ICTs and Gender-Based Rights

Ana-Cristina Ionescu, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Romania (CCIR), Romania

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). In this paper, the author addresses the question of whether women have equal rights and opportunities to access and use ICTs. In this article, the author strengthens 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.

Keywords: Digital Divide, Gender Equality, Human Rights, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Online Networking, Virtual Communities

WOMEN AND ICTS

Today women build strong networks online to fight social exclusion and the stereotypes of the outer male-dominated world. Consequently, beliefs from the 1990s, according to which computer mediated communication (CMC) is a mere reflection of the social reality (Ebben, 1993; Collins-Jarvis, 1995, Herring, 1992, 1993, 1994; Ferris, 1996), are only true for third world countries untouched by the Internet, where women lack access to basic communication means.

Women’s Access to Technologies

The use of ICTs can make essential contributions to reducing poverty, increasing productivity, and stimulating innovation and economic transformation. Technologies provide women with access to critical information that helps them achieve better results and thus better living conditions (Fredriksson, 2011). Yet, gender relations and hence women’s access to technologies, are constantly negotiated and the main factors to take into consideration are culture and wealth.

In the undeveloped regions of the world technology has been historically a male preserve. Consequently, women’s access to ICTs is controversial and political. The situation is different in the urban areas, where a culture that encourages women to pursue a career and attend higher education, the easy access to information via Internet or mobile phones, and the increasing tendency to adapt to the international trends, shape an optimistic landscape.

The access to ICTs and usability is determined by the existing power relations in different societies. All over the world, the most dramatic situation is encountered in the rural areas, where women have restricted access to

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ICTs because the basic infrastructure for such technologies is missing and the costs of deployment are high. In these areas, technologies are used almost entirely by the husband, and women, the majority of them illiterate housewives, lack opportunities for training in computer skills. Domestic responsibilities, cultural restrictions on mobility, reduced income, and the lack of relevance to their existence, exclude them, even today, from the information sector.

Patterns of gender segregation apply to the ICT industry as well, because men hold the majority of high-skilled, high value-added jobs, while women are concentrated in the low-skilled, lower value-added jobs like work in call centers. Teleworking - the home use of telecommunication services that allows employees to work from home - is an example in this regard. Out of the two categories of teleworkers, the well-educated with demanding jobs that necessitate entrepreneurial and specialized skills and the low-level workers who perform tasks like typing or data entry, women are most likely to integrate into the latter, the separation being a gendered one (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001). Thereby, women’s empowerment in the information society varies depending on how gender relations as a cultural process are being negotiated and contested, in relation to the technology environment. Yet, the situation as such is unacceptable, as hundreds of recent studies on sex and intelligence reviewed by Fine (2010) reveal that there is no scientific evidence for innate biological differences between men and women’s minds. In her book Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference, Fine (2010) argues that, in fact, cultural and societal beliefs contribute to commonly perceived sex differences. In other words, Fine believes that differences between men and women have less to do with neurological differences and more with our own implicit gender stereotypes, pointing out that thoughts and attitudes often disagree with consciously held beliefs.

Engendering ICT does not refer to a greater use of ICTs by women, but to facilitating women’s access to the ICT system by transforming it. Measures in this regard include ICT policies initiated by the government with strong gender perspectives and involvement of civil society in gender equality related issues; considering gender related issues when drafting, implementing, and evaluating ICT projects and policies; and analyzing the differential impact of telecommunications/ICTs on men and women (Gurumurthy, 2004). Mansell and When (1998) point out two different categories of initiatives meant to enhance women’s access to the benefits of ICTs: those generated by women themselves in using ICTs as tools of social and economic empowerment, and those taken by national and international organizations to ensure women’s access to the benefits of the information society. The Internet has the potential to change women’s role in politics on a transnational level, as nowadays they can create, through these new technologies, local and global political networks (Youngs, 2000). The new ICT communication infrastructure facilitates networking in real time and, in this way, women are able to move beyond the patriarchal vision of politics by expressing opinions on websites that tackle their concerns and increase their influence in a field such as international relations, where historically they have been least visible. Furthermore, Youngs (2000) notes that women’s access to the Internet has enhanced the creation of new global communities, with a focus on feminist issues, such as violence against women, political, social, and cultural rights, and repression. The so-called social media communication channels - like Facebook or LinkedIn - connected the general public with the different public or private institutions, decision making bodies, etc., on gender equality topics.

Two major contemporary aspects impact on the spread of the Internet: the availability of personal computers (PCs) and the prevalence of preexisting fixed telephone lines and cable (Rueda-Sabater & Garrity, 2011). Women in the most remote and traditional places are being connected to the world via innovative initiatives. In Afghanistan, in 2010, a mobile phone operator - MTN - enhanced mobile use among women by setting up women-only retail
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