Book Review

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Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb (Eds.). *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment.* International Development Research Centre (IDRC), London: Zed Books, 2009, 320 pp., ISBN 978-1-84813-192-7, $28.95 (paperback)/ $124.95 (hardcover). Also available to download free at http://www.idrc.ca/openebooks/399-7

Nowhere in the world do men and women enjoy perfectly equal access to, and benefit from, ICTs. While lauded for their transformative potential, ICTs intended for gender development represent one of the cruel ironies of our field: Women's advancement is critical to community development; their access to ICTs as information delivery mechanisms is an important component to this advancement; and the female gender experiences significant barriers to the access and use of ICT, thus never completing the promised circle or axiom. While the impediments to women's uptake of technology have been well-chronicled in Hafkin and Huyer's *Cinderella or Cyberella?* (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006), the UN/INSTRAW Virtual Seminar Series on Gender and ICTs (moderated by Huyer in 2002), BRIDGE's *Cutting Edge* series (BRIDGE, n.d.), and others, these barriers are often listed as a litany of inequities that the ICT researcher thinks is too big to solve alone. These barriers—cost, low literacy, access, lack of perceived relevance, and workload, among others—are real, and as general descriptions, are useful for conceptualizing difference. In *African Women and ICTs,* these lists are given the opportunity to mature. The work exposes us to the barriers as they manifest in a variety of anxieties and contradictions. This is in itself challenging to observe—after all, it is far easier when we can consider women a monolithic entity (i.e., not male) in development efforts. This categorization masks the real reasons women lag behind men in technology uptake, and exposes the realities that underlie the more widely-accepted barriers.

It is this diversity of experiencing technology that Buskens and Webb demand we recognize, starting with an assignment to meditate on our position vis-à-vis women and technology. While this did lead to a few uncomfortable moments in my ICTD seminar, the editors emphasize the need to center the researcher and reader in any exploration of women. In doing so, we can create a climate of useful reflexivity, examining our gendered self, our biases and insights, and what the editors call our "sexist filters" (p. 14). That women can possess such filters is another uncomfortable truth hiding beneath gender and technology efforts.

For those whose work explores the gendered dimensions of ICTD, it is no surprise that the editors and champions of the GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment) project are women. Likely, the most avid reader of *African Women & ICTs* is also a female researcher. Having such an easily identified audience is a mixed blessing, but also having a predictable and appreciative readership is a benefit, although it is not a stretch to imagine whose bookshelves contain a copy. While this readership no doubt includes a handful of men, the majority are likely to be the women ICTD practitioners and researchers who were dismayed to

discover that the Women's Caucus at WSIS in 2005 was relegated to a separate site, or to find that their talks about ICT and Gender were scheduled last at conferences. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International Telecommunication Union are incorrect in the claim that, "without data, there is no visibility; without visibility, there is no priority" (Hafkin, 2003). There is an abundance of data to demonstrate gender discrimination in technology initiatives; however, gender and technology remains an evergreen issue in reporting parlance. It is timeless and unsurprising, and thus does not qualify as hot topic unless someone who should know better lets something sexist slip.

Buskens and Webb follow a more interesting approach than that of the standard "add women and stir" approach to technology; they cast technology in a different light, rather than spotlight women. Their book tracks the first outcomes of the 14 research sites that comprise the Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) Project. The methodological approach to the GRACE project is grounded in participatory action research (PAR), where both the process and result of the development effort are a political shift in the status quo and the "uncovering" of knowledge, as better explained by such researchers as Cornwall, Jewkes, and Chambers (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Chambers, 2005). In UNDP's 1997 publication, *Sustainable Livelihood Approaches in Operation: A Gender Perspective* (Katepa-Kalala, 1997), participatory action research is cited as an effective practice for incorporating gender and technology issues. In *African Women and ICTs,* the variety of PAR-inspired qualitative methods employed across several Africa countries lead to significant contributions in ICT and Gender studies. While ICT for Development (ICT4D) research is often focused on one specific community under the assumption that this provides for ethnographic depth, the diversity of localities and women in the GRACE project uncovers subtle structural and psychosocial factors that would not reveal themselves in totality if the focus centered on one community or region.

If there is one overriding message in *African Women and ICTs,* it is to recognize the plurality of women's experiences with ICTs. The second message is to listen. These demands frame the editors' introduction and serve as a leitmotif throughout the chapters. The editors' introduction starts with a poem intended to mentally and emotionally center the reader. Buskens and Webb enjoy playing "gotcha" with convention. Opening with poetry may put some readers off the book, given that ICT and gender is already entrenched as a soft issue, an important afterthought. The emotive imagery in the poem is not part of the ICTD lexicon, but a meditation on self-reflexivity. It is one of the "methodologically innovative" mechanisms for getting right-sized before conducting (or reading) thoughtful gender research. This is an overlooked task in ICTD courses, a chance to know our neuroses before they become amplified by the strained conditions and tensions of fieldwork. The value of poetry as a practical research method may be worth the academic awkwardness.

Perhaps the most useful chapter from a research point of view is Buskens' first chapter, where she delves into the realities of doing research with and about women and ICTs—these are the complexities that field researchers know and feel internally, but can rarely articulate. Buskens describes these intangibles and the cost of ignoring their heft. For the researcher familiar with the moving target of action research, this exploration of anxieties and "adapted preferences" (p. 13) is welcome and grounding. The book then is divided into four parts that map women's relationships with ICTs: (1) passive relationships, (2) relationships where women create female-only spaces through and with ICT, (3) active relationships where women challenge gender and power roles through the use of ICT, and (4) relationships where women have appropriated ICTs to change the dynamics of the public space (be it the home or the international arena). These are not necessarily linear stages, but studies of agency and complexity across a range of ICT-based women's empowerment initiatives. While the overall number of research participants is small in most cases, the spectrum of women's experiences and responses to ICT is exhaustive. Even critics of qualitative research would likely agree that a larger sample size would only supplement the existing findings.

The 17 case studies following Busken's first chapter test the assumption that all women can benefit from ICT access and use, and that technology will expand the "assets and capabilities of women" (p. 22). These cases examine the everyday dynamics that are rarely uncovered in ICT and Gender research—the social, economic, and material realities of women's lives that trigger women's responses

to technology. Even in the most participatory of exercises, we often do no more than identify these responses as the root cause of inequities of access and use. We do not know where to look for the triggers, as we are several steps past them when we ask members of a community what they need in a technology. Some of the triggers produce forehead-slapping moments—why *should* women in rural Mozambique spend their resources to use the telecenter when there is no employment pipeline for women with newly-acquired technical skills? Other gendered barriers to ICTs seem to follow their own Occam: Women in a rural region of Nigeria rarely text due to extremely high illiteracy rates, although we professionals have come to believe that SMS is the lingua franca of ICTs. In Zimbabwe, we see how gender-blind policies at a university hinder women's access to the school computers. As a policy, women and men are supposed to enjoy equal access to the hardware in the library and labs. However, the first-come, first-served system of access works against the majority of female students who have different demands on their time, and who live under societal expectations of how such time is spent. The women interviewed did not view this as gender discrimination, but rather the way of the world.

Exclusion is a commonality in all the case studies, region independent, and sometimes perpetuated by women. A Zambian case study discovers an interesting fact about the names in women's mobile phone address books. The cachet of adding increasingly more prestigious names to one's mobile network disadvantages the less-networked and lower-earning, thus creating a lower class of mobile users. As one respondent states, "When you have names of poor people in your phone book, you will not have much access to your own development through your phone" (p. 99). This is further evidence that human-based social networks existed prior to technical social networks; technology mirrors the power relations of those networks. There is another critical takeaway—while we focus on the uneven development between men and women, we need to also look for the more subtle, uneven development cycles among women. There is no female monolith.

These are findings and suggestions that can be generalized, not just to women, but to all communities where we plan ICTD interventions. Having read these case studies, I have an enhanced understand-

ing of the issues at stake. Thoughtful ICTD efforts are not only about translating human need into technical systems, but also about recognizing the goals and limitations of potential users, as well as studying how power dynamics flow within a community. Thus, I am torn by the title of the book. All ICTD practitioners and researchers will be able to form more effective research models and survey instruments after reading *African Women and ICTs.* Somewhere under the title, I want to read: "This is not just about African Women. Read it."

As fair notice, the chapters are not equally educational. Several primarily echo the findings of more widely-known studies. They are, in essence, "safe" case studies that discuss the contradictory nature of ICT for women as both a potential avenue for economic development and personal empowerment, as well as a disruptive force that can reinforce gender roles as much as challenge them. The lack of mentoring, the subtle glass ceilings, and the shallow pipeline of young technical women—these are the evergreen laments. ICTs are cast as multidimensional, and society is deemed in need of a critical systemic overhaul of the institutions and mores that create and sustain gender inequity. That said, the plurality of voices in these studies demonstrates the power of many truths—there are women who can use ICT within the confines of their home to pursue economic development and there are those not allowed to do so. Reiteration is not necessarily the same as retreading—some of the cases remind us that infrastructure, like ICT, is political. A full 90% of rural African communities remain off the electrical grid—and a majority of that 90% are women.

Such facts ground the reality of gender and ICTD projects, which may be the greatest contribution of *African Women and ICTs.* It is the everyday experiences of the women chronicled that are the most surprising to our conventional wisdom about women and technology in Africa. Yet Buskens and Webb provide a rich set of examples and tools to emulate within other contexts to uncover experiences that are otherwise too easily and incorrectly explained in the lists of gendered barriers already discussed. The seemingly challenging and counterintuitive perspectives in the 17 case studies offer us a way to truly "see" the authentic discursive practices that we haven't otherwise recognized. These are the tools that can reverse the cruel ironies.

While ICTD professionals will deny themselves an

important academic and practical opportunity if they do not read *African Women and ICTs,* we readers await the next book on GRACE as Phase II expands to include 27 additional sites. Similar efforts continue to gain momentum as well: Organizations such as LinuxChix Africa work to understand and address these issues, and female ICT professionals from Senegal, Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria, Turkey, Brazil, and Pakistan have been recognized as "change agents" at international events, including the Grace Hopper's Celebration of Women and Computing. There is an opportunity for GRACE to highlight these connections and build bridges between South/North and South/South communities of women who continue to challenge assumptions and create their own conventional wisdom and future for ICTs. ∎

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