

## Notes from the Field

# Agency and Reflexivity in ICT4D Research: Questioning Women's Options, Poverty, and Human Development

### Ineke Buskens

ineke@researchforthefuture.com  
Director  
Research for the Future  
GRACE Project Leader  
Gender Research in Africa into  
ICTs for Empowerment  
(GRACE)  
P.O. Box 170  
ELGIN 7180  
South Africa

Information Communication Technology (ICT) can be instrumental in enabling women to empower themselves economically and otherwise; to connect and communicate across physical, social, cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries; to craft new identities for themselves; and to challenge the environments that are coherent with their "old selves." As such, the field of ICT for development research (ICT4D research) warrants serious attention when considering the challenge that poverty poses and the hope that human development offers.

In "Questions of Agency: Development, Donors, and Women of the South," Nzegwu argues that Northern donors who fail to recognize the agency of women in the South miss out twofold: Not taking into account the experiences, options, choices, dreams, and perspectives of women in the South will compromise the quality, effectiveness, and success rate of North-funded development aid projects, and furthermore, an invaluable source of learning and inspiration will be withheld from Northern actors (Nzegwu, 2002). In "Development and Freedom," Sen states that the "extensive reach of women's agency is one of the more neglected areas of development studies, and most urgently in need of correction." He considers "an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women" to be a crucial aspect of "development as freedom" (Sen, 1999, p. 203). Agency can be understood in this context as the human capacity to make choices and impose those choices on the world. This definition evokes the acknowledgment of individual responsibility as an expression of personhood. In Sen's words, "Understanding the agency role is thus central to recognizing people as responsible persons" (*ibid.*, p. 190).

While this is a crucial point to make, I would like to suggest that it is not only the agency of the beneficiaries or research participants which must be acknowledged and examined, but also that of the other parties that define the discourses and practices of the ICT4D research process—the donors, practitioners, researchers, and scholars who influence the theoretical, methodological, and normative concepts employed in the ICT4D knowledge construction processes. Although their agency may be less visible, and definitely under less scrutiny, their frames of mind impact directly the way meaning is made of Southern women's experiences, dreams, and perspectives in the context of human development, poverty, and ICTs.

In this context, I want to set the stage for reflection on the agency of women who use ICTs for development and empowerment, as well as on people who do research with such women, set a research agenda for oth-

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ers to do so, or influence thinking about such research in a scholarly fashion. It would stand to reason that the way ICT4D researchers and scholars frame women in the South is coherent with their framework of understanding what development is, what it should be, and what it would take for individuals to succeed in such an arena and grab the opportunities for development that ICTs have to offer.

ICT4D research is a reflexive endeavor. This is so not only because of the essentially self-referential nature of any social research act that makes us ponder our own lives when we witness other human beings going about their lives, but also because our processes of making sense of what we witness and observe impact the reality that we study because of the ways that power and knowledge construction interact and intersect. The larger narrative that forms the background of the concept and practice of both local and global development is defined by the powerful and signifies the powerful. It is therefore just as important to understand women's rationalities for development action (or the lack of it) as grounded in their realities, as it is to become aware of the frames of reference that researchers and scholars entertain. The ICT4D knowledge construction processes are neither innocent nor neutral, and refraining to take a normative stand in this field of power relations will automatically render the knowledge that is constructed more viable to the powerful than to the powerless.

It is in becoming aware of our perspectives, realizing them for the choices they are, and acknowledging the impact they might eventually have on the lives of the women to whom we aim to reach out that we, as researchers and scholars, can exercise our agency.

I thus want to tell a story that was one of the case studies in the Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) Network's First Phase; to contextualize it with insights gained within the wider research quest in which this particular research took place (Buskens & Webb, 2009); and to respond to it from my own theoretical, methodological, and normative positions, as well as from the knowledge I have of ICT4D research discourses. The text does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis of all the issues that would need to be investigated in this regard; it is the start of a process of reflection, and thus, it is a work in progress.

### **Bahati's Story**

Bahati was born in a rural area in Tanzania to poor parents. Her education was minimal—primary school and a few months of dressmaking training. So Bahati decided to try her luck in Dar es Salaam, where she could live with an aunt who was supported by her children. Bahati first tried dressmaking. Because the competition was too fierce to make a reasonable living, she turned to hairdressing instead. She worked long hours and made very little money because she worked in a salon owned by somebody else, but she persisted. She started saving of the little money she earned, and after two years of working day and night and spending the absolute minimum, she was able to buy a mobile phone. Once she had this phone, she had her freedom: she shared her number with her clients and soon after, could establish her own business. Never did she use the phone for private or social calls; she only used it to receive bookings and inquire from clients what hair extensions they wanted. By the time the researchers finished their work with Bahati she had bought a house of her own and was able to rent out a room for extra income. With a monthly income of about \$300, Bahati lives well above the poverty line of less than a dollar per day. In all the years that Bahati has lived in Dar es Salaam, she has not been able to contact her family at home because of the fact that there is no connectivity in the area where she was born (Meena & Rusimbi, 2009, pp. 194–195).

### **Reflecting on Bahati's Story**

#### ***Bahati Has Done Everything Right***

There can be no doubt that women like Bahati are ideal candidates for ICT4D projects that aim to empower small- and medium-based entrepreneurship. Maybe nothing more would be needed than giving people like her the ICT tools they want (or we think they need) and letting them get on with it.

#### ***A Beautiful, Yet Challenging Reflection***

Bahati's story cannot but evoke awe and admiration. Using a mobile phone to build up a business and secure a measure of material wealth in an environment where the costs of cell phone use are prohibitive is no mean feat. The focus, the tenacity, and the discipline she demonstrated are exemplary. Turning the gaze toward us as ICT4D researchers and schol-

ars, one cannot help but wonder whether, and to what degree, we would be able to accomplish what she did. And if we would not be able to rise to this quality of being, what would we possibly have to offer her and others like her through our development research and planning efforts?

### ***Rejecting the Fix-it Reflex***

A fix-it reflex, such as “Let’s send all our second-hand mobiles to Tanzania so people like Bahati would not need to save for two years to obtain a mobile phone,” would lead us to miss the meaning of this story for development research practice and discourse: the fact that there are places in this world where it takes two years of saving to get a cell phone, as well as what that means to us, who experience a different reality, for both our relationship with such persons and our intentions with them and their realities. The “fix-it” reflex would preclude us from engaging at a deeper level of questioning and analysis. Maybe that is why it is such a common and often-heard reaction?

### ***ICT Deployment Is a Process Requiring Behavior Change***

The story also hints at the understanding that all development and empowerment processes take time and involve self-development and self-empowerment. The story invites us to reflect on the processes of self-management that a “poor person striving for wealth and security” set in motion. It is possible that the two years Bahati needed to save for her mobile phone were pivotal. Maybe those two years were essential not only to hone her hair-dressing talent, but also to forge a disciplined mind, grow in self-confidence, and prepare for a new life. Understanding this dynamic invites reflection on the chances for success of projects that are grounded in technocratic solutions for social problems and involve deployment of ICT tools—often in large scale and within a limited time frame.

### ***Female Work Aspirations and Feminine Work Connotations***

For all her discipline and empowerment, Bahati’s story also speaks to the power of the gendered aspirations for labor and entrepreneurship prevalent in her community. She was exposed to ideas about dressmaking and hairdressing, and thus, she carved her future in line with these horizons. “Female” occupations are usually less lucrative than “male”

labor activities, a fact that contributes to the feminization of poverty. So while she rose above the situation she was born into, she did not expand beyond her gendered socialization. Maybe this was wise; maybe she would not have received the family support that she did get if she had challenged gender categories too much. It could have rendered her unrecognizable to her family and community.

### ***Female Economic Empowerment***

In using her mobile phone to start and run her hair-dressing business, Bahati also did not (have to) break any norms about female economic independence. But then, she was not married: Women operating village phones in rural Uganda reported to the researcher that they had to choose between their marriage and their economic advancement, since their husbands could not cope with their increasing economic empowerment and social independence (Bantebya, 2009, pp. 156–160). Some women divorced, and some toned their businesses down; these seemed to be acceptable options. There was only one respondent (out of nine case studies) who entertained a totally different form of thinking: She attributed her acquisition of a husband to her improved financial circumstances, and she valued his support in her “gender-bending” work (*ibid.*). Bahati also did not have children. Bakesha et al. have found in their study of Ugandan grassroots entrepreneurs that women with children would often spend money on their children’s needs instead of investing in their business: “You cannot sacrifice life in favor of business” (Bakesha et al., 2009, pp. 146–147).

### ***Sub-Saharan Africa as the Benchmark for the Developing World***

Bahati may have been lucky that she was born in East Africa: If she had been born to poor parents in India (Kerala excluded), Pakistan, China, or North Africa, she might not have lived to reach adulthood. In China, Bahati could have been thrown away as a female baby. In India, she could have died from malnutrition as a toddler. In North Africa, she could have been sold into slavery at the age of five. The low female-male ratios in these countries indicate that 100 million women could be missing. With a female-male ratio of 1.022, sub-Saharan Africa is used as a benchmark for the developing world (Sen, 1999, pp. 99–110). The women that bear the heaviest burden of gender discrimination in this world

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may actually never get to a position where they can use ICTs for their development and empowerment.

### ***ICTs as Handmaidens of Our Divisive Economic-Financial-Monetary Systems***

The story evokes the question as to why a mobile phone should cost almost two years of a hairdresser's salary in East Africa, while the same item would cost a hairdresser in the North not more than a lunch or two. Furthermore, Abraham's research in Zambia reveals how the prohibitive cost of mobile phone use has had a profoundly divisive effect on women who use their phones for the explicit purposes of connection, mobilization, and social advocacy. The women users now speak of "callers" and "beepers"; a "virtual class system" has been created. One can only wonder about the longer-term effects this will have on Zambia's women's movement, or on other social movements (Abraham, p. 102). It seems that the economic-financial-monetary systems we have accepted to govern our world limit the empowering potential of ICTs and create more disparity between countries and within countries. When ICTs are drawn into this financial-economic-monetary power field, ICT users perpetuate and exacerbate its dynamics of division and exploitation.

### ***Humans Can Do Anything, Yet . . .***

Bahati's story is also a story of hope; it speaks to the grand narrative of the resilience of the human spirit. If Bahati could do this, maybe there are more women and men who can lift themselves out of abject poverty through the power of their mind and the use of an ICT tool. If people can, indeed, use their agency to overcome the limitations of their environment and upbringing in a sustainable way, then maybe there is hope for the development project in general, and for ICT4D in particular. At the same time, the thought presents itself: If this is what it takes for successful entrepreneurship to evolve in a developing world context, how viable is the ICT-based small- and medium-based business formula as a development model? How many Bahati's would there be out there?

### ***The Two Dimensions of Women's Agency***

It can be argued that Bahati is a woman who employs her agency successfully and empowers herself through the use of ICTs in a context of poverty. It can also be argued that gender problems would

be the least of her worries. She might well support what Nzegwu (2002) stated about the 1960s and 1970s: "[I]t is not their men *per se* but the leadership who are to blame for the immediate problems. Some of these problems are supra national, since they are already in-built into the way macro-economic measures, development projects, and modernization programmes have been conceptualized, introduced, and implemented in the South."

The perspective that poverty would be more of a concern to Bahati than gender discrimination has to be contextualized, however, by the fact that Bahati lives in sub-Saharan Africa, which serves as a benchmark for women in the developing world. Specifically, she lives in Tanzania, where a certain measure of female autonomy is accepted. She was also unmarried without children at the time, and she kept her choice of profession within the work sphere accepted for females. In short, Bahati never really challenged the gendered status quo of her environment, nor did she exercise all the options of being a woman. The concept of choice (and therefore, agency) has to be kept in balance by the concept of adaptive preferences as suggested by Nussbaum (2000). Women face obstacles to change and transformation not only in their environment, but also within themselves, as they are simultaneously the constituents and the co-creators of their environment.

For Amartya Sen, development as idea and practice is about enhancing people's individual freedoms (capabilities) to lead the lives they have reason to value, which implies enhancing the "real choices they have" (Sen, 1999, pp. 282–298). Acknowledging people's individual responsibility for and in their lives, Sen argues for social support to expand people's freedom to realize their responsibility. He thus sees support and responsibility (and hence, freedom) not as opposites, but as companions—necessary components in the processes of development. Turning to Bahati, we have to ask the question: What support can be given to women like her within the limitations of their particular economically oppressed and gendered environment?

The responsibility for change cannot be only hers and that of women like her; inasmuch as women are actors in and of their environments, they are also subjected to the actual power invested in the gendered relations of their direct environments and the global financial-economic regulations of the

wider, global environments. So while it is true that women's agency is needed and necessary for true empowerment to take place, putting the total burden of change on women's shoulders is neither fair nor reasonable. It is like an organization expecting the most fundamental change from its most powerless and vulnerable constituents. In supporting women to take responsibility for their own empowerment, we have to take a normative stand within the wider systems in which they both find themselves and find themselves oppressed. It is my contention that this would be the logical consequence of Amartya Sen's perspective on development.

### ***ICT4D Researchers' and Scholars' Agency***

Turning the gaze reflexively toward ourselves, as ICT4D researchers and scholars, I would state that we, too, express our agency as an adaptive preference, and that we, too, experience our agency within the tension between the structural powers vested in our environment and the conceptual decisions that we have reason to value. The power structures that we face as researchers and scholars are the funding organizations and the corporations that have positioned themselves as powerful patrons in the ICT4D research arena. The mainstream economic neoliberal model that justifies the global financial and monetary systems, despite the recent breakdown of the banking institutions in 2008 and the widespread social and environmental devastation that becomes more clear every day, is the intellectual environment to which researchers and scholars have adapted their conceptual preferences, making it their frame of reference for the research choices they think they can make.

Other models are possible, however: Initiatives like the Institute for New Economic Thinking, begun by George Soros (<http://ineteconomics.org>) and Jacques Fresco's Venus Project (<http://www.thevenusproject.com>) offer new and innovative socioeconomic paradigms for the future. These are grounded in a reflexive understanding of the social and economic systems that humans have developed in interaction with each other and the planet. And these are only recent, Northern developments.

Nzegwu explains how cultures in the South have found approaches to life and living that incorporate children and community in a holistic way, and that have more space and freedom to offer women than

the mainstream Northern model that aims to "turn the South into the North" (Nzegwu, 2002).

It is our adaptation to the mainstream neoliberal kind of economic thinking that might find Dominga de Velasquez of La Paz, Bolivia, to be hopelessly naive when she asks: "And we, the housewives, ask ourselves: What have we done to incur this foreign debt? Is it possible that our children have eaten too much? Is it possible that our children have studied in the best colleges? Or do they wear the best clothes? Have we improved our standard of living? Have our wages become so great? Together we say: No, no, we have not eaten too much. No, we have not dressed any better. We do not have better medical assistance. Then to whom have the benefits gone? Why are we the ones who have to pay this debt?" (cited in Vickers, 1991, p. 9). Dominga raises questions of social justice, responsibility, and social choice that we, as ICT4D researchers and scholars representing the Northern economic model, would have to answer.

The perspective that it is a choice and not an inevitability to think in terms of the neoliberal model creates the space to raise moral concerns about our assumptions, our theories, and our methodologies, as well as about the impact they have on the women to whom we aim to reach out. Instead of wondering how we can learn from Bahati how to fit women like her better into the existing global economic model through the use of ICTs, we could turn the gaze to the world that we ICT4D researchers and scholars come from and ask if it is not time for us to change and rise above our own adaptive preferences. This would set us free to learn both from and with women like Bahati how ICTs can be employed in the co-creation of a model of living economically and socially that accommodates women, children, and men in the South and the North in sustainable and just ways. ■

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Forum II. Lastly, I need to stress that the opinions expressed in this position paper are mine alone.

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