

MANILA (Women's Feature Service)—“No voice, no choice, no power,” was how Anna Leah Sarabia, executive director of Women's Media Circle, summarised the situation of most Filipino women today during a recent symposium on Women and Technology.

In her talk on “the new technologies from a feminist viewpoint,” jointly sponsored by

market what to or not to sell,” she explained.

Women who work outside the home believe equality begins with economic independence. “However, there is still that ‘broadcast’ clock which shows how women in the Philippines, even with money, are stereotyped,” Sarabia conceded, herself a mother and a producer of radio and TV programs.

Information Technology:

The New Gender Equalizer

By Gina Mission

Easymailer (EMC), a national E-mail service, Isis International-Manila, and WomanHealth, Sarabia started with the roles that women play vis-a-vis technology—as audience, as consumers, and as inter-actors.

We are audience, according to her, when we listen to priests deliver the homilies in the pulpits; when we listen to politicians announce their platform of government; when we sit in boardrooms dominated by men. It is a situation where the main players are men.

“As audience, we are expected to listen to those in power,” she says with bitter sarcasm. “After all, silence is supposed to be a virtue for women,” she added.

But we are now in the 90's where women, apart from opting to be full-time housewives, now pursue professional careers—for economic independence or when to or not to sell,” she explained.

With some money, Sarabia conceded, women as consumers can be equal with men in some aspects. “As buyers, for example, they can dictate the

The advertising rates for primetime shows (between 6 to 10 p.m.—the time when husbands and kids are supposed to be home) cost twice the rates of the morning noontime shows (consisting mainly of fashion, cooking, showbiz news, etc. and considered watched only by housewives). In fact, some Philippine TV stations don't start until 12 noon.

“The irony is that while advertisers pay much to be seen by prime time audience, it is the women who do the ‘grocery,’” she added matter-of-factly, prompting a suppressed laughter in the audience.

The advent of telecommunication technology brings yet another role for the women to play—that of inter-actors.

Unlike the first two roles where they are quite passive, women as inter-actors now approach things rather aggressively, whether through the 15 x 9 inch beeper or the 2 x 5 inch cellular.

It is common nowadays to hear stories of people sending uncensored messages (expressed at most in 400 characters) to each other or for some to talk unrestrictedly on the phone.



The same is true with telephone hotlines where callers can share their wildest or cruellest experiences simply because nobody sees them.

And where anonymity is the name of the game, the emergence of E-mail and the Internet is considered to be God's gift to the women's movement. Computer intersection through network gives the women a 'feel' of the ultimate communicator.

Easymailer, where 150 subscribers are connected through the E-mail, serves as an avenue for women who want to address issues of all concerns on a national level. The issues 'talk' politics, ecology, culture, gender, etc. with the hope of influencing policy on these issues.

Pi Villanueva, section editor of *Women in Action*, a publication by Isis International-Manila, confesses to have been attracted to the computer because "you don't have to dress up to face an audience to convey your message."

"It offers them privacy which makes it possible for women to create a new self, a virtual self they themselves designed (in as many words as they want), which is devoid of prejudgment because of physical absence of the other party," asserted Sarabia.

"This development brings in what they call 'cyberfemininity' which creates virtual freedom for women. Unlike being audience or consumers where they are voiceless and therefore powerless, they can now explore or break boundaries to constantly create or define who they are, to show that there are voices other than those in power," she maintained.

In the same manner that we abhor any violation of the freedom of expression, Sarabia believes that "invasion of this privacy would trigger them to create communities of their own. Diversity would then exist, which in turn makes democracy possible."

Ande Andolin of the Women's Education, Development Productivity and Research Organization (WEDPRO) conceded that it is to the great advantage of those who have access (like when you type a password and on the screen will appear, for example, a woman's face in the mail-order bride directory of the Internet). However, it is surely a major form of exploitation on the part of those who are in the directory, knowingly or unknowingly. "I may wake up one day to see my face in one of those in the directory," she exclaimed.

Villanueva, on the other hand, claims that

goodness or badness of this information technology (IT) is relative. "After all, it's the user that gives it value," she countered.

Access to this interaction means you have a personal computer and a modem connected to the Internet or the local E-mail through a telephone line, Dr. Sylvia "Guy" Claudio, chairperson of Linangan ng Kababaihan (literally means developing the women or LIKHAAN), an NGO that trains and educates grassroots women, said that this development creates two classes: "the haves and the have-nots or the knows and the know-nots."

THE KEY IS TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO FALL INTO THE TRAP OF ENJOYING THE WONDERS OF THIS NEW TECHNOLOGY AND FORGETTING THE VALUE OF ONE'S NEED FOR IT.

Robert Verzola, operator of EMC, activist, and a convener of Philippine Greens, said that the Philippines, "basically an agricultural country trying hard to be industrialized, has a dilemma like other developing countries to try or not to try."

"Being in the transition period, we tend to change the order, by replacing manual works with computerized ones, in the honest belief that it is the only way to get there, wherever and whatever that is."

A person, for instance, may be contented with using the non-complicated DOS at first. But with the various Windows-based softwares now proliferating in the market, everyone wants to have his/her PC upgraded to accommodate the latest version. One may be spending the last centavo in the ardent desire to join the bandwagon.

"The key is to be careful not to fall into this trap," advised Verzola. That is, enjoying the wonders which this new technology offers without forgetting the value of one's needs for it.

However one views this development, one thing is sure though: information technology gives a level playing field for men and women. Women can now be heard or represented equally. IT is it!