

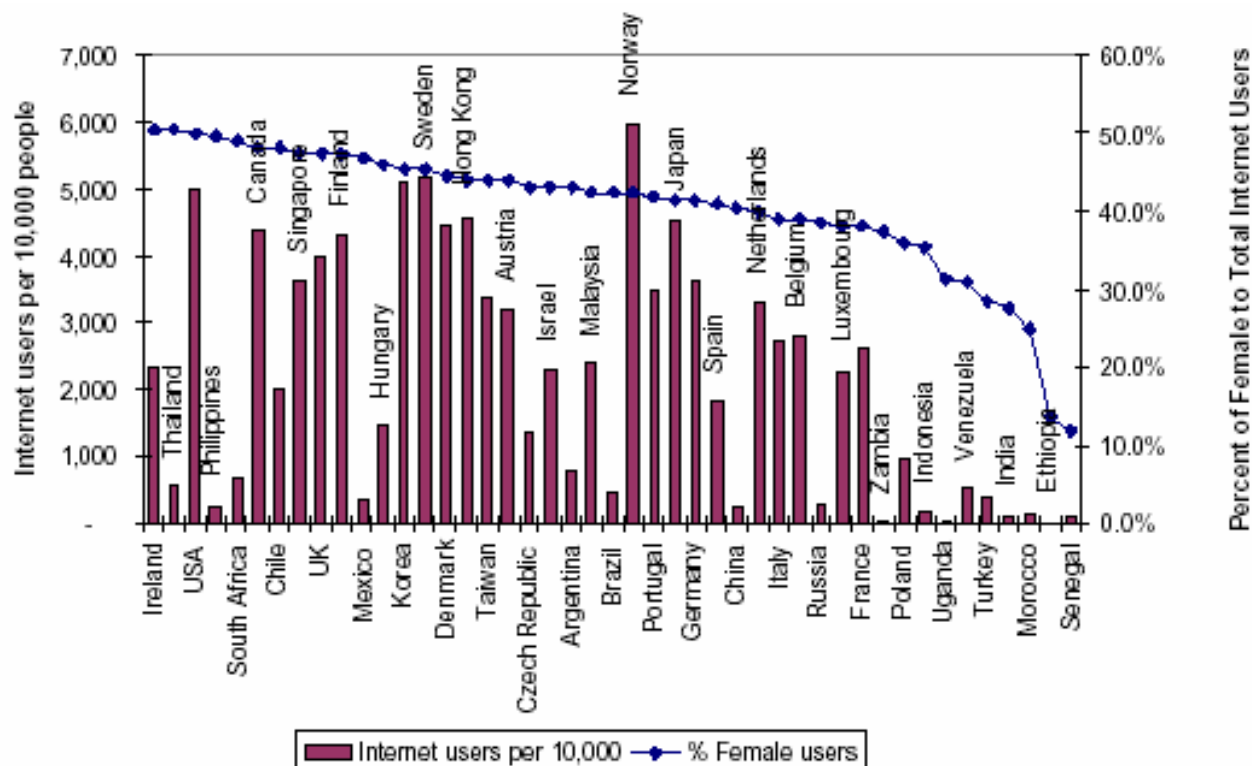
Gender Related Issues in ICT

The gender related issues can be discussed under different headings. But the main theme should be the understanding the difference existed in all aspects between the two genders. Bearing in mind that men have dominated in almost all aspects, the women-centric analysis is carried out in many aspects.

Women's Access to the Internet

The gender divide within the digital divide can be seen in the lower numbers of women users of ICTs compared to men. The majority of the world's women are excluded from the World Wide Web. The digital divide within countries broadly reflects the gender divide. Women are in the minority of users in almost all developed and developing countries. Even in the developing countries where women do make up a high percentage of users, total users themselves constitute very small elite. In some cases where women make up a relatively high percentage of users, the total proportion of the population using the Internet is very small.

Illustration: Total Internet users and female Internet users



Source: Huyer and Mitter, 2003.

Socio-cultural Barriers to Women's Access

There are number of reasons why women have lesser access to ICT. To mention a few, they are socio-cultural attitudes, lack of women's interaction with technology, resource constraints and so on. For the majority of women, specific barriers include illiteracy, unfamiliarity with the dominant languages of the Internet, absence of training in computer skills, domestic responsibilities, and the fact that the information delivered by ICTs is not that valuable to them. Infrastructure itself is also a gender issue: it is concentrated in urban areas and more women live in rural areas. Also, public ICT facilities have a great tendency to become men-only spaces, effectively inhibiting women's access

The following are some socio-cultural factors that impede women's use of ICTs, particularly in rural areas:

- Cultural attitudes discriminate against women's access to technology and technology education.
- Women are less likely to own communication assets – radio, mobile phone.
- Women in poor households do not have the income to use public facilities.
- Information centers may be located in places that women are not comfortable visiting.
- Women's multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities limit their leisure time. Centers may not be open when it is convenient for women to visit them.
- It is more problematic for women to use facilities in the evenings and return home in the dark.

Illustration: Pornography in Internet Cafés

Many commercial public Internet access points are appearing in developing countries like India. However, in small towns and rural areas, these Internet facilities are typically entertainment joints, which men frequent for accessing pornographic content. Most often, the Internet café manager, usually a young male, is himself into surfing pornographic content, and the place serves as a hangout for his male friends. This is even true of some community telecenters set-up by non-profit organizations in India. Women and girls are obviously wary of going to such places for accessing the Internet. Additionally, gender insensitive management of many commercial Internet access points poses the threat that personal email addresses of women and girls are accessed and used by boys and men to harass them.

Gender and ICTs Overview Report

Gender in the Information Economy

Women have relatively little ownership and control of the ICT sector. It is clear that women are under-represented on the boards and senior management of IT companies, policy and regulatory organizations, technical standard-setting organizations, industry and professional organizations and within government bodies working in this area.

The new economy rides on the power of ICTs. Job outsourcing is an important business strategy today and has given rise to a new global division of labor. Internationally outsourced jobs, such as medical transcription work or software services, have made a considerable difference to women's work opportunities in developing countries. In software, women enjoy opportunities on a scale that they never experienced in any other field of engineering and science. However, in the information technology sector, women make up only small percentages of managerial, maintenance, and design personnel in networks, operating systems, or software.

Information technology has brought employment gains for women. Here are a few observations: -

- Patterns of gender segregation are being reproduced in the information economy where men hold the majority of high-skilled, high value-added jobs, whereas women are concentrated in the low skilled, lower value-added jobs
- As traditional manufacturing industries that previously employed women gradually disappear, the women finding jobs in the new, often ICT-related industries are rarely the same ones as those who lost their jobs in the traditional sectors. New inequalities are therefore emerging between women with ICT-related job skills versus those without.
- While teleworking has certainly created new employment opportunities for women, the downside is that women can be excluded from better career possibilities, and instead of finding a balance, family responsibilities are combined with paid work, so that women end up acquiring new tasks on top of the old.

Illustration: Gender Ideologies in Information and Communications Work

‘While examining gendered processes of work within the ICTs sector it is useful and important to problematize the term “low-skill work” to understand how gender ideology operates within the ICTs arena. Certain kinds of work, historically performed by women, have come to be defined as “unskilled” (and therefore low-pay). Costanza-Chock (2003) highlights how.

- Effective call service often requires a great deal of performative or emotional labor, but such labor is naturalized as “inherent” to women and therefore undervalued.
- Recent studies of women working in call centers in Ireland and Europe found that, contrary to employers’ rhetoric about skill development and flexible career advancement, women’s info-work is routinized, deskilled, and devalued.
- Women in these centers rarely advance beyond “team leader” roles to managerial positions (Belt, Richardson, and Webster 2000, Breathnach 2002).
- Concerns about the exploitation of low-skill female workers familiar from other sectors (harassment and abuse by male managers, poor health conditions, control of wages by male heads of household) do not disappear in the information and communications sectors.
- New forms of gendered inequality are of particular concern in call services, where 3 out of 4 female call center workers report repeated sexual harassment over the phone (ILO 2001b).’

Source: Costanza-Chock 2003: 11–12.

ICT and Sexual Violence

The global entertainment industry, poised on the power of new ICTs, is a force beyond the grasp of law and regulation. The sex industry markets precisely the violence and oppression that feminists seek to eliminate from the streets, workplaces, and bedrooms. Pornography has assumed mammoth proportions with the Internet. The Internet has made sexual exploitation of and violence against women and children seem more normal, and this is a matter of deep concern. Criminal syndicates violate laws prohibiting sexual exploitation and violence by locating their servers in host countries with less restrictive laws, to avoid regulation. The new technologies have thus enabled the creation of online communities free from interference or standards where any and every type of sexual violence goes and where women-hating is the norm.

While states often take a strong position against websites concerned with the rights of sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people, Internet-based sexual violence is not seen as a priority for regulation.

Illustration: The Internet and the Sex Industry*The Internet as a Site of Violence*

The Internet has brought in a revival of child pornography, which had more or less been eradicated in developed countries by the 1980s. Today, the business of both adult and child pornography arguably sustains the Internet. It has often been said that pornography is the only profitable entity on the Internet. Over the past ten years, the Internet has emerged as the premier forum of the international sex trade and has facilitated, accelerated, and normalised the sexual exploitation of women and girls. New ICTs have combined with racism, sexism, and capitalism to escalate sexual exploitation worldwide.

The Internet as a Site of Resistance

The Internet was used as a means to form a coalition of activists when thousands of Internet users protested Yahoo’s decision to sell pornography. In December 2000, Yahoo created an online store devoted to selling pornographic videos and DVDs. Just a few months later, after receiving over 100,000 emails from Internet users, Yahoo decided to remove the portion of its website that sold pornography and to stop accepting advertisements from pornographic websites. In May 2001, Yahoo decided to make it more difficult to find sexually explicit chat rooms and online clubs (<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/vaw02/module4.html>).

Women's Participation and Decision Making

Access to the media can modify the power structure in society. Control over knowledge and information is an important source of power and that is where the media are relevant. It is always striking that women, who make up half the world's population, have to struggle to get their voices in the media. They also need to fight with the increasing globalization that also means patriarchy becoming more powerful, more entrenched. So a few questions are raised for example: -

- Is it possible to use Internet communications and other ICT tools to modify the situation of women's citizenship and the standing of their rights?
- Could we say that ICT opens new channels for participation and decision making in the social and public spheres?

Women worldwide are using ICT to monitor the promotion and protection of their human rights, using the Internet to denounce violations, send alerts and campaign for their rights. They are also using ICT to facilitate communication among organizations, thus empowering the networks that work to ensure that women have equal rights. Gaining access to legal information (law and other legal instruments, new legislation and legal recourse, and accountability procedures) via the Internet enables them to discuss human rights issues with authority and thus further their struggle against any sort of discrimination either under law or practice. Women's access to information sources and interchange channels are crucial for their democratic participation, the respect for their human rights and for intervening with an equal voice in the public sphere.

Illustration: Campaign against violence on Women

In a successful use of the Internet in campaigns against violence on women, the Kenya-based African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), launched the Men to Men Initiative in 2001 to mark the Sixteen Days of Activism Against Violence on Women. The campaign targeted men to promote male involvement and action to combat gender-based violence at the regional level in Africa.

Old patterns in the new media

Technology has changed, but the fundamentals remain the same. Women's absence from information is crucial because today the media play a decisive role in the building of the public agenda. There is still a sexist and stereotyped portrayal of women in the media, and there is a need to work with media professions to create a media environment that promotes gender equality by fostering positive images of women and women's views.

Illustration: Media's involvement

In Nepal, Sancharika Samuha (Forum of Women Communicators) has focused on using the media to address violations of women's human rights. They challenged the mainstream media campaign against granting women the same rights to inherit property as men. The group was able to place articles on equal property rights in the press, produce and air radio jingles and television advertising, distributes posters and hold workshops with journalists and NGOs. As a result there is a new awareness among journalists and the general public of women's side of the story.

Defining ICT Development

The "intersection approach" that women are in the deepest end of the digital divide has been the main message of gender advocates working in ICT development. Therefore, the definition of ICT development must strike at the root of unequal power relations, not just between men and women, but more fundamentally between rich and poor, North and South, urban and rural, empowered and marginalized.

ICT policy currently rests on the assumption that information and communication technologies are gender neutral and that women must adapt to technologies, rather than have ICT policy specifically formulated to meet the interests and needs of women. Therefore, they need to be actively involved in

the definition, design and development of new technologies in order to avoid new forms of exclusion and ensure that women and girls have equal access and opportunities in respect of the developments of science and technology.

There is a need to develop educational projects that stimulate critical and creative skills, and encourage greater participation of women in the design and production of new technologies. This requires a comprehensive set of interventions ranging from quality public education for all, through scientific and technological education and research. Instead of trying to make girls fit into the existing computer culture, the computer culture must become more inviting to girls. Girls should be educated to be ICT designers and not just users. Educators and parents should help girls imagine themselves early in life as designers and producers of technology, stimulating deeper interest in ICTs and providing opportunities for girls to express their technological imaginations

Cross Gender Communication in the Cyberspace

Women and men have different ways of conducting themselves electronically. Male users are known to dominate mixed-sex electronic conversations. They have also been found to be the more frequent instigators of online sexual harassment. Men even preempt the women discussants by employing the same techniques they use in face-to-face interaction. When women do attempt to participate on a more equal basis, they risk being ignored by the men. Due to these non-legitimate practices, they sometimes avoid participating.

Women are more cautious in their postings; they also tend to act more like a moral advocate in joining a discussion. The women who deliberately use harsh words do so apologetically. Besides the frequent apologies, the women also tend to write shorter messages and gently reproach those that wrote long messages. They contribute more overt expressions of agreement, appreciation and support.

With the men, a common reason for their participation in online discussions was to avoid face-to-face personal communication. But for the women, they joined online discussions precisely to supplement and enhance their communication with others.

When women's representation is no longer biologically based, as it sometimes happens on cyber space, the Internet can be empowering to women. It allows women to be active and constructive. It allows their voices to be heard, and serves as a mechanism for the consideration of their ideas and insights.

Sources:

- Anita Gurumurthy, *Gender and ICTs Overview Report*
- Dafne Sabanes Plou, *What about Gender Issues in the Information Society?*
- Esther Kuntjara, *Gender Issues in Information Technology Communication*