
Enabling Women Empowerment through ICT

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Dr. Kamal Shehadi

CEO & Chairman

Telecommunications Regulatory Authority

Information and Communications Technologies which include communication devices or applications such as radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, have evolved very rapidly over the past decade with new technologies being introduced almost on a daily basis. However, women – particularly women in developing countries – did not fully benefit from these new technologies.

The importance of ICT today therefore lies less in the technology advancement itself rather than in its ability to create greater access to information and communication in underserved populations and disadvantaged groups. ICT today is a means of bridging this digital divide helping disadvantaged women increase their participation in the civic, social, political, and economic processes. ICT has the potential to reach those women who have not been reached by any other media, thereby empowering them to participate in economic and social progress, and make informed decision on issues that affect them. ICT can put a greater control in the hands of women from managing water distribution at the village-level, to standing for local elections and having access to lifelong learning opportunities.

ICT can therefore be used to either exacerbate or transform unequal power relations. ICT cannot create gender equality, or end poverty, but it can be a tool for social action and positive social change.

Having said this, what is the role of ICT in the economic and social development of women? How can technical knowledge and experience among professional women be widened and promoted? What policies need to be put in place and what steps need to be taken to expand the reach of good practice examples?

International and regional experience show that women gained more respect in their local communities as a result of ICT skills acquired at the center – learning to use a computer and accruing and distributing the information to local people. This resulted in greater respect both at family and community level. Younger women felt they were able to approach the job market with greater confidence than before. ICT skills help them to find jobs and increase their income. Women became more creative after acquiring ICT skills. Women have achieved an increase in income as well as have been able to build solidarity among women in the community. In addition women have benefited from many e-government services especially land and voter registration and license applications. They have especially profited from online availability of services that would otherwise require travel to the national or district capital city or using intermediaries. ICT has also been applied as agents of change in enabling women to participate directly in politics and civic life: electronic voting system opened up avenues for direct participation of women which so far has been limited to representative forms of participation in which women were insufficiently represented.

ICT is a field that is becoming increasingly accepted and relied upon in the Arab world as a crucial means towards social and economic development. This is an area however, where women and girls are at particular risk of exclusion from potential opportunities, because of poverty, illiteracy, insufficient access to education and training and insufficient time as a result of their multiple roles in families and communities. Women's access and utilization of ICT among Arab countries continue to lag behind creating a widening gender digital gap. Women population is as low as 4% of internet users in Arab countries, one of the lowest in the world in quantitative terms (Interne World Sats, 2006).

There are, however, a set of pre-requisites needed for realizing the potential for ICT as a tool for social, economic and political empowerment for women:

- 1- Liberalization of the telecommunications market
- 2- Universal access to information with no gender discrimination
- 3- Freedom to produce content and freedom of expression
- 4- Investment in Human Resource Development
- 5- Access to affordable communication services
- 6- Education, training and awareness-raising
- 7- National ICT planning and initiatives

ICT has been a powerful tool for women to use to overcome discrimination, achieve full equality, well-being and participation in decisions that impact the quality of their lives and the future of their communities. For instance, ICT is a catalyst in achieving all MDG goals (UN 2000) , promoting poverty reduction and improvement of quality of life in developing countries. Some MDG goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, combating Aids and ensuring environmental sustainability. Women have central roles in achieving these goals due to the fact that they are central agents of development in societies, they are responsible for nutrition for families, they make up the majority of HIV infected persons in Africa, and they are important environmental managers in their communities.

Over the past two decades, women's activity rates have been increasing in the entrepreneurship sector with women in advanced economies owning more than 25% of all businesses. The number of women-owned businesses in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America is growing due to the introduction and use of ICT in their daily lives. ICT enables them to be exposed to telecommunications services, media and broadcasting services which in return create markets for their products and services. Better access to information and the ability to tap into the benefits of ICT enabled women to be more competitive. However, many strides need to be taken in order to enable Arab women empowerment through ICT in order to reach best practice examples. Who knows? Perhaps one day, Arab women will be able to attain Japan's example where four out of five small business owners are women or China's example where women initiate 25% of new business start-ups. We might reach a point in our life where gender inequality, restrictive social cultural norms, and low levels of education are no longer holding women back no longer exist to hinder their development. Hope does lie ahead.