Cultural Boundaries and Cyberspaces

Women's Voices on Empowerment, Leadership and Technology
Produced by Women's Learning Partnership, 2000
VHS form, 30 minutes, video-documentary on women and technology
Reviewed by Rowena Festin

The video-documentary *Cultural Boundaries and Cyberspaces: Women's Voices on Empowerment, Leadership and Technology* is taken from a symposium presented by the Women's Learning Partnership on innovative tools and strategies for strengthening women's leadership capacity in Muslim societies. The symposium was hosted by New York University's Kevorkien Center for the Near Eastern Studies on June 1, 2000. The 30-minute documentary discusses the power of information technology (IT) and its benefits for women—how the Internet, e-mails, computers, videos, telecenters and cyber cafés (Internet centers) can be used as powerful innovative education and training tools for women. The documentary successfully captures the points of view on IT concerns by women-leaders from Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Morocco, Libya, Afghanistan, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Singapore, USA, and South Africa.

The women in the symposium agreed that it is the West, the rich, the government, and the males who control IT. Since women are considered second class in most cultures, they have the last chance, or no chance at all, to control, and even access, the tools of IT.

While viewing the documentary, one comes across several points that it is trying to make in relation to its main theme. For instance, the documentary promotes the idea that Muslim women do not have to change their culture so as to empower themselves.
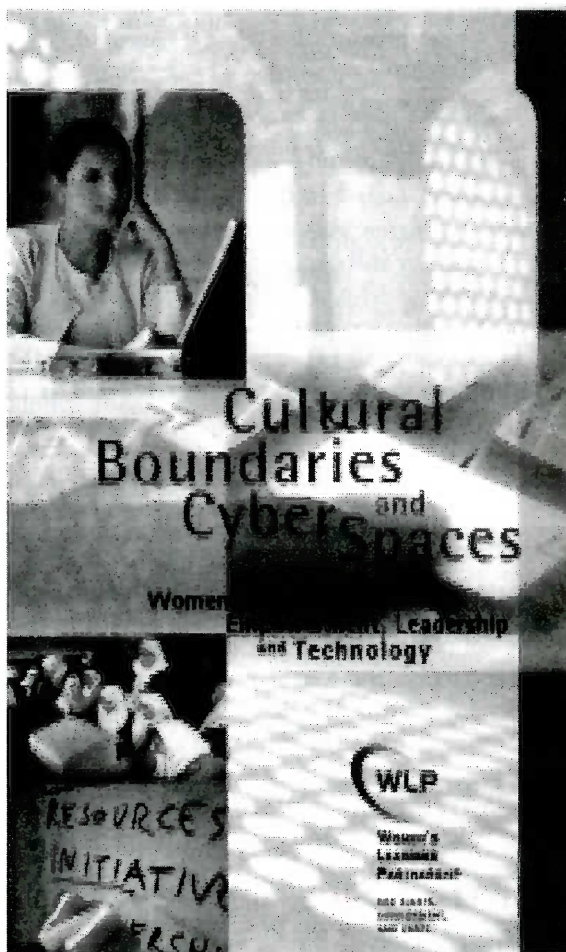
What they must do is to be proud of what they have. But if they must bring in some modifications, they can do so by connecting these to the developed cosmopolitan world.

On the concept of power, the documentary says that it is always read and understood in the context of male hierarchy and *macho* power, particularly in the Muslim communities and even in non-Muslim communities all over the world. This definition of power devalues participation. It silences women's voices that could otherwise bring to the table different experiences and knowledge that could resolve various issues.

Going back to who controls IT and its tools, the documentary dwells some more on the matter while taking up male hierarchy and male power, and who controls the technology. It is emphasised that giving as well this control to women could be another venue for their empowerment. But when it comes to IT, like all other discourses on women's issues, women have to deal not only with the issue of male domination but also the issue of political economy. It would then answer the question "Why do women have difficulty in accessing IT tools?" In this highly wired world, in this time and age where women are supposed to be empowered, they still experience the double discrimination of patriarchy and feudal power. That is, they have to struggle for equal job opportunities because they are women, and because they are women, they are always the second best, be they educated, wired or not.

But after all that has been said, in this era of global communication and global business, the winner is always the one who has access to and control over IT. Today, IT is spurring the growth of many economies, from communities to big business. IT is making communication move at a very rapid pace around the globe. But a deeper examination of those currently involved in the design, operation, and usage of IT would actually reveal that the "gender gap" is also present in this arena. Although there are women in IT, they are mostly working as IT technicians or call center operators. Very few are able to enter the level of IT engineers or developers. Again, women go back to patriarchy and feudal power as they struggle to understand the disparity.

Women must get the equal chance as men have in being trained and being knowledgeable on IT—its various forms, benefits, possibilities for use, opportunities for self-development as well as for improving livelihood. Women must get the equal access to and control over IT as men have in order to fully utilise its many benefits, such as networking with other women or related interest groups, or in doing online business for women-entrepreneurs. Through e-mails and e-groups, women could form interest groups and networks that could provide them support groups and electronic discussions on issues affecting them or the community to which they belong. IT tools could also help the women develop critical ideas, as they might be engaging in electronic conferences thus opening up themselves to many ideas and information without having to spend valuable and scarce time and resources for travelling.

The documentary encourages the woman to be proud of herself. It is also a reminder to all that not recognising and helping her develop her potential as a woman means making her give up her chance to be recognised as an important member of society. It is a call for all women to resist the devaluing consequences of IT but to confront it as another option for their development and empowerment.

Finally, the documentary is about the woman transforming herself into a model. A model she has created in her own circumstance, who could be strong and powerful enough to create a channel—using the powerful tools of IT—that would open a dialogue between sexes, beliefs, cultures, and religions. A woman who is able to transcend boundaries, most likely imposed by others, and make herself well informed, known and heard, and an important IT actor and user.

Copies of this video are available at:
Women's Learning Partnership
4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 201, Bethesda, MD 20814 USA
Tel: (1-301) 654 2774
Fax: (1-301) 654 2775
E-mail: <wlp@learningpartnership.org>
Website: <http://www.learningpartnership.org>

Rowena P. Festin is a multi-awarded poet and fictionist; she is member of KATHA and Wika ng Kababaihan, and is pursuing her graduate studies in UP.