

Get In and Get In Early: Ensuring Women's Access to and Participation in ICT Projects

by Nancy J. Hafkin and Sonia Jorge

Recent research on Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-based projects shows that the majority of these projects developed and funded by major donors do not consider gender an important component of project design and, consequently, fail to address the demands of women in the targeted communities and provide them access to ICT.

No Women at the Start

Much of the transfer of ICT to developing countries has come in the form of projects funded and/or executed by multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental organisations and foundations. Regrettably, and following the pattern of other earlier development interventions, the inclusion of women and their needs in these projects has generally come as an afterthought. The year 1995 was a watershed for most of these groups to start ICT and development efforts. However, it was not until 1998 that the consideration of gender and ICT began to appear on the agenda of donor and international development organisations.¹ This was more evident in the papers presented to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Telecommunication Development Conference in Valletta, Malta and International Development Research Centre's

sponsorship of the track on women and ICT for the Economic Commission for Africa's 40th anniversary conference on women and development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Even after that introduction, it was not until 2002 that many important development players, such as the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development and the Euro-

pean Union, began to take seriously the integration of gender in ICT projects.

More and more, research is making the case for gender equality and equity efforts. "New evidence demonstrates that when women and men are relatively equal, economies tend to grow faster, the poor move more quickly out of poverty, and the well-being of men, women and children is enhanced."² Development organisations are coming to realise that gender analysis and incorporation of gender are necessary if they are to fulfil their mandate and meet their objec-



Neighbourhood internet shops or those in locales where women are mostly found are examples of ensuring women's access to ICT.

Nancy J. Hafkin

...the incorporation of gender into projects linking ICT and development is still the exception, rather than the rule. One reason for this is that "if you don't ask for gender, you don't get gender."

tives. Put simply, many development practitioners now believe that the incorporation of gender concerns results in more successful project outcomes.³

Given the new awareness of the role of gender in ICT policy, what insights can we offer to ensure that the mistakes of efforts in other areas (i.e., agriculture, transport and environmental projects) are not repeated in project design and implementation and that a workable approach is taken from the beginning?

Why Women are Invisible

While there is new consensus on the importance of a gender focus in information technology and development, the incorporation of gender into projects linking ICT and development is still the exception, rather than the rule. One reason for this is that "if you don't ask for gender, you don't get gender." In many cases, project designers do not incorporate gender into their analyses and design because project proposal guidelines

do not ask for it. This happens even when the majority of project participants and potential beneficiaries are women. An example is Peoplink <<http://www.peoplink.org>>, a well-known and successful example of artisans, the majority of whom are women, in developing countries using e-commerce to market their wares. Yet the Peoplink project proposal to the World Bank Group's infoDev made no single mention of women or gender. When there are no references to gender in the project proposal format instructions, and no requests for gender-disaggregated data or analysis in the reporting requirements either, these elements rarely emerge voluntarily. As Helen Derbyshire wrote, "equity outcomes are not achieved unless they are explicitly stated and operationalised through well thought-out procedures."⁴

The other reason is simply the lack of gender awareness on the part of those involved in project planning. This leads to incomplete project analysis (i.e., no gender analysis) and consequently, the failure to address women's needs and demands. For example, telecentre projects in Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, which did not consider gender from the start, found that they did not meet women's demands and that they were not providing equal access to women and girls because: (1) they did not address gender relations and the social constraints imposed on women and girls, and (2) they did not provide services that addressed women's needs.⁵

How to do Gender

What do project planners need to do in order to incorporate gender into ICT projects? Some suggestions for incorporating gender into project design and implementation follow:

(1) *It is imperative to consider gender from the beginning of project design. They are not to be added in hindsight or as a mid-term correction.* Key to doing this is the involvement of gender-aware persons in project planning or design. Gender-awareness is the desired minimum; someone trained in gender analysis would be optimal. In addition, by using an engendered project design process, which serves as a guide on how to integrate gender analysis in the planning process, the team is most likely to understand and include gender considerations.⁶ It should be noted that the number of women involved in project design and implementation, or as participants, is not a guarantee of gender awareness, but a fully participatory process will most likely include gender experts and/or input from organisations that work with women and on gender issues. There are many cases where women feature prominently in design and implementation teams, but without any gender awareness.

(2) *It is nearly impossible to find a project without gender issues.* Project designers in China thought that theirs was such a project.⁷ The Ministry of Information Infrastructure in China, executors of the project, believed that macro-policy

In itself, information technology cannot combat constraining socio-cultural forces (such as machismo and negative male attitudes toward women and stereotypes about women), but needs to be complemented by gender analysis and corrective measures.

projects, particularly those in technical areas, were gender-neutral and did not need to incorporate any special concern for women. It held that ICT development in China, particularly in e-commerce, would benefit many people in China and "...so, automatically, women will be half of the beneficiaries." Labouring under such an argument, the agency did not take any particular note of women's needs or interests in the project. In an effort to incorporate gender into its projects, *infoDev* sponsored a gender analysis of this and other projects, in the course of which the reviewer brought Ministry officials to see that the project actually had many gender aspects that they had not considered.⁸ In Ecuador, Chasquinet has implemented numerous successful telecentres; however, the organisation noticed that even when it assumed that everyone would benefit from services provided, it was clear that us-

age patterns reflected gender differences and that the telecentres needed to address those differences by developing specific programmes for women and girls.⁹

The assumption that a so-called gender-neutral information technology project will benefit an entire population, regardless of gender, disregards the impact of gender relations on technology and the societal constraints that women face in accessing and using information technology.

(3) *The socio-cultural context is all-important.* Technology does not operate in a vacuum. In itself, information technology cannot combat constraining socio-cultural forces (such as machismo and negative male attitudes toward women and stereotypes about women), but needs to be complemented by gender analysis and corrective measures. This is illustrated by another *infoDev* funded-project in Panama,¹⁰ where the technology itself could not correct extensive gender discrimination in employment. Although a Web-based database of graduates seeking employment got the resumes of many women to employers' desks (or monitors), traditional attitudes of machismo still reigned, preventing women from being hired for managerial positions. In a third *infoDev* funded-project in Peru,¹¹ lack of awareness of gender roles on the part of project designers meant that the economic roles that women play and the ways in which they could benefit from the new technology were overlooked. The project was directed

at information services for farmers, who the project defined as men, ignoring the important economic roles women play in agriculture in Peru. In an *infoDev* funded-project in India that uses personal data assistants to collect information on women's health, the lack of gender analysis prevented an understanding of gender relations on the vital issue of reproductive health.¹² Questions about reproductive behaviour were directed only to women, but men's attitudes are obviously essential to a full understanding of reproductive health. In the China project cited earlier, the absence of gender analysis led to a blind spot about the different ways that the proposed telecom reform policy would impact men and women. In a training programme for East African health professionals held in Kenya, the lack of gender analysis kept the project from taking proactive measures to recruit women and anticipating the difficulties women would encounter in terms of project scheduling and access to connectivity.¹³

Awareness of the socio-cultural context is also of overriding importance in ensuring the participation by, and the distribution of benefits to, both women and men. In some cases, this could happen best by ensuring that women and men work together. In other cases, it meant separation of the sexes in training and meetings. Often, special accommodation is needed to ensure that women as well as men are able to participate (e.g., attention to course and meeting



Nancy J. Hafkin

Ms. Tsehaye Admasu, a young woman entrepreneur, is the owner of the only computer training centre in Assela, Ethiopia.

schedule in recognition of women's multiple roles and time constraints).

(4) *In technical fields (including meetings and training), projects need to be pro-active to ensure the participation of women as well as men.* The pool of eligible women in technical areas, especially in Africa, is small, and sometimes, corrective measures may be needed to include them. For instance, in technical training, because of the smaller number of women who take technical courses, they may have lower skill levels than men and some remediation may be necessary. In addition, outreach efforts are essential to ensure that women are aware of project services and opportunities. These efforts must consider the appropriate channels in communicating with women (which, for example, may not be an Internet-based or E-mail-based

advertisement but rather a poster in schools or women's support organisations) and must try to provide women with the necessary conditions to participate in project activities (such as day-care assistance or schedules that consider women's multiple work responsibilities).

Where We Go from Here

Based on experience, if we want to address gender issues in ICT projects, gender must be integrated into project analysis and design from the beginning. There is no such thing as gender-neutral design. Gender-neutral projects neglect the complex socio-economic and cultural context which impacts project outcomes and which constrains women's access to and participation in ICT projects.

The integration of gender analysis in project design and implementa-

tion is of great importance. We recommend two specific strategies. First, on-going research and work on gender and ICTs should be made widely available to inform and educate practitioners about gender analysis and to increase awareness of gender issues. Second, donors must take the responsibility of incorporating gender concerns in their own work and in the specific requirements for project preparation and funding, even when projects are demand-driven (i.e. when donors receive proposals from organisations to fund their projects). Specifically, donors should develop and publish guidelines for project design and implementation that integrate gender analysis and provide guidance on how to implement projects from a gender perspective (e.g. project proposal instructions and data requirements that include gender considerations, and gender-disaggregated data for monitoring and evaluation purposes). In addition, donors should develop accessible gender resources that can be used by their partners. ☺

Nancy Hafkin has worked in the area of gender and information technology for development for more than thirty years. For 25 years she was with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia as chief of research and publications at the African Center for Women, chief of the Pan African Development Information System, leader of the ECA team to promote information technology in Africa and coordinator of the African Information Society Initiative. She now lives in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Sonia Jorge has been involved in the telecommunications reform process for 12 years. Her recent projects include the development of national policies for the governments of Mozambique and Sri Lanka, the design and implementation plan of the Telecommunications Development Fund for the Dominican Republic, the development of a training curriculum on gender perspectives in telecommunications policy for the International Telecommunications Union, technical assistance to the Bolivian regulator, and the Telecentre Implementation Plan for South Africa. Ms. Jorge is a Portuguese citizen who was raised in Angola and is now based in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. She can be contacted at E-mail: <sjorge@att.net>.

Footnotes

¹ Although the Association for Progressive Communication Women's Networking Support Programme (APC-WNSP), which puts emphasis on using ICTs as advocacy tools, got underway in 1993. See Association for Progressive Communications, *Networking for Change: the APC-WNSP's First Eight Years* (Manila: 2000) for a detailed account of APC's work in this area.

² The World Bank, *Integrating Gender into the World Bank's Work: A Strategy for Action* (Washington, D.C., 2002).

³ Why do we focus on women while using gender analysis that considers the situation of both men and women? When talking about gender and development, we are looking at whether policy, projects and activities impact men and women differently. From the history of development we know that the differential impact nearly always favours men. Thus, to achieve equity, gender analysis leads to special attention to the situation of women.

⁴ Helen Derbyshire, *Gender Manual: A*

Practical Guide for Development Policy Makers and Practitioners. London (UK): Department for International Development (2002), p.10.

⁵ See Sonia Jorge, Gender Perspectives on Telecentres, ITU-Telecom Americas 2000; Chasquinet, Estado del Arte de los Telecentros en America Latina y el Caribe, February 2002 <<http://www.telecentros.org/estarte/index.html>>; and presentations of telecentre projects at the Gender Evaluation Methodology Workshop, APC-WNSP training workshop for ICT projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 15-19 May 2002.

⁶ Sonia Jorge, "Gender-Sensitive ICT Projects: A Policy Framework," prepared for the Gender Evaluation Methodology Workshop, APC-WNSP training workshop for ICT projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 15-19 May 2002.

⁷ "Exploring Adequate Reform Models for the Telecom Sector in China." The gender analysis of this project was completed for *infoDev* by Prof. Liu Meng in a study to be published shortly on the *infoDev* Website: <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ict/projects.nsf/20c7f8205b9d190185256b180057ba4f/d3f2f6035a62503385256b10005b7dfd?OpenDocument>>.

⁸ A number of gender analyses of *infoDev* projects cited in this article point out gender omissions in projects that could have been corrected in project design. The citations from *infoDev* projects are not meant to criticise *infoDev* projects; rather, they commend the institution for its openness to gender analysis and its application to future projects. Few other donors have done this. More details on the *infoDev* gender review framework can be found in Louise Chamberlain, "Gender Review of ICT Projects" <<http://www.digitalnetwork.org/content/stories/index.cfm?key=250>>.

⁹ Geovanna Muñoz, "The BarrioNet Project," presented at the Gender Evaluation Methodology Workshop, APC-WNSP training workshop for ICT projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 15-19 May 2002.

¹⁰ "The National Graduate Registry in Panama—Partners for Employment." Gender analysis of this project was completed for *infoDev* by Michael Clulow in a study to be published shortly on the *infoDev* Website: <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ict/projects.nsf/20c7f8205b9d190185256b180057ba4f/8a20e479a61c0c1f85256b5d0060948d?OpenDocument>>

¹¹ "Information Systems for Rural Development: A Demonstration Project." Gender analysis of this project was done for *infoDev* by Norma Puican in a study to be published shortly on the *infoDev* Website: <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ict/projects.nsf/20c7f8205b9d190185256b180057ba4f/886bce8daced1d7d85256b750070e048?OpenDocument>>.

¹² "India Health Care Project—Use of Information Technology for Delivering Quality Health Care to the Rural Population." Gender analysis of this project was completed for *infoDev* by Prof. Shiraz Wajih in a study to be published shortly on the *infoDev* Website: <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ict/projects.nsf/e4ed1d55d4e1c27085256b180057ba50/eeaa76fe47e8a51d85256b10005b7bf2?OpenDocument>>.

¹³ "Infodev Health Information Training Center." Gender analysis of this project was completed by Karen Odhiambo in a study to be published shortly on the *infoDev* Website: <<http://wbln0018.worldbank.org/ict/projects.nsf/20c7f8205b9d190185256b180057ba4f/84dfebf109f0be0785256b10005b7bf4?OpenDocument>>.