# *Gender and ICTs*

Dramatic changes brought about by information and communication technologies (ICTs) have created new economic and social opportunities the world over. Their use, however, continues to be governed by existing power relations. This issue of *In Brief* looks at the relationship between ICTs and gender equality. Women, particularly poor women, often lack the necessary infrastructure, skills, literacy and knowledge of English to make the most of the opportunities opened up by ICTs. However some individuals and organisations are using ICTs to promote gender equality. The Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) is a women's Internet radio station that uses these technologies to promote exchange between women across the globe. The work of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is an example of the capacity-building provided by ICTs which can support and empower women living in remote areas.

# *Challenging gender inequalities in the information society*

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THERE IS AN overwhelming consensus that new information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet have ushered in a new age. References to the "information age" and "information society" conjure up images of a worldwide revolution as if these technologies have a global reach and are relevant to everyone. The truth is that ICTs are not simply technical phenomena, but also have a social character. To fathom the social dimension of ICTs we need to ask some important questions: Who benefits from ICTs? Who is dictating the course of ICTs? Is it possible to harness ICTs to serve larger goals of equality and justice? Central to these is the issue of gender and women's equal right to access ICTs.

**Unequal access to ICTs**
Access to new ICTs is still a distant reality for the vast majority of people. The countries of the South, particularly rural populations, have been left out of the information revolution. In many of these countries there is a lack of basic infrastructure, resulting in high costs for installing and running ICTs. Unfamiliarity with ICTs and the dominance of the English language on the Internet, together with a perceived lack of demonstrated benefit from ICTs to address local

Recording a live radio programme
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level challenges, are also key factors. These barriers pose even greater problems for women. Women are less likely to be literate or to speak English and they lack opportunities for training in computer skills. They are further marginalised from the information sector as a result of domestic responsibilities, cultural restrictions on mobility, less economic power and the lack of relevance of most content on the World Wide Web.

Despite the mainstream opinion that technology is gender-neutral, feminist scholars have long researched the gendered character of science and technology; arguing that women and men relate differently to technology due to cultural values and practices. For the majority of women this has meant exclusion from access to and power over different technologies. The ability to harness technology is political as it involves a shift in power relations and a redefinition of technology that reflects women's needs, interests and aspirations.

**Power relations**
The power relations around ICTs need to be examined at different levels. At one level, household traditions and social norms reflect unequal gender relations and prevent women's access to ICTs. Women are underrepresented in the private sector and government bodies which control the ICT arena, meaning they have relatively little ownership of, and influence over decision-making processes involved in the development and provision of ICTs. Strategic control of ICTs by powerful nations and corporations also poses challenges for disadvantaged populations in a world where corporations control the intellectual property regime and thus control knowledge. The explosive growth of pornography on the Internet is one of many examples that demonstrate the e-exploitation of marginalised groups by the forces of capitalism, sexism and racism.

This is the larger picture that frames the questions about who is gaining and who is not. While the introduction of ICTs has brought employment gains for both women and men, patterns of gender inequality are being reproduced in the information economy. Organisations in the information technology sector, as elsewhere, employ men in the majority of high-skilled, high value-added jobs. Women's labour is continually undervalued as is demonstrated by the feminisation of work in environments such as call centres.

**Working towards equality in the information society**
To redress these power imbalances, civil society groups and international organisations like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are involved with issues around the democratisation of the ICT arena. These include cultural diversity, the right to communicate, and intellectual property rights. Gender equality advocates have also been pushing for measures designed to address the gender dimensions of the information society. They have worked on integrating gender perspectives in national ICT policies and strategies, providing content relevant to women, promoting women's economic participation in the information economy, capacity-building, and regulating violence against women and children connected to pornography on the Internet.

Many of these issues were raised by individuals and organisations working towards gender equality at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva in December 2003, which brought the multiple stakeholders in the arena together to address the challenges and possibilities posed by ICTs. However, the outcomes of the Summit, which concludes in Tunisia in 2005, left much to be desired in terms of a global consensus on the use of ICTs for human development and for equal access to ICTs. In terms of gender, the initial WSIS Declaration and Action Plan contained negligible reference to the potential impact of ICTs on the lives of women and girls across the world. However, through the intensive lobbying and advocacy efforts of women's groups such as the NGO-focused WSIS Gender Strategies Working Group and the multi stakeholder Gender Caucus, more gendered language was included in the final documents. It remains to be seen whether gender issues are taken into consideration when stakeholders implement the WSIS Action Plan.

**Appropriating ICTs for women's empowerment**
Despite the numerous challenges to equity in the ICT arena, many social actors have exploited ICTs as tools for social transformation and gender equality. Women artisans are directly accessing global markets through e-commerce initiatives and are using the Internet to support their activities with market and production information. E-governance programmes have been initiated using ICTs for delivering government services; in some cases with an explicit strategy to ensure these services reach women and others who face barriers to access. Health educators have used the radio to communicate information related to women's sexual and reproductive health. Email, online newsletters and List Serves have enabled women to communicate on a global scale, resulting in increased collaboration to push the

agenda of gender equality.

New technologies do offer remarkable advantages in terms of ease of communication, unprecedented possibilities for interaction, and efficiency in information storage and retrieval; however they are not universally available. New initiatives have been most effective where they go beyond issues of access and infrastructure to consider the larger social context and power relations. The examples of FIRE and SEWA, the two initiatives discussed in the following two articles, provide good examples of where issues of context and power have also been addressed. These articles also demonstrate how it is necessary to work creatively with what is plausible in local contexts – for example, working with older technologies like radio and video – to meet the information and communication needs of women.

### Engendering the ICT arena
In order to support the growing call for more equitable ICT initiatives the world over, far-reaching changes towards gender equality and women's empowerment in the ICT arena are needed at international, national and local levels. For instance:

• International fora such as WSIS could and should be used to challenge Northern and corporate dominance of the ICT arena.
• Governments need to act by building gender perspectives into ICT policies through the involvement of gender and ICT experts.
• Clear gender strategies are needed in the design, implementation and evaluation of mainstream ICT projects and programmes. This requires sex-disaggregated statistics and gender indicators on access, use, content, employment, education, representation in ICT decision-making, and impact of ICTs on women and men.

Engendering ICTs is not merely about the greater use of ICTs by women, but about transforming the ICT system itself.

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'BY ALL MEANS connecting voices, technologies and actions, amplifying women's voices worldwide'. This became the slogan of the Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) in 1998 when it substituted the world of shortwave radio broadcasting with an Internet radio station sending out programmes from a desktop computer to audiences all over the world. FIRE demonstrates how women have sought to take back control over communications in a unique and transformative way.

Linking global debates to women's lived experiences has long been a challenge faced by feminist activists and those working in gender and development. Women travel for many hours to the FIRE offices in Ciudad Colón, Costa Rica, to take part or simply to spill out into the courtyard whilst the discussions on global women's issues take place in the radio studio. Here, the global and the local meet.

FIRE harnesses the power of the Internet to connect individual experience with structural and global discrimination and exclusion. FIRE's feminist perspective is not simply about "women's rights"; it is about raising women's voices and perspectives on all issues – voices that are not only absent but are actively silenced and excluded from global debates. FIRE is not only "for" women, but is *by* women and *about* women, *for* a global audience. The station highlights the issues and voices of minority and immigrant women in particular, taking care to link race and gender-based discriminations among others.

### Why Internet Radio?
Internet radio bridges the gap between non-literate communication and global communications technology. It has the potential to reach wide audiences without the need for a fully equipped studio or even a licence to use the airwaves – and yet it can still include illiterate people (most of whom are women). FIRE's

# ...to the global and back again:
# ...national Radio Endeavour (FIRE)

CHARLIE SEVER, *BRIDGE* and MARÍA SUÁREZ TORO, *FIRE*

Internet station combines the Internet with other media to create an interactive space which aims to maximise the involvement of women listeners through letters, email lists, re-broadcasting arrangements with community radio stations, and linked websites. Broadcasts are recorded on cassette and sent by post to women's organisations all over the world through networks such as the Women's International Network of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC). FIRE also receives



Workshop on 'Reconstructing Spaces for Participation on the Web'

*© FIRE, November 2003*
http://www.radiofeminista.net/taller03/galeria_fotos3.htm

audio material from other women's radio stations such as Radio Tierra in Chile and Milenia Radio in Peru who send their productions for re-broadcast. FIRE materials even reach large international broadcasters such as the BBC!

Radio is intimate and at the same time anonymous – you cannot see who is talking – and can be listened to whilst doing other things. Moreover, radio is a trusted and credible medium for both women and men. Men are not threatened by radio which is not seen as dangerously "political" in many areas and they generally control access to sets. However, FIRE enables women to determine and create programme content which can have a positive impact on their empowerment and the profile of their issues and concerns. In this way FIRE works within gendered power structures to open up debates within accepted spaces.

## FIRE and radio on the Net

Since 1991, FIRE had been successfully broadcasting feminist programming on shortwave radio. In 1998, as the first women-run international Internet radio station in the world, it began as a simple microphone placed in the middle of any conference or meeting to open spaces to women. Here they could share with an international audience their news, reports, debates, sorrows and joys when developing advocacy and mobilising skills and actions to influence agendas.

Now, from the FIRE website, it is possible to access a number of different radio programmes both live and "on demand". Monthly audio features include interviews with women who have made important contributions to women's rights and empowerment, and coverage of key events such as international conferences and days of action. FIRE runs open microphone, virtual events called "FIRE places" at meetings like the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the 2002 World Social Forum. It also organises "webcast marathons" – extended programmes streamed live over the Internet. The 'Full Spectrum Against War', a twelve-hour webcast on International Women's Day 2002, launched a campaign to support displaced women and their families in Colombia. The webcast included live broadcasts of women talking from Colombia, Israel and Afghanistan and included women from all round the world in the discussions, by telephone, in person at an associated event, or by email.

## Organisation

The success of FIRE is partly due to its location. Costa Rica has a highly developed, state-owned telecommun- ications and electricity infrastructure which provides universal service. Recent national protests over the privatisation of communications services and the resulting public dialogue around communications as a human right have played a key role and Internet access in Costa Rica is now the most advanced in Central America. However, recent Free Trade Agreements yet to be signed between Central American countries and the United States Administration could mean privatisation of this infrastructure. FIRE has joined local and international social movements that affirm the right to communicate as a human rights issue that must be defended.

FIRE is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation with four full-time staff and some volunteers. It operates with two phone lines, a laptop, three microphones and a mixing board and the staff have largely taught themselves the technical aspects of working with Internet radio. Simple equipment and technical processes have meant that they remain in the hands of FIRE staff rather than external "experts". According to FIRE, this amounts to a democratisation of the processes of broadcasting and communication; you don't need complicated technology to touch the lives of people in all areas of the world!

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# Empowering women at the grassroots: SEWA and ICTs

MONICA RAINA, *SEWA*

**T**HE SELF EMPLOYED Women's Association (SEWA) is a union of about 530,000 poor women working in the informal sector in India. SEWA's aim is to achieve full employment and self-reliance for women workers and does so by focusing both on work and on support in other related areas like income, food and social security (health, childcare, and shelter).

Having understood the effect of poor access to information on poverty, SEWA embarked on a journey to include ICTs within its work. The vision was to make ICTs a tool for empowering its ever-increasing numbers of grassroots members. It now runs programmes which develop women's abilities in the use of computers, radio, television, video, the telephone, fax machines, mobile phones and satellite communication.

## Appropriate technology for supporting micro enterprise

SEWA's provision, training and capacity-building with ICTs at the grassroots level has helped in bridging the existing digital divide through the use of technologies appropriate to the needs of its members. It has shown that such technologies can support women working in the informal sector, bringing greater livelihood security to economically vulnerable households living in increasingly fragile environments.

Earlier I used my savings to buy gold ornaments. Then I decided to get a telephone. I have direct and faster communication with everyone. I use the telephone to confirm meetings and bus schedules and decide my work plans. I just dial whenever we are ready for more work! *Jomiben, Bakutara (Patan)*

I used to wonder about the working of a mobile phone. Then I began to use it to call up the wholesale market for prices. This helped me to get direct orders. Now I am recognised as a businesswoman, growing and selling sesame seeds, and not anybody's wife or sister. Ever since I have begun to use [an] electronic



Jomiben and her telephone  © SEWA, 2004

weighing machine, people rely more on me. I have also learnt how to use computers.
*Jasuben Malik (Surendranagar)*

SEWA's capacity building measures include computer awareness programmes and training on basic computer skills for its members. The organisation received a donation of 400 computers from the World Computer Exchanges in the United States, to strengthen its capacity-building resources at the grassroots. Members are now able to manage their own micro enterprises, which has lead to a surge in confidence and better decision-making abilities.

For me a television and computer meant the same thing. After the computer training I feel that the computer is like my buffalo. The buffalo has to be fed and looked after in order to fetch me five to six litres of milk each day. With the computer, I can easily earn more money and I don't have to spend that kind of time and money over its maintenance! When I first began to learn computers, the children of my village made fun of me. But now, seeing me work on the computer, my respect and self-esteem has increased incredibly in the village.
*Niruben (Patan)*

SEWA is also using satellite communication (SatCom) for participatory and interactive training programmes on forestry, water conservation, health education and building leadership. Besides savings in time and cost, this medium enables the members of SEWA to achieve quick and easy communication and problem-solving across districts.

## The road ahead

Now SEWA has a solid ICT infrastructure, its members are eager to use the potential of the Internet. Community Learning Centres (CLCs) have been set up in rural areas, and focus on IT training to build the capacity of members including in areas such as electrical, mechanical and IT engineering, where members are able to obtain direct access to the World Wide Web and markets. The CLCs also provide IT training to increase the capacity of grassroots women to manage their production systems. The CLCs provide content tailored to the needs and environment of particular groups of villages. They also serve as a hub of information and access to government schemes.

The driving force of ICTs in SEWA has been the enthusiasm of its members. Now the organisation hopes to build models which will help them and others like them to learn and understand the complexities of and possibilities for ICT use. This will enable SEWA to continue in its support of the dreams and aspirations of poor and underprivileged women workers.

I used to wonder how could one sit in front of a computer for the whole day but now I do the same! Earlier I was reluctant to make my daughters study computers. But now I strongly motivate and encourage them to learn further. My ardent wish now is to carry a laptop to a conference and make a presentation to everyone present there!
*Niruben Sureshbhia (Anand)*

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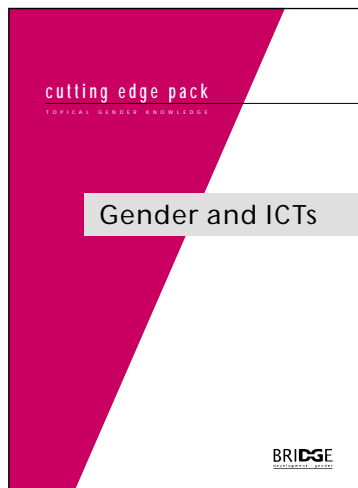
**Useful websites:**
Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking and Support Programme (APC WNSP)
http://www.apcwomen.org/
Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE)
http://www.fire.or.cr/indexeng.htm
Centre for Women and Information Technology
http://www.umbc.edu/cwit/
The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)
http://www.femnet.or.ke/  – available in French and English
Modemmujer
http://www.modemmujer.org/indexw.htm
ISIS International Manila
http://www.isiswomen.org/
Siyanda
http://www.siyanda.org

*Please note, all Internet addresses provided above are current as of August 2004.*

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