

Let Girls Go Online

What schools should know about the Internet and its implications for young Asian women

By Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Images of Women and Girls in the Internet

When girls and young women go online, chances are they will log on to any of these websites: MTV, J.Lo, NSync, and Barbie. All glorify what is collectively known as pop culture, where self-absorption is the name of the game. More often than not, these websites feature women as objects of desire.

If, on the other hand, one searches for sites on Asian girls, you can be sure that the long list will be mostly about sex and pornography.

The growing concern over the misuse of the Internet is not unfounded. As early as 1997, the Center for Technology at the National University in the United States estimated that 60 percent of all electronic commerce on the web is pornography.

The Child Advocacy Task Force on the Internet Online Summit in Washington, for its part, established that the Internet is a haven for pedophiles. Its 1997 report stated, among others, that the Internet has allowed pedophiles the following: instant access to other predators worldwide, open discussion of their sexual desires, shared ideas about ways to lure victims, mutual support of their adult-sex philosophies, and instant access to potential child victims world-

wide. Pedophiles are able to bask in the anonymity that the Internet provides, enabling them to build a long-term, virtual relationship with a potential victim.

Tougher Laws?

The common response, even of organised groups concerned about this situation has been to call for government intervention and state protection. A number of Asian governments have attempted to regulate Internet usage. China is the pioneer in this area. Its strategy is aimed at controlling access and not allowing foreign firms to offer information. In February 1996, new regulations were passed banning transmission of state secrets, information harmful to state security, and pornography over international computer links. But the new laws also require Internet users, including institutions, to register with the police. It also directs that all public Internet access go through computers managed by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications.¹ The laws make China the most regulated environment for the Internet in the world.

Singapore recently promulgated new laws regulating content for the Internet. All contents of a "broadcast nature" are deemed to be licensed; content providers who breach the local laws regarding content (such as pornography) will be told to remove

such objectionable content or have their license revoked (Singapore Broadcasting Authority, 1996). Asian countries differ in the extent of liberalism. Some, like the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Japan, allow commercial Internet Access Providers (IAPs) to flourish, allowing market forces to decide the level and quality of Internet services. Others, like Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, and Malaysia, are more careful about allowing commercial IAPs to proliferate.

A few clicks of the mouse, however, will reveal the extreme difficulty of enforcing such legislation over a medium whose very nature is open and free. Moreover, while the call for governments to step in is an understandable response, this matter must be approached with extreme caution. The question needs to be asked: "What are the implications of giving



governments control over what is commonly recognised by civil society organisations as an important tool which can contribute towards mobilisation for social change?"

The other form of response is the development of filtering software, which, by voluntary means, can be installed on computers and configured by parents to protect their children from potential harm. Many welcome this as a chance to have some personal control over what their children can have access to online. But filters, which are like dictionaries of key words embedded in one's computer and which one has access to, are developed by private companies with possibly some hidden agenda. (e.g., CBCPNET – Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines operates its own ISP and sells Internet cards). Are we, therefore, not providing our children with a 'filtered' perspective of the world over which we have no control of?

Pornography, trafficking, violence and all other crimes have been around before the advent of the Internet. What people need to realise is that the Internet is not creating new forms of crimes against women and children. Rather, it is creating new ways and means for crimes to be perpetrated. The other side of the coin is that it is also creating new ways and means for people to organise, network, campaign and bring about social actions.

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Internet Usage

Cool. This is how young people want to be described. But who is cool? The image of a cool young woman of today is one who owns a cell phone, and or a palm top, and is Internet savvy.

While there is an evident increase of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) usage by young people across the world, getting reliable statistics on girls' and women's Internet use in developing countries is very difficult. The standard indicators are not disaggregated by sex, and the available data are not very reliable or comparable.

However, it is safe to assume that most women Internet-users in developing countries are not representative of women in those areas as a whole. They are, rather, part of a small, urban educated elite. Less than one percent of the total population of devel-

oping countries has access to the Internet. By region, women constitute 22 percent of all Internet users in Asia, 38 percent in Latin America, and 6 percent in the Middle East.

It is not surprising that most women in developing countries are in the deepest part of the digital divide—further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share.

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Most women in developing countries who use information technology use it at work. Except in upper-income enclaves, home access to a computer and the Internet is not a phenomenon.

Users at work are divided into those who use the computer as a tool of production (for routine office work, data entry, manufacturing, programming) and those who use it as a tool of communication (creating and exchanging information). As a tool of communication, the prevalent application is networking for political advocacy on behalf of women. This came about largely because non-governmental organisations promoted electronic networking.

They were also the early adopters and are continuing users of the technology in developing countries.²

There is not much data on how much the Internet has influenced the consumption patterns of girls and women in the region. A survey conducted by Hermes in 1994 on why Asians subscribe to the Internet has shown, however, that majorities do so for browsing (79%) and entertainment (64%). Others cited the following reasons: work (52%), educational (50%), business research (40%), and shopping (11%).

Net Behaviour

Michele Evard of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Laboratory, contends that when women become disgusted with obnoxious behaviour in the Internet, their tendency is to keep silent, if not log out of that electronic space completely and stop accessing it for some time. In effect, they are allowing their voices to be drowned out. The choices seem to be limited to two: put up or shut up.

However, this is not entirely true in the case of children. A study conducted by Evard on children's participation in online discussion groups established that girls did not avoid writing public messages. In fact, even though there were only a few more girls than boys in that particular project, girls wrote 58 per cent of all messages. Moreover, the girls who received negative responses did not back off—they stayed online.³

Texting Phenomenon

The other ICT that has had a great impact on the lives of Asian girls and young women in the last couple of years is SMS (short messaging service) or what is more popularly known as texting. In the Philippines for example, some two million messages are exchanged on a daily basis and a big percentage of these messages come from young texters. Although not yet as popular as in the Philippines, SMS is also starting to pick up in countries like Thailand and Malaysia. Texting or SMS has altered young people's way of communicating. When before they taxed their elders' patience by burning telephone lines, they now beg their parents to increase their allowance to enable them to buy call cards.



The Chat Room

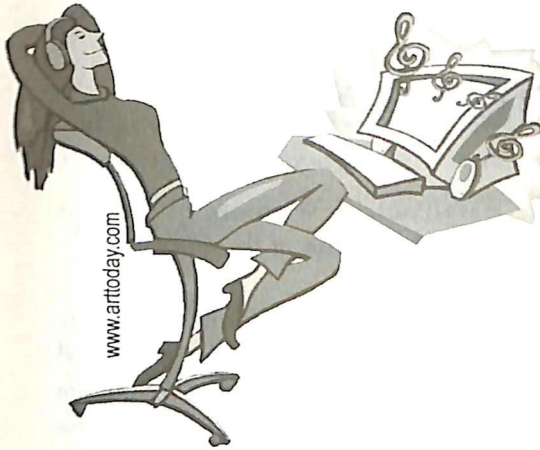
The Internet chat room is another form of ICT that has gained enormous popularity among young women in the region. They find the chat room a fun and exciting space to meet people and socialise. While some gain a wholesome experience, a large percentage of young people also find themselves in chat rooms that talk of nothing else but virtual sex. This should not, however, deter people from exploring electronic spaces. The rules for meeting people and making friends online are the same as in real life. If used properly, the Net can be a safe and enjoyable space; with supervision from concerned adults, it can be an empowering means for young women to explore the world.

Why the Need for an ICT Education for Women

The digital economy opens up significant opportunities for all girls and women in Asia including fresh employment opportunities on an unprecedented scale. However, their ability to take advantage of these opportunities depends on helpful policies, an enabling environment in their countries to extend communications infrastructure to where women live, and increased educational levels.

Of these, the single most important factor in improving the ability of girls and women to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT is education, at all levels from literacy through scientific and technological education.

The current Internet landscape has not been promising at all for young girls and women. According to the *Girl and Technology: An Idea Book for Educators and Parents*, girls use computers three times less than boys at home. Parents are also likely to purchase technological equipment twice as much for their sons than their daughters. In school, only a quarter of students using computers during their free time are girls. Girls and women are also largely invisible in educational software for math and science. A 1997 study of technology use in large suburban school systems showed that girls consistently rated themselves lower than boys in terms of computer ability. Girls were also



less likely than boys to think that computers helped them do better in school.

Clearly, efforts of the past decade to ensure girls' and women's access to quality basic education should be continued, strengthened, and complemented. Technologies should be integrated into girls' education and women's literacy programmes to expose girls to new technologies at earlier stages and to allow much-needed integration of these two programme areas.

Science and technology education is necessary for women to get into the level of computer programmers, engineers, systems analysts, and designers. Women's low enrolment in science impedes this globally. Today, women tend to be concentrated in end-user, lower-skilled ICT jobs related to word processing or data entry. Although ICT is a relatively new field, gendered division of labour is already clearly established. Few women are producers of information technology, whether as Internet content providers, programmers, designers, inventors, or fixers of computers with a few exceptions in countries like India and Malaysia. In addition,

women are conspicuously absent from decision-making structures of ICTs in developing countries.

But, lest we be tempted to believe that all we need to do is encourage girls and young women to become interested in the technology itself, we need to think again. A study conducted among computer science students at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, U.S.A., established a critical distinction in technology interest between males and females. While female students do just as well as male students, female students maintain a different relationship with computers. Unlike young men who often fall in love with the technology itself, young women tend to become interested in science for a larger purpose. The female students interviewed in the study describe computers as a tool to use within a broader context of education, medicine, communication, art and music. In other words, women are more interested in the advantages and outcomes of using one particular technology.


To attract and retain female students, computer science departments in a number of universities in the North have had to redesign their courses to emphasise the ways in which computers can be applied to help solve problems, rather than focus on the computer as an end in itself.

What Should an ICT Education for Girls and Women Emphasise?

Girls and young women need a broad spectrum of positive women's

images and role models that they can identify with. Like other social institutions, ICTs can become building blocks of patriarchy and tools for gender inequality. Schools should invest in the setting up of Websites that will encourage girls and young women to delve into ICTs and all other possibilities available to them. There are already a number of Websites set up for this purpose. However, not a single one has been set up for, maintained by and focused on Asian girls and young women.

Training is needed for Website designs that reflect the professional, vocational and business needs of non-elite women. Courses that enable women to be knowledgeable in the methods and scope of setting up e-business and e-commerce are also a priority.

To reach out to women who are not part of the privileged middle class and/or are not able to attend formal schooling, new modes of training such as distance tele-education that allow women with children to receive lifelong education—if necessary at home or in neighborhood centres—must be explored. 

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References:

¹ Newsbytes, 1996.

² Ibid.

³ Cherny, Lynn, et al. *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*. 1996. Seal Press, Seattle, Washington, U.S.A..