

Book Review

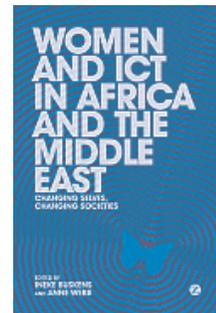
ICTs and Gender Equality: Transformation Through Research?

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Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb (Eds.), *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: Changing Selves, Changing Societies*, London, UK: Zed Books, 2014, 336 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

This book is the second volume of output from the Gender Research in Africa and the Middle East into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) network. The first—*African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (Buskens & Webb, 2009)—with many of the same authors contributing to both—concentrated heavily on women’s use of mobile phones in Africa. The 2014 volume covers a broad range of information and communication technologies (ICTs), along with the teaching of ICTs at the university level and the situation of women ICT professionals in the workplace. Its coverage extends to the Middle East, with chapters from Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen. In Africa, one can discern a much higher level of both use and skills on the part of users since the first volume. In the new chapters on the Middle East, Yemen is a standout for its almost total lack of access to and use of ICTs by women.



The GRACE network follows an essentially participatory action approach, the specifics of which Buskens and Webb (2014) define as purpose-aligned action research—research with a positive purpose—in contrast to research into a problem to be resolved. The ideal is that researchers engage in “transformation of their own gendered selves in and through the research processes” (p. 5) in order to achieve personal and societal transformation through development research. The network’s overall vision is a post-sexist future in a world of freedom for both men and women—“a world where all people are free, where men and women are equals and treat each other with respect as partners, a world that is grounded in social justice and sustainability” (p. 291).

While in the first volume the research was mostly descriptive, the second aims to increase women’s empowerment through the research projects themselves: The authors are to become agents of gender change. Buskens and Webb define the primary purpose of the second phase as arriving at social change in gender relations moving toward gender-equal societies through the research process and use of ICTs. Basic to this approach is nurturing self- and gender awareness and intentional agency in both respondents and researchers. Toward its accomplishment, the editors set up a hierarchy of approaches to changing gender relations, assessing the degree of accomplishment of the overall target of gender equality as conformist, reformist, and transformist, which are reflected in the major divisions of the volume.

As Buskens and Webb write:

This book is . . . about the processes of personal and social change that [need to] take place when women in the South set out to explicitly empower themselves in and through the use of ICT, by participating in ICT space and by enhancing their being, doing, becoming and relating through ICT. (2014, p. 7)

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ICTS AND GENDER EQUALITY

The underlying ICT questions are these:

- Can ICT be turned into a good for the developing world or will it increase existing inequalities?
- How can ICT—as space, as a way of life, as technology and science—be influenced and formed by notions of social justice and sustainability?

The GRACE researchers chose their own projects, with the basic criterion that they reflect the most pressing gender inequality in their country. The results of these projects make fascinating reading in a number of cases.

Several of the studies exhibit the fallacy of achieving social change through ostensibly gender-neutral policies without addressing gender equality in the society. In the Sudan, the University of Khartoum declared a policy of equal access to computers for all students, 71% of whom were female. Still, the societal view that women were less interested in ICT became a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of women's lesser access to and experience with technology. At the University of Zimbabwe, the 2004 national gender policy to encourage more girls into science and technology led to an increase of female students to 40% at the National University of Science and Technology, but only 20% in computer science. It was found that computer science professors there tended to denigrate the skills of female students in class, and the young women in turn internalized their professors' low expectations. Tunisia also was presented an example of a country where a national gender-sensitive ICT policy was insufficient by itself to ensure equal benefits of ICTs for men and women, given the existing gendered division of labor.

In one of the three chapters from Yemen, the project aim was to send women information on reproductive health by SMS mobile phones, but the mobile phone companies refused to cooperate in the dissemination of such reproductive health information messages to women. Even relying on radios and television broadcasts, women still did not have access to the health messages.

In Cape Town, in the case of girls' sexting over mobile phones, the use of technology was not gender neutral in an overall patriarchal society, but rather, it amplified traditional gendered roles. The author of this article sees sexting as an expression of the emergent sexual agency of girls. In a society where gender relations were untransformed, this often had highly negative results for the young women.

In Zambia, women using social networking challenged the societal view that women's expression of sexuality was shameful. Unfortunately, society was not ready for their free expressions, which led to an increase in misogyny on social networks.

In Egypt, consanguineous marriages are common, with 30% of marriages taking place between first cousins. Often leading to birth defects and other negative consequences, the mothers were blamed, divorced, and left to lives of poverty and isolation. An educational website, workshop, and CDs were developed, and mobile phones were distributed to a number of women to facilitate communication and development of a support network that contributed to an increase in their overall well-being.

Your reaction to this edited volume will depend on what you are looking for. If you are looking for case studies of ICT for development (ICT4D) in Africa and the Middle East, you may come away unsatisfied. If your primary interest is gender relations and feminist theory in a non-Western setting, this is the place to come. Overall, the ICT4D analysis is subsumed by the analysis of gender relations and feminist theory and an emphasis on action research for social change. In several cases, the treatment of ICTs seems almost an afterthought to the examination of gender relations. A case in point is the chapter on Jordanian women bloggers speaking back to the "politics of silence." The text concentrates on feminist theory with almost no description or analysis of its ICT elements, providing no specific examples from the blogs, the descriptions of the women who write them, or the extent of ICT use in social networking among Jordanian women.

There is no discussion in the book of which ICTs are considered or what constitutes an ICT or the distinction between "new" and "old" ICTs. All and any ICTs are under discussion for their potential to contribute to gender equality, without distinction among them. The French and Spanish terms of "new information and communication technologies" are useful in this regard because they stress the difference between older, essentially one-way technologies such as radio and television broadcasting and newer, two- or multiway communication. For a book concerned with women's empowerment, this would be an important distinction. To be fully empowered in a knowledge society, in my view, is to have two-way communication with information sources

and to be a producer and creator of information (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). Several of the chapters do deal with two-way communication technology such as blogs and email lists, but others concentrate on one-way transmission of information to women such as broadcast radio (as distinguished from community radio), television, and video. These may contribute to women's empowerment as they gain more access to information, but it seems that the ability to interact, ask questions, make suggestions, and share experiences is more empowering than to be simply an information recipient.

In the last chapter, which is presented as the most successful case of transformative gender and ICT research, we read that everything has changed for women landowners in Egypt, who formerly did not manage their own land. Through the adoption of ICTs, it is said that they gained respect, autonomy, and economic success. But there is little detail provided on the women's use of ICTs: How did they have access? How much did they use the ICTs as opposed to the in-person workshops, interpersonal communications, and print material that were also part of the project? Without knowing this, it is difficult to determine the extent to which ICTs contributed to the stated result.

Buskens and Webb write about the emergence of common themes regarding ICTs, gender, and development despite the fact that the researchers/chapter authors chose their own topics. However, the common threads are left untied at the end. The reader is left uncertain about the answers to the main questions raised about whether ICTs can contribute to gender equality or to social justice and sustainable development. But we do have 21 interesting investigations into ICTs as they are being used to try to reduce gender inequality and how ICTs might be part of efforts toward a gender-equal, post-sexist future for girls and women in Africa and the Middle East. ■

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