Chapter 13
ICTs and Gender-Based Rights

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ABSTRACT
In this new age, the Internet, the network of networks connected by a complex array of electronic, wireless, and optical technologies extending from the private to the public sector, and from academic to business and governmental organizations, is starting to have increasingly broad social implications, besides the technical ones. Nevertheless, as women and men enter and progress differently into employment and occupations, not all humankind benefits equally from information and communication technologies (ICTs). The question that this chapter addresses is whether women have equal rights and opportunities to access and use ICTs. In this chapter, the author aims to strengthen the idea that in this changing era, new ICTs represent a cardinal instrument for social transformation, enabling and empowering women to become controllers of information.

INTRODUCTION

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one - Albert Einstein

Over time, women have been subject to some of the most brilliant novelists’, playwrights’, and philosophers’ writings. Their vision on women’s role within different societies reflects a status quo at a certain moment in history, or expresses a critique of a given system. The various portrayals of women in their writings influenced gender relations, their rights - including access to technologies - and the way they were perceived by societies, such as the interpretation of their image in the media.

In the world of literature, famous fictional heroines whose destinies left a mark and impacted generations, include Edna Pontellier, the main female character in Kate Chopin’s “The Awakening”, who struggled to find independence; Emma Bovary, the heroine of Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary, the woman full of dreams and romantic notions
who was propelled toward adultery and impossible debt by her unfulfilled marriage and died painfully and tragically"; or Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina”, one of the greatest tragedies of all time, that portrays a young married woman who has an affair and eventually committed suicide by throwing herself under a train. Among philosophers, Nietzsche, although he appears more welcoming of the feminine than many of his peers, and even though he depicts life and wisdom as two women engaged in a dance, nevertheless refuses “to admit women, qua subjects, as interlocutors into the philosophical conversation” (Froese, 2006, p. 198). Of the playwrights, Tennessee Williams featured women as main characters more often than men (Blackwell, 1970), empathizing with their loss and longing and displacement in a society that hardly had regard for women, and portrayed them as fighters struggling within themselves and with the circumstances surrounding them. Also, Henrik Ibsen’s woman character takes care of her life in dire conditions, facing many challenges.

It is imperative to also note here the outstanding achievements of women in fields that traditionally belonged to men, such as science or journalism. In science, examples include Ida Hyde who completed her Ph. D. in 1896 at the University of Heidelberg, becoming the first woman to ever receive the degree for her type of work and, in addition, the first woman ever to conduct research at the Harvard Medical School and the first woman elected to the all-male American Physiological Society; Marie Curie, who received the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics and became the first woman ever to receive this award, and subsequently also received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1911; Florence Bascom, the first woman and the first female geologist to be awarded a Ph. D. from Johns Hopkins University, even though she could not officially attend classes there as a woman. Florence Bascom also was the first female scientist to be hired at the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in 1896 and became a pioneer of the use of microscopes to study minerals and rocks. Examples of famous women journalists with remarkable contributions over the time include Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), first American female foreign and war correspondent; Nellie Bly (1867-1922), a world-travelling reporter; Alice Dunnigan (1906-1983), a champion of the efforts to end gender segregation; and Ethel Payne (1911-1991), a fearless civil rights reporter. Media initiatives by women include the publication in May 1999, at the initiative of a Scottish journalist, of the world’s first virtual women’s newspaper, Worldwoman, intended to disseminate transnational news written by women to a wide global audience and represented a milestone in promoting gender equality, or the more recent Great Britain-based online journal, International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology, established in 2009. To support freedom of expression and the development of community media, plurality of content and opinion, and the training of media professionals, international organizations like UNESCO have allocated, over the last thirty years, more than US$100 million to 1,200 projects in 140 countries via its International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). Examples of initiatives include support for the Media Institute of South Africa to improve the quality of journalism in post-apartheid South Africa, the deployment of a women’s media centre in Cambodia, and the training of the next generation of professional journalists in Mongolia (Souter, 2010).

To set the background on the theme of this chapter, a thorough literature review (with specific focus on the research theme) on ICTs, gender, women’s perception in the media and their access to technologies is provided next.

WOMEN AND ICTs

Technology is often understood by people as a gender-neutral technical tool that society can utilize, and not as something that is in itself influ-
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