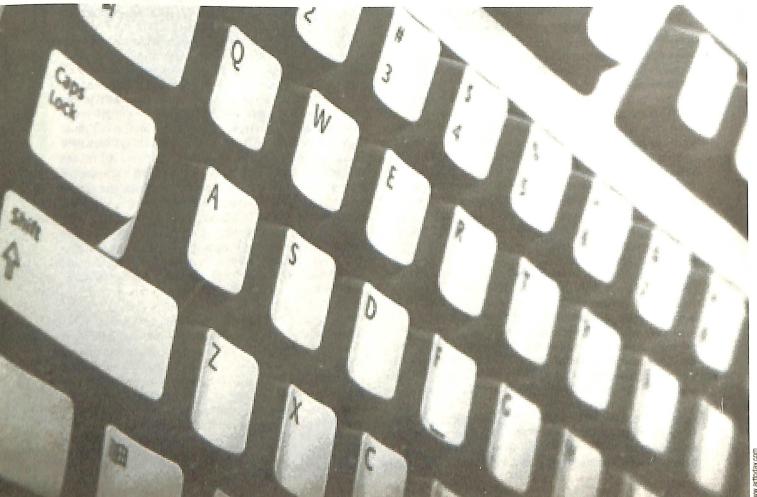# Women and New Information and Communications Technologies: The Promise of Empowerment

By Susanna George

One of the most important contributions of the women's movement, I believe, has been the incisive analytical feminist lens that it has used to examine almost every aspect of human society, its structures and processes. Feminist activists have interrogated the soft underbelly of society that most have been unwilling to examine, and challenged the most fundamental assumptions of women, men and societies. In other words, it has been as revolutionary in concept and challenge as the framework of class analysis.

Mainstream media was and continues to be a major site of struggle for feminist activists. The content, the form, the delivery channels and the very institutions have been challenged; despite all setbacks, there have been some changes that we can count as gains in the all-uphill battle for a society that is truly just and equitable for all.

In the early 1970s, the insensitivity of mainstream media spurred feminists, such as those who founded Isis International, to set up alternative channels of information and communications. We refer to ourselves as women's information and communications, or info-com activists. The old adage "information is power" inspired us to get information that mattered to women who had no access to it. Women's info-com activists have used various means to gather, process and deliver information that mattered to women, and challenged the invisibilising, demeaning and stereotyped information that flowed in the mainstream. Women-centred communications channels, managed and controlled by them,

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continue to be important arteries of information flow within the women's movement. We have seen the power of effective and appropriate communications in encouraging networking, inspiring international solidarity, and building a stronger movement.

Empowerment, therefore, is a concept that is very close to the heart of feminist activists. We do subscribe to the notion that information, if relevant and appropriate, has transformative potential, and more importantly, that putting the means of communications in the hands of women and communities can be a very empowering experience.

Even so, the current stream of discourse around new information and communications technologies (ICTs) as a tool for women's advancement and empowerment is somewhat worrisome, even as we believe that it is crucial to examine new ICTs in relation to women's needs, rights and perspectives. This paper will do two things in this regard; first, it will raise some of the concerns that we have in relation to the current discourse on gender and ICTs; and second, it will list the issues that, we believe, civil society groups in the South need to take up in relation to gender in the WSIS process.

Concerns Related to the Current Discourse on Gender, ICTs and Development

Feminist Activism and Gender Advocacy

Feminist analysis has had a profound impact on the development world. The framework of gender relations has added significantly to the critique of activists and intellectuals from the South who have brought into sharp relief the unevenness in the distribution of the fruits of development.

I believe, however, that a "disconnect" has taken place between feminist activism and gender advocacy over the past years. Feminists will enter spaces of discussion around gender and development where it is no longer politically savvy to speak about feminist frameworks. Where previously the advocacy around gender was rooted in the feminist movement, with feminists pushing for change within development institutions and governments, today gender advocacy can be entirely removed from the feminist movement framework. For different reasons some gender advocates would not want to be associated with feminism, and have little or no associations with the women's movement. They move directly from university into development institutions with

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little experience in organising women, or working within a women's organisation framework.

This means that there is some generation loss of the principles and values that have been at the core of the feminist movement. In other words, knowledge transfer from one activist to another is not taking place. The implicit hierarchy of practical gender interests (women's needs) over strategic gender interests (women's rights and transforming their position within societal structures), it must be admitted, has been of strategic importance to unpacking the notion of women's empowerment. On the other hand, it can be argued that it serves as a convenient way out for governments and development agents from addressing the more calcified structures of unequal social relations. It is thus crucial to forge solidarity links between gender advocates and feminist activists, since protest action is often needed to maintain pressure and an ethical stance against mere reforms in the system.

Lip Service to Empowerment

In the desire to ensure that women are not excluded from and through development processes, an alphabet soup of terminology has been floated to capture the concerns of women in ICTs. From this meeting, we have gender justice and empowerment in one panel title; and in the discussion of gender and ICTs we have others such as the gender digital divide, e-quality,[1] women's empowerment through new ICTs. Generally speaking, there is euphoria amongst development institutions about the wonders that ICTs can bring. Perhaps the speed and ease of digitalised communications and information dissemination, and the remarkable success

that middle-class, educated women have had in integrating computers and the Internet into their lives, has raised expectations of its possibilities as a tool for empowerment.

Women's empowerment, particularly of the poor women in the South, cannot be spoken about without juxtaposing this against questions of ethnicity, class and race, and the realities of new forms of globalisation and geopolitical hegemony of the North in the new information economy. Women's empowerment cannot be achieved by any means necessary, and feminists have always argued that the means is as important as the ends.

> ...the struggle for gender equality by women of the South is linked to the concerns of cultural activists in relation to the cultural hegemony of the USA and the homogenisation of culture symbols and processes. Gendered considerations are involved in the perpetuation, through worn-out stereotypes—"the West is best"—of the cultural hegemony of the old European colonial powers.

We do not view as a step forward, for example, the involvement of multinational interests such as Cisco Systems in the development landscape through partnerships with the United Nations, and such proposals to address the "digital divide" as the women-specific Cisco Networking Academy Programmes.[2] In fact, we see it as a dangerous sliding of the basic premises upon which gender equality is founded.

The Lowest Common Denominator

The discussion of solutions to addressing the "gender digital divide" has focused to a large extent on questions of access and control of ICTs. Gender discrimination in the workplace and in schools, social class, illiteracy, and geographic location have been cited as factors related to women's lack of access to and control of ICTs.[3] These are all serious concerns indeed, and certainly, issues of access, control and participation are very serious for most women in

countries of the South. However, the focus on access, control and participation as a strategic advocacy position has been a case of finding the lowest common denominator. There is little disagreement amongst the widest possible range of actors, from UN agencies to the private sector, telecommunication specialists and NGO activists, on the importance of these key concerns.

For some feminist activists however, including myself, it has felt like trying to squeeze my concerns into a narrow definition of gender concerns in ICTs. I would liken it to Cinderella's ugly sister cutting off her toe to fit into the dainty slipper. Not everyone is invited to the ball. The development model, it seems, can only accommodate some elements of what NGO activists, particularly those from the South, are concerned about in relation to new information and communications technologies.

Our concern is growing, for example, over the links, too close for comfort, between corporate interests and UN agencies, or the infamous revolving door between the military, government and multinational interests. But these issues have been left off the map of gender advocacy around new ICTs and certainly within the WSIS process.

Some Concerns of Women's NGO Activists in Relation to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Process

Access to, Control and Effective Use of New ICTs in Building the Women's Movement

As I stated in the introduction, the women's movement has for decades sought to enable women's networking, solidarity-building and advocacy and awareness-raising work. Isis International Manila is certainly keenly interested in harnessing the potentials of the new ICTs in carrying out this work, and to making the potential benefits of these technologies available to other women's organisations. We believe that everyone has much to gain from their potential for information gathering, storage, processing and dissemination. Research that was conducted by Isis International Manila in partnership with the Asian Women's Resource Exchange network (AWORC) shows that women's organisations have not maximised the new ICTs as tools for advocacy, information sharing and solidarity building.[4]

Even so, we are also aware that the application of ICTs and the process of integration of new technologies are mapped onto an already existing landscape of entrenched

gender, class, ethnic and other inequalities. We believe that the digital divide is laid upon the same grid as all of the divides that already exist, such as the economic divide and the geopolitical power divide.

When we speak of gender equality, the discussion needs to be nuanced to take into account the difference not just between women and men in gaining access, control and effective use of new ICTs, but between vastly different levels of readiness of women to do so. We want women to have options and opportunities made available to them, as well as a diversity of appropriate tools and technologies. We need, however, to recognise that in some contexts such as the Pacific,[5] the effective use of computers and access to the Internet may not be possible in the immediate future. In this situation the older forms of technology may still be the most effective in terms of public outreach, community-building and information dissemination.

Women Activists' Involvement in Decision-making, Policy Development and Governance

One of the key areas of application of gender perspectives is in the area of decision-making within institutions of policy-making and governance. There is a tendency in the WSIS process to treat policy-making on ICTs, and their governance, as purely economic, legislative or technical matters. For our governments, usually it is a question of viewing first what the economic potentials are; they are not too interested in the content, as well as the social, political and cultural factors, that are equally important. We argue that the technologies themselves and their application have gendered dimensions, and are not neutral. Even the prevalent mode of speech, let alone the language, in currency in the Internet is cause for concern-would a woman name the number of times that a website is visited as the number of "hits"?

Why Talk About Gender?

Some civil society groups assume that framing our arguments in a rights-based approach would ultimately address gender concerns. In fact we have found quite the contrary. There has been research showing that even in development institutions that promote gender equality in their programmes, the internal gender hierarchies are preserved in fact.[6] There are many anecdotal accounts of how the inclusion of gender concerns in different committees and task forces related to promoting ICTs in development institutions are blocked by men who refuse to understand why gender matters.[7]

We argue that gender inequality is the most difficult inequality to address, simply because the transformation would be so fundamental. For this reason, we keep making the point.

Enhancing Diversity, Resisting Homogenisation and Monopolistic Control

We believe that for women of the South, the struggle for gender equality is linked to the broader social justice movements that advocate the preservation of diversity of views, opinions, content and information, and the respect of indigenous and localised knowledge systems.

It is also linked to the overall and anti-globalisation resistance that seeks to expose the impact of trade liberalisation on the ability of local content producers to compete with multinational corporations that have cornered the entertainment industry.

It is linked to media and communications activists who are pursuing the acknowledgement and respect of the fundamental right to communicate, resisting the corporatisation of all public broadcasting systems, the encroachment of community-based radio broadcasting services.

Lastly, the struggle for gender equality by women of the South is linked to the concerns of cultural activists in relation to the cultural hegemony of the USA and the homogenisation of culture symbols and processes. Gendered considerations are involved in the perpetuation, through worn-out stereotypes-"the West is best"-of the cultural hegemony of the old European colonial powers.

Presentation by Susanna George, Executive Director, Isis International Manila, at the WSIS: The Asian Response Meeting, 22-24 November 2002, Bangkok, Thailand

Footnotes:

[1] Speech by Joanne Sandler, Deputy Director of Programmes, UNIFEM, to the Preparatory Committee of the World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva, 1-5 July 2002.

[2] ibid

[3] Turley, Anne, "Gender Issues, the digital divide and the WSIS," Media Development, 4:2002.,Journal of the World Association of Christian Communication.

[4] Isis International Manila, NGO- Women@Asia.net: The Use of Information and Communications Technologies by Women's Organisations in Seven Countries, Isis International Manila: 2002

[5] AWORC, I on the Mouse: ICTs for Women's Advocacies and Networking in Asia and the Pacific, AWORC: 2001

[6] Kabeer, Naila, Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development, Kali for Women, 1994

[7] Personal account of an expert at the UNDA W Experts Groups Meeting on "The Use and Impact of lCTs as an instrument in the advancement and empowerment of women, 11-14 November 2002, Seoul, Korea.