Newsletter

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- **Information and communications technologies: essential tools for achieving gender equality.** By UN-WOMEN, Andean Sub-Regional Office.
- **For an information society with gender equity.** By Dafne Sabanes Plou.
- **"We see the potential of ICT for rearranging family communication networks",** interview with Juan Eduardo Rojas.
- **"Training telecentre operators as technology leaders in their social environment is an ongoing task",** interview with Olga Paz Martínez.
- **"Including women in ICT can make a big difference in narrowing the digital divide",** interview with Zoraida Franco.
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ICT and gender

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Martin Hilbert,
Doctor of Economic and Social Sciences
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In his article "Digital gender divide or technologically empowered women in developing countries? A typical case of lies, damned lies, and statistics" published in the magazine Women's Studies International Forum, Dr. Hilbert refutes the idea that women use information and communications technologies less than men because their tastes are different. Instead, he argues that less use by women is actually the result of discrimination in access to education and employment. What is more, when they are on an equal footing with men, women use ITC more.

"ICT might be the most tangible tool we have right now to fight gender discrimination"

Why do we need a study on the digital gender divide in developing countries?

The discussion about women's access to and use of digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in developing countries has been inconclusive so far. Some claim that women are rather technophobic and that men are much better users of digital tools. The pervasive and persistent stereotype is that women are at a natural disadvantage to benefit from the digital revolution because they are less tech savvy, they are afraid of technology, and because the technology is not built for their needs and intuition. If this were the case, the increasing socio-economic importance of ICT would add a new dimension to the already existing vicious circle between the traditional and long-standing discrimination of women in fields like employment, income, education and health, and women's chances to improve on this situation in the digital age.

On the contrary, others argue that women enthusiastically embrace digital communication. Digital technologies have proven to be practical and tangible tools for women to improve their living conditions. ICT can help women to gain employment (for example through telework or newly created information jobs), obtain cost-effective health services and education (such as through online courses or software-based literacy programs) and to increase their income (such as through e-business channels and online transactions). This would imply a virtuous circle, whereas women could

fight their current disadvantages in society by exploiting new digital opportunities.

It all comes down to the question if being a woman is a factor that positively or negatively correlates with the usage of ICT. Does a certain type of gender hinder or favor the participation in the digital age?

What data and what countries does the study cover? What is the time period of analysis?

We analyze data sets from 12 Latin American and 13 African countries from 2005-08. This is believed to be the most extensive empirical study in this field so far. Both databases are the products of the initial seed funding of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which has been the driving force behind the creation of important statistics throughout the developing world for decades. In Latin America, IDRC has cooperated since 2002 with United Nations ECLAC to operate OSILAC. During the last decade, OSILAC has successfully worked with National Statistics Offices all over the region to include ICT indicators in existing household surveys. Given the large samples of official household surveys, this data is very robust. In Africa, IDRC is cooperating with the Research ICT Africa Network (http://www.researchictafrica.net), which has conducted their own household and individual user surveys of ICT access and usage between 2007 and 2008.

The study talks about misleading statistics on ICT and women. What does that mean? Why is this still the case?

When we look at the mere usage statistics, it is a fact that more men use ICT than women. For example, in Mexico in 2007, 24 % of the men used the Internet, while only 20 % of the women did. In Honduras, 26 % of the men used mobile phones, while only 23 % of the women did. This is the main reason while people are quick to conclude that being a woman is harmful in the digital age. However, the key question is if it's really the mere fact of difference in sex that makes this difference, or are there what we call "confounding variables"? Often the confounder is easy to spot. For example, if somebody would realize that children's ICT usage is positively correlated to the size of their shoes, most people would become suspicious. They would be quick to notice that age, and therefore education and literacy skills, might confound this relation. There is no reason to believe that the shoe size of children with the same level of schooling would make any significant difference. Often it is not as easy. But the cure remains the same: as soon as there is a suspicion of confounding variables, it is wise to control for them and to compare subjects on the same level of such variables. In this case it turns out that the confounding variable are the usual and longstanding factors of discrimination that women suffer: it is a fact that women have less employment, receive less income (even for the same work), and end up receiving less education. When controlling for these variables, that is, when comparing men and women with the same level of employment, same level of income, and same level of education, women turn out to be more active users of digital tools than men. Continuing with our examples, 41% of all Mexican women that attend an educational establishment use the Internet, but only 39% of all men that do so. In Honduras, 48% of all women that actively work use a mobile phone, while only 41% of all working men do so.

In the study you hold that ICT represent "a concrete and tangible opportunity to tackle longstanding challenges of gender inequalities in developing countries." Why? What kinds of inequalities can ICT help to decrease? How?

We showed that ICT per se does not have anything on them that might keep women and girls from using it in developing countries. Notwithstanding, women continue to be discriminated in many other aspects of social life, including employment, literacy and income. These inequalities also throw their shadows on ICT usage. However, once having access to ICT, this vicious circle can be turned into a virtuous circle, whereas the identified positive attitudes of women toward ICT enable them to circumvent and fight existing inequalities. Given that being a woman is very useful when living in the digital age, if they could be provided with these technologies, they could access employment, increase their income and improve access to education and health. This might be the most tangible tool we have right now to fight gender discrimination. It is also a proactive tool: women can bootstrap themselves out of discrimination.

So, how to bring women closer to ICT and make these technologies more readily available to them?

The data do unfortunately not tell us what to do, they simply tell us that our current outlook on the problem might be ill-focused. Now is the time to rethink policies. Our data indicate that women's access to ICT can be fostered anywhere, at home, at work or at public access centers. Actually, data from Brazil confirms that women use the Internet more than men at communal access centers and also at commercial public access center. Therefore, public access, especially when combined with special provisions for women (for example a lady discount, or ladies discount time-slots), might turn out to be very useful. Once policy makers realize that women are starting into the digital age in a unfavorable condition, but that they could make the biggest contributions to an Information Society, there are many ways women could be helped to create a positive dynamic that attacks one of the Millennium Development Goals that the world is still having serious problems with: gender equality and the empowerment of women.