioners have followed some conventional patterns in myriad conceptualizations of women's empowerment. First, the empowerment of women is largely viewed from an economic stance. Even though Sen developed the two different terms of "well-being freedom" and "agency freedom" [2], most current approaches have concentrated on the well-being aspect, while the agency aspect has received less attention. The well-being approach considers income growth, access to education, healthcare, and labor market, as well as other instrumental development outcomes as primary targets of programs for the empowerment of women [9].

Secondly, when examining women's agency, the vast majority approaches primarily advocate Western notions of gender equality in which empowerment is defined as enhancement of women's rights to be equal to men in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes [13]. Especially, the current dominant discourse of development tends to regard women either as victims of gender inequalities or as agents who stand out to fight for equality and mobility [14, 15]. This notion is very much in line with Sen's argument of "agency freedom" for women as an appropriate framework for evaluating gender inequalities in the family and beyond that gender issues in democratic policy evaluation [16, 2], leading to attempts among feminist scholars to use gender equity as a measure of women's agency [17].

Moreover, little attention has been paid to the contextualized and situated nature of development when it comes to women's agency and empowerment. While scholars [18, 19, 3] recently purposefully incorporated social structure as a component in innovative frameworks of choices and agency, such as Kleine's "Choice Framework" [19], yet the approaches are considered Sen-ian given that fact that they still define choices themselves as development outcomes. Our question is what if in a particular social structure and an individual circumstance, one has very limited or even no choices to select? In this situation, "restricted agency" [5] and "adaptive preferences" [20] can help explain decision-making and outcomes. When faced with limited options, a person can make a choice wherein she consciously or unconsciously downgrades and reframes her desires for what she cannot access [20] and strategically negotiate a set of concrete constraints for empowerment, at the risk of reproducing some (unequal) social norms to a certain extent [21].

1.2 Role of the Mobile Phone

Extensive literature has been established to affirm positive impacts of ICTs on women's lives. Traditionally, scholars put considerable emphasis on economic and tangible development outcomes that ICTs make available for the empowerment of women. The adoption and usage of ICTs by women has contributed to various instrumental outcomes such as enhancing income growth and capacity building, improving their marketable skills and boosting work efficiency [22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 11]. The effective use of ICTs proved to lead to women's access to global e-business channels [27, 28, 29], social networks and political participation [30]. Among a range of ICTs, the mobile phone is increasingly considered an important tool for women's empowerment and poverty reduction [31]. Mobiles have emerged in ICTD projects such as female-owned microenterprises, helping transform low-income marginalized women in under-served locations into entrepreneurs, reducing transaction costs/time/travel,

and enhancing market flows and competitive advantage [32].

ICT4D scholarship has recently turned its attention to non-economic benefits of the mobile phone. Having attuned to the notion of the blurring between lives and livelihoods [33], scholars have examined intangible development outcomes gained from the mobile phone use, especially by women from the developing countries [34, 35, 36]. Studies found that mobiles brought about improved psychological well-being [37], a sense of mattering to Others [38], and increased agency and autonomy as the consequence of establishing an independent income [39]. It was also evident that the mobile phone facilitated mothering practices [40], and helped migrant women to seek for social support through frequent phone calls to relatives [41] and to alleviate social exclusion in the host society [42].

Furthermore, the mobile phone redefined traditional gender roles [43], ushering in social changes by altering gender relationships [44]. For instance, in patriarchal societies, mobile phones were used by women to challenge traditional gender relations and the hierarchical social structure resulting in a positive social change leading to a sense of autonomy and equality to their lives [45, 46]. Nonetheless, we note that paradoxically ICTs, particularly the mobile phone, could simultaneously relate to empowerment and disempowerment outcomes. For example, technologies led to inequitable redistribution of resources along gender lines, exacerbating existing unequal gender relations [47, 48, 49].

The overall picture of the impacts of mobile phones suggests that current research in ICT4D is still very much in line with the Western notion of women's empowerment. In relation to the targets of ICT4D projects aiming to empower women in developing countries [15], prior research has placed considerable focus on the roles of ICTs and mobiles in transforming traditional gender roles and establishing equal socio-economic and political rights for women. Remarkably, the mobile phone has been considered as "great equalizer" [50], within which gender equality and income equality are regarded development outcomes. We argue that an overemphasis on economic and tangible outcomes leads to unexamined belief that economic growth is equal to an individual choice and empowerment. Such a perspective fails to closely examine the very daily condition of women's lives and their lived experiences of the technology within a constrained social structure. Doing so would provide insights into the situated nature of choice and agency, and contribute to the discussion of what exactly constitutes development.

It is evident we need more research on women's empowerment from a bottom-up approach that investigates the everyday condition of their lives [51, 52], and especially to align women's agency with the social structure and cultural factors [53]. Fortunati called for studies to describe the actual forms of agencies the mobile phone brings to women [54], while Masika demonstrated that taking notes of dominant social structures in relation to women's use of ICTs could reveal (even unequal) gender relations that are superficially perpetuated through the way women negotiate agency mediated by the technologies [55]. This paper situates development as the enhancement of women's agency, focusing on situated/restricted agency established through strategies actively developed by women. We argue that at some particular junctures in women's lives, (unequal) power relations do not appear either merely superficially and temporarily or as a constant immovable structure but manifest strategi-

cally by the female agents in their negotiation of agency and empowerment. To understand the dynamics and situated nature of agency, we use intersectionality as a theoretical framework.

1.3 Intersectionality as a Perspective and a Theoretical Framework

Over the past decades, the theory of complex co-constituted differences under the rubric of intersectionality is seen not simply a normative-theoretical argument but also as a research paradigm [56] in gender studies and related fields. To illustrate the concept, Crenshaw used the metaphor of intersecting roads, referring to multiple categories of differences/inequalities experienced by women of color. She argued that a single-axis framework that focused on either sex or race was insufficient to consider how marginalized women are vulnerable to both grounds that are mutually constituted [57]. Mahalingam and Leu defined intersectionality as “the triangulation of a subject vis-à-vis her location and social positioning along class, gender, race, or caste” (p. 841), discussing the dynamic, multi-dimensional and historically contingent nature of women’s experiences [58]. The framework thus provides a unique lens to situate the lived experiences of women and make visible the multi-layered power relations central to their life.

We draw upon the intersectionality perspective to guide our understanding of multi-faceted voices and experiences of Vietnamese FBs, as well as the dynamic process in which they negotiate agency through the use of the mobile phone. Situating agency within an intersectionality perspective allows researchers to look at a broader horizon of social relations in the women’s lives that are derived not only from their gender identity but also from other dimensions as their ethnicity, social class and other social constructed identities, such as that of the transnational migrant. We argue that when touching upon complex and multi-faceted nature of feminist experiences, the study can inform socio-psychological effects mediated by the mobile phone use, and hitherto hidden development outcomes can emerge in the way migrant women negotiate situated agency through mobile phones.

Our study focuses on the following research question: How do Vietnamese FBs strategically use mobile phones to negotiate agency at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The study participants were Vietnamese foreign brides living in Singapore. In order to qualify for participation, respondents were required to be a female migrant from Vietnam living in Singapore who migrated exclusively through marriage with a Singaporean man. Other criteria as the period of residence in Singapore, as well as their legal status, were not bounded because we aimed to discover the diversity of women experiences and their personal-social relationships while living in the foreign land.

We used convenient snow-ball sampling to recruit our participants. Since this group maintains a low public profile within an increasingly volatile environment for migrants (mirroring global public opinion of host countries), we sought assistance from organizations in Singapore. Key respon-

dents were approached from the Vietnam Embassy, which frequently organizes cultural events for Vietnamese communities in Singapore, and The Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People (ACMI), which provides counseling and skill-learning classes for foreign brides in Singapore. After the first round of interviews conducted at these organizations, positive references and trust resulted in more respondents for the study. The final number of respondents recruited was 26. The respondents’ demographics are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents’ demographics

Demographics		Number
Age Group	20-30	2
	31-40	21
	41-50	3
	51+	0
Residential Status	Long Term Visit Pass	20
	Permanent Residence	6
	Singaporean Citizen	0
Income/Month (S\$)	0 (Housewife only)	6
	1-1000	7
	1001-2000	7
	2001-3000	3
	3001+	3
Highest Qualification	Primary School	0
	Secondary School	14
	High School	8
	College/University	4

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Given the fact that in-depth interviewing is a useful method for researchers to understand human’s lived experiences and complex psychological processes, we chose qualitative interviewing as the primary approach in the study. We conducted two extensive periods of fieldwork in Singapore between March and August in 2015. The interviews were semi-structured, and a majority of them (23/26 interviews) were conducted in Vietnamese due to the respondents’ lack of English proficiency. Using their first language was determined as the least intrusive method and one most comfortable for expression in a natural fashion. Interviews, which lasted for about 45-60 minutes each, were conducted at various locations, such as respondents’ homes, parks, coffee shops and nail salons. The principal themes explored in the interviews include: (i) lived experiences and personal relationships of Vietnamese FBs in Singapore; (ii) their representations and beliefs about their identity in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class and other social identities; (iii) their daily mobile phone usage patterns in relation to their femininity, wifehood and motherhood practices; and (iv) their mobile phone uses in other domains of life as learning, employment, and social activities.

After the interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed in verbatim and were translated into English for analysis purpose. The transcripts were coded according to different themes in connection to the research questions. Wherever a new theme was merged, it was coded and put into new categories so as to not capture important or interesting findings. Lastly, all of the themes and details were analyzed together, and units from micro level to macro

level were integrated in order for the researchers raise interpretations and answers for the research questions of the study [59].

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Marginalized Migrant Women at the Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Social Class

We discovered that multiple differentiators in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class are mutually constituted; further marginalizing Vietnamese FBs in Singapore and making visible power relations central to their life. Various forms of discrimination were evident in the social to personal domains of their everyday lives. First, compounded by low income and limited education, the women experienced social discrimination due to their minority position and stereotyping of their gendered ethnicity image. A number of respondents reported that the host population, including their in-laws, explicitly distinguished between “Singaporean” and “Vietnamese”, making clear the distance between ethnicity privilege and marginalization. This was exacerbated by existing stereotypes related to foreign sex workers led to social stigma being cast upon the ethnic identity of these foreign brides. The history of Vietnamese women coming to the island state to engage in prostitution (although prostitution is legal in Singapore, it is often practiced illegally - both avenues are frowned upon), caused prejudice towards Vietnamese FBs:

No denying that some Vietnamese women come to this country to work as prostitutes. I do not want to criticize them because each person has her own destiny and situation. But a small worm can spoil the whole soup since such “bad reputation” can negatively affect us Vietnamese foreign brides here in Singapore. (Respondent 11)

Second, although patriarchal control was self-reported as a major challenge in their lives, constraints related to their gender identity at the intersections of ethnicity and social class still restricted Vietnamese FBs’ personal opportunities and mobility. On the one hand, the women, originating from conservative backgrounds in Vietnam, aligned themselves with the traditional gender role upon arrival. On the other hand, it was not entirely their choice; they are usually expected to be domestic home-makers by the family in Singapore. This supports earlier reports that Singaporean husbands, who are Chinese-speaking blue-collar workers with low levels of education, seek foreign mates willing to uphold traditional gender values [60]. This means that most respondents were attaching their lives to the domestic sphere rather than being active in the professional sphere:

I want to go to work but my husband isn’t happy about that. He said: “Who will take care of the family and cooking? Who will teach our little child?” So I need to stay at home to take care of my son and teach him to do writing and counting. (Respondent 25)

Such vulnerable position is amplified with governmental policies that subject their residential status to the stability

and harmony in the relationship between them and Singaporean husbands:

It’s worse that without PR (Permanent Residence), when we have any problems with husbands, like divorce, we’re forced to go back to the home country, meaning that we lose everything (Respondent 13).

It is important to note that despite their marital status with Singaporean men, not a single respondent had gained citizenship.

While facing multiple grounds of discrimination from the dominant group, we found that the Vietnamese women constantly negotiated at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class, and migrant status, and their struggle culminated in two strategies developed in response to the marginalized status: Essentialization and Aspiration. Essentialist representation of womanhood refers to the foreign brides’ essential beliefs about traditional gender roles and the idealization about their self-image as superior wives/mothers with the talent of running the household. Mahalingham and Leu argued that for immigrant women, essentialism serves as a mechanism to negate the dominant representations of “Other” [58]. Further, because of the discrimination associated with their moral values, the vulnerable women had a need to uphold a moral image.

My husband said that he and his friends especially like to get married to Vietnamese ladies, partly because unlike local women, we’re very good at taking care of the family, especially people from my place - Hue, we’re famine, soft and care for the family. (Respondent 19)

We found that Vietnamese FBs simultaneously aspired for autonomy and equality resulting from their admiration for local women being portrayed as role models, resulting in strategies demonstrating agency.

I admire them local women. They earn money well, know how to drive cars and be very equal to men. Woman should do the things that they are good at. Going outside and working helps me to learn more things and know more people. (Respondent 8)

Paradoxically, the two seemingly contradictory notions of gender (Essentialization and Aspiration) characterize how Vietnamese immigrant women make sense of their transnational identities. Within this complex and challenging social environment, the mobile phone was found to be an active agent mediating and facilitating the enactment of the two strategies of the women for essentialism and aspiration.

3.2 Mobiles and Vietnamese FBs’ Aspiration

The in-depth interviews revealed that at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and social class, the Vietnamese FBs utilized the mobile phone for aspiration (i.e., activities involving self-enhancement in learning and employment). While some respondents were very active in exploring beneficial aspect of the mobile phone, the others were not aware of the benefits or possessed very limited skills to proactively use mobile phones.

3.2.1 Learning

Upon arriving in the new land with myriad uncertainties about local culture and norms and incompetency with the local languages, the Vietnamese FBs expressed a need to improve their own capabilities through learning. All of them reported having difficulties in communication with locals due to language barriers, thus managed to learn local languages, particularly English and Chinese. One common practice was to harness mobile phone features and Internet-based applications. Instant helpers for these house-bound wives were dictionary-based programs that resided by default in their mobile devices. Google Translate and chat-based apps, such as WeChat and Facebook Messenger, were used to send messages to their friends to ask for the meaning of a particular English/Chinese words. In this sense, the mobile phone eased their learning practices, and more importantly brought about independence and autonomy to their lives.

I often use this dictionary on my phone. When I do not know an English word, I type out the word to this bar, so I can see the meaning in Vietnamese, and vice versa. So it's kind of helpful, especially when there is no one beside me. (Respondent 22)

To some people who possessed more advanced technological skills, English learning programs and sites on the World Wide Web became essential so as to help them sustain the long-term self-learning process.

I go to Internet to learn English. I download materials and save on phone. I open Google, type out keywords like "English for beginners", "Daily conversational English", "basic English", and so on, so I can see lots of websites suggested. (Respondent 25)

The manner in which the migrant wives harnessed Internet-based features and applications on their smartphones for learning in this particular context suggested a form of restricted agency. Despite limitations of home-based self-learning perceived by the women, the mobile tool brought them a sense of autonomy; the mobile was vital in the very situation in which they couldn't go to school due to financial constraints and domestic responsibilities.

I think that watching Youtube is not the best way to learn languages (...) But anyhow, it's helpful especially when there is no one around me and when I cannot go to school (Respondent 22)

Besides learning languages, the women professed a desire to learn more about local norms, particularly regarding legal matters, so as to protect their rights and gain a sense of security in the cross-national marriage. Common practice to all of the respondents were to read up online about matters related to their marriage such as the sponsorship of local husbands for FBs' residence in Singapore, and child-raising rights in case of marital discord.

When I just arrived, knowledge about legal issues, especially those related to my marriage, was very important. I went online, especially to visit some Facebook pages for Vietnamese FBs in Singapore to read up or post questions. (Respondent 16)

3.2.2 Employment

We found that the Vietnamese FBs partially harnessed benefits of the mobile phone for employment activities to achieve autonomy and engage in decision-making roles in the professional domain. For some of them who were securing a paid job, it was evident that the mobile phone was an essential asset for their work. In particular, mobiles facilitated business liaisons with clients, to boost work efficiency, and to learn contemporary job skills:

I often Google new nails designs for each season, or watch them on YouTube to learn (...) Customers often called me to appoint a particular time slot before coming to my nails salon. They also may want to comment on my posts on the Facebook page of our salon. (Respondent 24)

The mobile phone played a significant part in online self-businesses carried out by some of the women in our study. Five (approximately a fifth) respondents reported conducting home-based self-owned businesses, particularly online sales of clothing or Vietnamese foods, transnational Singapore-Vietnam money transfer services and job-placement intermediary services. With all of the employment choices being home-based and conducted online, smartphones with Internet connections became a significant and indispensable tool. A wide range of mobile resources, which typically included free chat apps and Facebook personal pages, were utilized to actively facilitate various business transactions and help the foreign brides improve their technical skills:

Sometimes I use photos of myself and make videos of myself wearing new arrival by using online video makers to create videos as a kind of promotional ad. Originally I used mostly Facebook for business. But now I've installed these chat apps, especially WeChat, so now I'm doing business using these apps as well. The suppliers often message me on WeChat using text or voice messages. (Respondent 17)

It was through the involvement in these entrepreneurial activities that the Vietnamese FBs developed self-confidence, earned respect and helped define a more powerful role in both social and domestic domains. For instance, the self-owned business mediated by the mobile phone offered Vietnamese brides the opportunity to teach their clients digital skills, thereby boosting their self-esteem, resulting in a more positive personal identity:

My customers are often living abroad, and some of them do not know how to use Apps as WhatsApp, Zalo or Viber to send photos of their passports for me to process and help them find a job. But I've got familiar with the situation, and now I always spend time to teach the people carefully about how to use the Apps (Respondent 5)

Moreover, with the enhanced income opportunities and associated respect within the family, the women could take on greater decision-making roles.

Now I can be a good earner, create a business for myself at home, I can use my own hands to work

and feed my family. Think about others marrying to a foreign man, the man sponsors her and works to feed her, and the husband family in law can cover for her everything also, but me ? I'm married to a foreign guy and feed him instead - I'm proud of that. (Respondent 17)

Here we can see the role of mobile phones in facilitating and bringing about empowerment as a form of gender equality that the women aspired for and made efforts to achieve.

3.3 The Mobile Phone and Essentialization of Gender

While harnessing the mobile phone to mediate the aspiration for agency and equality, Vietnamese FBs simultaneously negotiated the use of mobiles to promote a belief about their traditional roles and essential self-image as ideal women desired by local men. We found three aspects in the enactment of the beliefs that were facilitated by the mobile phone as an agent, including Femininity, Wifehood and Motherhood.

3.3.1 Femininity

The enactment of an idealized belief of the women femininity was mediated by the mobile phone as an active agent and a facilitator. The role of the mobile device was found to be pervasive in the daily lives of these women in maintaining their physical attractiveness and feminine traits. All of the respondents reported using applications and online resources on smartphones to learn beauty tips and woman health advice. Internet based applications, particularly Google Search and YouTube, were essential tools in providing these women with informational support.

I do feel that if I'm beautiful, my husband will love me more. So I suppose I always need to keep being beautiful in front of his eyes. (...) I watch and read up every day, consult news and doctors online concerning things like what to eat so as to have a fair skin, what cosmetics I should use. They teach us on websites. (Respondent 7)

While the desire to “show off” their physical attractiveness to the Singaporean husband re-affirms their essentialist beliefs about gender identity, the mobile phone, as distinguished from external help, was an optimal choice that imbued them with a certain degree of independence.

I just need to go online, but not have to ask for help from other people. See, I've just typed “beauty tips” [on Google search], so here you can see, they teach me to use turmeric to treat my skin problems, to apply these creams and collagen to my face as well. I always search for tips with the keyword “collagen”. (Respondent 19)

Furthermore, we noted that it was the essentialist notions about femininity mediated by the mobile phone that instilled happiness, self-confidence and resilience in the lives of the Vietnamese FBs. It was certainly not difficult to feel these women's joy in their demonstration of the digitization of their womanhood in terms of physical attractiveness and a hyper-femininity. But more importantly, improved psychological well-being was derived from how they perceived the

essential femininity related with close others, particularly the Singaporean husband, and in the public demonstration of the results.

If I'm beautiful, I feel more confident and happy when I'm walking besides my hubby. (Respondent 15)

3.3.2 Wifehood and motherhood practices

The mobile phone was found to mediate the enactment of an idealized representation of these women in terms of their wifehood and motherhood. Mobiles were effectively digitizing their housework and facilitating their domestic life. A popular practice among the large majority of the brides was to harness online resources to access to available information and to select valued resources so as to ease their wifehood and motherhood practices. Most popular sites consisted of Google search tools and their own Facebook pages:

I usually go online learning cooking recipes and to ease my wifehood practices (Laugh). (Respondent 1)

For instance, when there are some early symptoms of a particular health problem on my child's body, I will go Google to search for related information (Respondent 16).

Basic functionalities of the mobile phone provided migrant wives with instant support from their close networks, such as their female relatives in Vietnam, to consult on wifehood/motherhood practices.

I do call my mom and grandmother sometimes to ask for some things that I do not know. For instance, when my child gets sick sometimes, I will call my family in Vietnam (Respondent 23)

The mobile phone even became a friend and a companion of some the foreign brides in the domestic space:

Well, I watch YouTube at home, especially when I do housework. I bring the phone to the kitchen, so I can watch or listen to videos while cooking or cleaning the floor. (Respondent 24)

Behind the closed doors of their adopted households, the pervasive mobile phone played an active role as a facilitator, providing FBs with different forms of information and assistance to fulfill their traditional roles as a superior wife and mother. More importantly, the enactment of the essential beliefs about idealized wifehood and motherhood mediated by the mobile phone was deemed to contribute to the women's empowerment. The resultant idealization of the self led to happiness and harmony, with improved resilience, increased marital satisfaction, and respect from others.

If I cook something and want to show him what we will eat then I will message him. I'm happy to cook for him and my child, and that's also better for their health. He seems to be happy about that, and of course I'm happy too (Respondent 15).

4. DISCUSSION

The study results reflect variants of agency and empowerment negotiated by Vietnamese foreign brides through the mobile phone, suggesting the importance of critical perspectives and context driven approaches in the ICT4D scholarship. Firstly, it is remarkably noted here that agency and empowerment is not necessarily gender equality. In fact, the idealized beliefs about femininity, wifehood and motherhood among these migrant women and their enactment of the beliefs contribute to the re-production of gender inequalities. Interestingly, gender inequality in our study paradoxically brought about agency and empowerment because it is one's strategy to improve one's well-being, and fight against interlocking social oppressions on their vulnerable position.

Concerning the socio-cultural context of this study, we can see that the construction of essentialist representations gendered ethnicity is one way for the Vietnamese FBs to live up to their husband's expectations. However, the patriarchal control, as reported by the respondents themselves, is not overt, thus suggest that these women were actually upholding the values voluntarily. In other words, the essentialist idealization of "being feminine" and "being Vietnamese" is one of the strategies actively developed by the foreign brides to respond to their marginalized status and social discriminations upon their identities. This is associated with the notions that an intersectional awareness can also reproduce essentialist representations of gender [58], and reconceptualizations of inequalities derived from one's intersecting identities could be one strategy of empowerment for marginalized groups [61]. Our findings suggest that the definition and conceptualization of development and women's empowerment in the developmental literature needs to be revisited. Our study points the need to have a critical examination of the dominant Western discourse about the role of ICTs in women's empowerment and development. Traditionally ICTs and mobiles are regarded as enablers of gender equality, but it is evident from our findings that empowerment and agency can come in the reproduction of gender inequality that is facilitated by the mobile phone itself.

Secondly, the agency that the Vietnamese FBs gained could only be in a form of restricted agency rather than an absolute freedom of choice. There are constraints, resulted from their vulnerable position at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and social class, as well as from their limited individual capabilities, that restrict them from freedom to lead a valuable life despite their aspiration. Sen [7] suggested a critical need to reexamine "agency freedom" to account for motivations and constraints under which a person acts [5]. Likewise, concerning the roles of mobiles in mediating the Vietnamese FBs' aspiration, the context plays a critical role. Although the introduction of mobile phones and access to online resources has the potential to transform the women into entrepreneurs, it does not guarantee the social and individual changes desired by our participants. In other words, the mobile phones do not bring about absolute freedom and agency with many choices. The Vietnamese FBs are in fact in a marginalized position with restricted legal status, and limited opportunities for education in the developed island state Singapore. Several cultural barriers, such as language incompetency, limited qualifications and job skills, offer few choices for livelihoods and limited suitable paid-job options. Hence, online self-business could be the only viable choice for them. And in turn the mobile phone with Internet ac-

cess is the only option suitable to their situation, and helps them to conduct low forms of self-employment. In other words, Mobiles may not play a transformative role yet may offer an opportunity for empowerment circumscribed by the intersections of gender, class and ethnicity.

Moreover, when looking deeply into actual mobile experiences among the migrant wives, we found that their friendship network primarily consisted of co-ethnic Vietnamese; most of them could harness only a limited amount of online resources and applications mainly in Vietnamese language. In other words, empowerment and agency doesn't simply mean that the mobile phone provides the users unlimited freedom of choice, but in fact framed them within an exclusive limited mobile space due to their English incompetency, limited technological skills and the lack of connection with locals. This leads to a caution in the way we evaluate to what extent mobiles are digitizing women's lives, and what forms of agency mobiles can actually negotiated.

Lastly, it's important to take note of factors influencing the technological appropriation amongst this migrant group. There were tensions between domestic responsibilities and employment opportunities that these women had to deal with when negotiate their mobile phone use. Also, a number of barriers emerged limiting the women from harnessing benefits of the mobile phone, especially the matters of motivations for change and awareness, let alone technical capabilities. A few of respondents in the study showed less enthusiasm for capability improvement, while some aspired for learning and employment chances but did not have enough skills to harness the benefits of mobiles, or even had no awareness about the benefits at all. As a result, the mobile phone usage for job searching was very passive since they were dependent mostly on information posted on Facebook by their friendship networks.

I do not know a lot about these (job websites) actually. So usually when people post about like "looking for shop assistant", "recruitment", "job openings" on Facebook, I click the post to read up. (Respondent 22)

Hence, an appropriation of use that balances between traditional and non-traditional gender roles can be a challenging, besides the importance of improving technical skills and developing awareness about multiple affordances of the mobile phone among these women.

5. CONCLUSION

Using an intersectionality perspective, our study revealed two strategies actively established by Vietnamese FBs in Singapore to achieve empowerment through the use of Mobiles, especially smartphones. The findings suggest that a static and one-sided viewpoint on agency might be insufficient to explain lived experiences of marginalized women located at the intersection of gender, ethnicity and social class. Not only equality and other conventional forms of women's agency were evident, but also essentialization of gender and inequality in relationships. Both processes were mediated by mobile phones. Hence, the mobile phone's role is actually to mobilize between the enactment of essential beliefs of being a superior traditional woman in the domestic space, and the aspiration for individual changes and more powerful roles in social and professional domains. The process is fluid and

dynamic; and there are always constraints that the agents have to confront, demonstrating their restricted agency.

Future research is required to examine the multiple layers of social structures and power relations that marginalized agents have to encounter and negotiate. In addition, holistic frameworks and context driven approaches continue to be critical for ICT4D scholars to consider lived human experiences at various intersections to better understand the complex relationship between development and empowerment eschewing an Eurocentric viewpoint on development processes.

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