

## Essay

### ***Women's Empowerment and the Information Society***

This special issue of *Information Technologies and International Development* originated in spring 2006 at a multidisciplinary, international workshop on gender empowerment and ICTs organized at Georgia Tech. The workshop brought together experts—practitioners, activists, and academics—working at the intersection of ICTs, development, and women's empowerment. These experts assessed the current state of the discipline, discussed successful empowerment projects, and charted new paths for activism and scholarly inquiry.

The present collection of “reports from the field”—the main product of the workshop—and research articles was inspired by the ingenuity of the hundreds of millions of women around the world who are determined to make better lives for themselves and their families. Rapid advances over the past decade in ICTs such as the Internet, cell phones, and specialized computer software have given these women potentially powerful tools with which to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by global economic integration. With topical, conceptual, and methodological diversity the contributors highlight the great potential ICTs hold for women's empowerment—greater individual autonomy and the ability to shape the forces that influence their lives—while also acknowledging how sex, race, culture, and poverty challenge their resourcefulness and clearly delimit the space within which they have to navigate.

The Forum section features three field report case studies from Macedonia, India, and Morocco in which women have successfully used ICTs to improve the competitiveness of their businesses, obtain marketable skills, and generate their own independent income. Janice Brodman, director of the Center for Innovative Technologies at the Education Development Council, discusses e-BIZ in Macedonia, a USAID-funded project that successfully improved the competitiveness of small- and medium-size women-owned enterprises through “high impact” ICTs. Chetan Sharma, founder and president of Datamation Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in New Delhi, details how *chikan* embroidery workers in Kanpur and Lucknow, India, used ICTs, provided by Datamation and the Indian Institute of Technology, to gain marketable IT and vocational skills and access information on health, education, and women's empowerment. Anthropologist Susan Schaefer Davis presents an inspiring case study of how illiterate women weavers in rural Morocco, with her help and that of two assistants, use the Internet to sell their handmade traditional rugs to generate their own income with which they support their families, fund their children's educations, and fund village development projects.

The four research articles highlight obstacles—race, poverty, and the absence of sex-disaggregated data on women's access to and use of technology—and opportunities (e.g., e-retailing projects, Internet cafés) for women's empowerment through ICTs. Deborah Wheeler, an expert on new technologies in the Middle East, highlights in her ethnographic study of 25 Cairene women Internet users

how these women use the Internet to carve out empowerment spaces for themselves. She shows how they use the Internet to access information and expand their social networks in addition to their social and political awareness. Nancy Hafkin and Susan Huyer, two of the leading experts on women and the information society, draw attention to the consequences of the paucity of sex-disaggregated data on women and ICTs in developing countries, highlight some pioneering efforts to gather quantitative data broken down by sex, and offer some recommendations on how to remedy the problem. My coauthor, Usha Nair-Reichert, and I have backgrounds working on issues of gender and economic development; in "Empowering Women Through ICT-Based Business Initiatives: An Overview of Best Practices in E-Commerce/E-Retailing Projects" we identify best practices in successful e-commerce and e-retailing businesses run by and for women in India, China, Bangladesh, and Peru. We argue that the most successful projects involve governmental support, societal involvement, training, expansion of market access, and specific managerial strategies. Last but not least, Caroline Tolbert, Karen Mossberger, Bridgett King, and Gena Miller, four academics specializing in gender and IT policy, focus on the domestic "digital divide" and assess the impact of gender, race, and poverty on access to and use of technology. They argue that minority women, although less so than their male peers, remain at a substantial disadvantage for IT use. This study is a reminder that development can occur in various contexts, even within the United States.

As these contributions demonstrate, ICTs are no panacea against women's disempowerment and engrained gender roles. The road to equality will be long and arduous. Yet the narratives are also a powerful testimony to the resilience and resourcefulness women have shown in their quest to create a more just and equitable society. ■

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