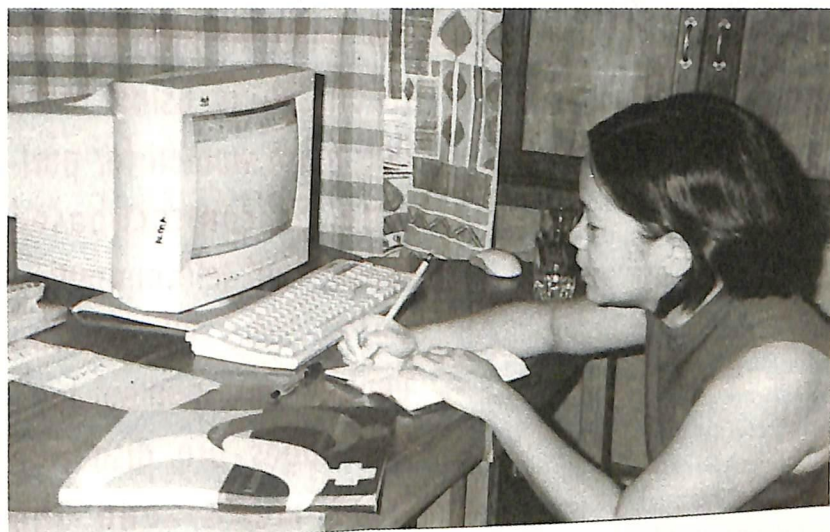


# Women, Neoliberal Policies and the ICT Revolution

By Christina Vogt and Peiyong Chen

The 1998/1999 World Bank Report on Knowledge for Development, by and large, persuades developing countries to reform, reconstruct, and readjust their institutional arrangements, prepare their future workers, and establish information infrastructures for globalisation. The World Bank considers a linear progress model that includes the advancement of technology as the best way to alleviate poverty, and improve gender equity as well as the quality of life in general. As with counterpart policies in the time of Reaganomics, the World Bank believes the benefits of its Knowledge for Development schemes will trickle down to every disadvantaged country and every marginalised group. It is such idealistic and optimistic faith in capitalist markets that has accelerated globalisation, an ideology that further strengthened since the triumph of capitalism over the communist bloc. In spite of the recent economic market crises in the capitalist societies in Asia in 1997 and the destitute conditions of the former Soviet Republic, pro-liberalisation proponents are unfazed.

The report uses the competitive model countries (South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) to support its argument for an acceleration of the readjustment and reconstruction it recommends. Through this lens, investments in schooling, research and development, and information infrastructure will pay back the costs of development. But the recent economic



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collapse of Argentina can serve as counterargument. By borrowing large sums from the IMF for technological advancements and industrialisation efforts coupled with the IMF's insistence on tying the peso to the dollar, and balancing the budget, Argentina's economy gave way. No immediate relief is in sight; and in fact, the Bank and the IMF are currently refusing additional loans to revive the collapsed economy.

Ostensibly, educated unemployment and underemployment can be solved as long as the country boosts its economy through development. This is because development, as the World Bank reasons, will upgrade the skills of workers, offer new jobs, and spur new foreign investments that will ultimately help reduce unemployment and bridge the gap between the "learning and earning" links. These issues are especially relevant for women.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) lies at the core of the World Bank's Knowledge for Development programmes. Knowledge workers—those who generate ideas—gain advantage through the Internet and other networking technologies. Yet, according to the International Labour Organisation, there is a knowledge component to all work, and that a "wired" economy could only further worsen the polarisation between skilled or knowledge-based work, on the one hand, and unskilled or de-skilled jobs, on the other. Across countries, the digital divide has common characteristics: the use of the Internet is more common among younger versus older people, men versus women, the more educated versus the less educated, urban versus rural dwellers, and those with higher incomes versus those with lower ones. The most significant factor is the level of education, as education itself is di-

rectly related to income.

Females lag in educational attainment in most countries and, in wealthier ones, where they comprise about half of tertiary-level enrolment, their presence in technology courses is often a much smaller share. In the U.S., for example, women comprise only 17 percent of engineering undergraduates, whose number has grown by only 4 to 5 percent since the late 1980s. Since the 1980s, enrolment in computing sciences has continued to drop. Throughout developed nations, women are nowhere close to parity with males in the ICT fields. In developing nations, the figures are even grimmer. This leads us to conclude that women stand to lose out in this new development scheme unless social groups, trade unions and government organisations support gender equity programmes that will lead both to women's increased access to technology and to higher school retention.

In addition, the global labour patterns, as reported by the ILO, indicate that the ICT revolution is using more and more women for part-time or contract-based labour and telecommuting only, jobs where the benefits are non-existent, the wages are disparate from men's, and the chances for advancement are compromised. One of the worst such job situations is the preponderance of women in digital sweatshop "call service centres," most of which have been relocated to developing regions where the level of English proficiency as well as unemployment is high. In short, the "learning-earning" link advocated by the World Bank is

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highly suspect, and feminists are called upon to deconstruct the emerging framework for women in science and technology. In fact, women have been traditionally co-opted into the labour force when needed, and then sent home when the problems are solved. Is this being replayed in light of a so-called ICT labour shortage in developed economies? Are women in the poorer countries again being asked to provide the cheap labour that already wealthy countries and companies prefer?

Considering the host of contradictions in this capitalist development paradigm, how can we trust that a global economy will bring good news, instead of an overwhelmingly complex crisis to all of human society?

Moreover, will women have full participation in this new economy, or will they simply be roped into a workforce that supplies low-end to mid-range labour that will upgrade technological infrastructure? As ILO believes, passive capitalist approaches that lack monitoring will not work. We urge women to rally and pressure firms to offer them equal compensation for their labour in the emerging ICT revolution.

The only countries where women are continually making progress in both government and private enterprise are those in Northern Europe. The explanation: these countries do not segregate business interests and governmental policies, trade unions remain strong, and, according to World Bank research, women's leveraging capacity in the workplace via unions gives them more equitable participation and remuneration in the job market. In the U.S., the most recent statistics show women's wages dropping to less than 70 cents to the dollar. It seems to be the same everywhere whether in times of unfettered economic growth or times of economic challenge, women continue to be least financially compensated, that is, unless strict interventions are exercised. ♡

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