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Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World

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Gender and the Digital Economy: Perspectives from the Developing World
CECILIA NG & SWASTI MITTER (Eds.)
New Delhi, Thousand Oaks & London: Sage Publications, 2005 262 pp., ISBN: 0761934103 (hbk)

Editors Cecilia Ng and Swasti Mitter address an important and timely topic in their new book. The book sets out to do exactly what the title says: the authors interrogate the participation of women in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) industry, particularly in developing countries. As the editors point out in the introduction, there are concerns that globalization will increase inequalities and asymmetrical power relationships between the rich and the poor. Yet, they are quite optimistic about the potential enabling power of new technologies.

While a very small percentage of people in the world are part of the Information Society, women have less access and control over ICTs and thus remain marginalized in the economic system. The numbers speak for themselves. Only 10% of the world population is connected to the Internet (Zorn, Chapter 8). As much as 90% of Internet usage takes place in industrialized or developed countries (Mitter, Chapter 2). Zorn points out that in general, women's access to the Internet is lower than men's, with the exception of the United States, where women now make up 52% of Internet users. Yet, Mitter shows that this inequality is exacerbated in developing countries, where women represent a much smaller proportion of the already small number of users.

The book contains articles from previous issues of the journal Gender, Technology and Development, an international refereed journal based at the Gender and Development Field of Study, the Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand. It was published to contribute to discussions leading up to the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunisia in November 2005 and also coincided with the first five-year review of progress toward attaining the Millennium Development Goals. According to the editors, the book is aimed at people working in international bodies, NGOs, the corporate sector, and trade unions. Academics certainly could also benefit from reading this book, but since the target audience is so diverse, contributions on theory, policy, and case studies might speak more to the interests of some readers than

others.

The main question addressed by the editors is: ‘How can ICTs empower women and make a difference to development?’ (p. 10). Ng, a visiting associate professor at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, and Mitter, an international consultant on information and communications technologies and gender, focus on economic empowerment while acknowledging the limitations of this approach. The inclusion of other, non-economic measurements for empowerment and development, such as social or spiritual dimensions, might add to a more holistic view of the impact of ICTs.

The biggest strength of this anthology is that it fills a gap in knowledge by presenting perspectives of women from developing countries as diverse as the Philippines, India, Malaysia, Morocco, and Argentina. Indeed, the editors argue that the various chapters offer ‘the insiders’ point of view’, in contrast to the outside views of professional consultants and experts (p. 11). For too long, well-meaning scholars have spoken on behalf of women instead of letting them speak for themselves.

The first two chapters present theoretical perspectives on the topic, while policy making is addressed in the final two chapters. In between, five chapters deal with case studies of women’s participation in ICTs. Czarina Saloma-Akpedonu discusses women’s participation in the ICT industry in the Philippines, where 40% of the ICT workforce is composed of women, the highest in the Southeast Asian region. In a chapter titled ‘Women’s agency and the IT industry in India’, the authors report information gathered through interviews with men and women in Bangalore and Delhi. The experiences of women workers at call centers in Malaysia and India is the focus of a chapter by the editors. In a very insightful chapter, Susan Schaeffer Davis recounts her experiences in working with rural women in Morocco to sell their rugs through the Internet. The final case study describes the participation of women worldwide in a virtual community through the Virtual International Women’s University (Vifu).

Throughout the collection, the authors acknowledge the multiple and intersecting oppressions of women as well as their specific positions in society, in accordance with principles of Third World feminism. Mitter states that current feminist philosophy in North America focuses on the universality of women’s human rights but overlooks the ‘multiplicity in

the aspirations of women in non-European countries. The discourse has similarly ignored the difference in the priorities of women in rich and poor countries. Women, in no society, form an undifferentiated group' (p. 32). Similarly, Davis looks at rural, illiterate women and the particular restrictions they face in participating in new technologies. This approach uncovers new and much-needed perspectives.

While globalization has the potential to increase inequalities, this collection shows the perhaps unexpected positive impact of ICTs in women's lives. The editors question what they call the 'simplistic and overgeneralized ''oppressed and margin-alized'' thesis of women workers' (p. 133). Contributors to this book found that some women felt more assertive, empowered, and free because of their work in the ICT industry. Yet, women also found the work boring, stressful, and demanding. This new system also brings forward new cultural tensions, as employees are expected to undergo voice training and learn about the client's culture. In the chapter by Ng and Mitter, some interviewees indicated that they were concerned about exposure to Western culture, and that more women in India now try to imitate the West by visiting pubs and smoking. Does this present a new form of cultural imperialism?

One weakness of this book is that some chapters are quite inaccessible. A piece that I found particularly hard to read was Chapter 3 by Martha Rolda´n. Too many unexplained terms*for example, reprimarization, signical, neguentropic, and Mondialization *impaired readability. This perhaps illustrates the difficulty of compiling a book with contributions from all over the world and from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

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