GENDER JUSTICE: DIGITALLY EMPOWERED WOMEN THROUGH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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The World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995 and Beijing+10) has drafted a recommendation to make women’s access to information a human right. This has helped to put access and equity in ICT (information and communications technology) on the international agenda. It could provide a platform for assessing the implications of the digital divide between the information-rich and the information-poor in the different ranges of class, race, ethnic, gender and age. Although, the possibility of the global village, where everyone can have a say, is as yet a long way off, the attempts to reduce the gender digital divide are at the heart of international ICT strategies and programmes such as UNIFEM and women’s agencies alike.

If gender equality is a goal of the world society, it requires an urgent attention of every ICT policy maker and user to construct gender sensitivity towards ICTs development. By this way, it may ensure that ICTs will be a powerful vehicle to shape the digital future and to lead to the equality of the e-society. This paper is attempt to apply gender analysis in assessing the ICTs situation in Thailand, the policy frameworks of Thai government under the recent establishment of ICT ministry, the movement of women’s cyber users and the suggestions to help women benefit from digital empowerment.

The current situation of gender and ICT in Thailand

Sharing the same obstacle with other countries, getting reliable statistics on women's Internet use in developing countries is very difficult. Although, the available data are not very reliable or comparable, it is clear that the numbers are small and the distribution limited.
According to the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), the approximate number of Internet users in Thailand is 3.5 million (March 2002). Another survey carried out by NECTEC gives more specific data on gender by monitoring the Internet users through the popular six Thai language websites during December 2001. It is found that women using the net have surpassed men by 2.4 per cent (women users 51.2 per cent while men users 48.8 per cent). However, this is not to celebrate since the data samples were purposively targeted at the young generation (by selecting the type of popular web sites). An implication of 76 per cent of the same sample users posses single status and mostly are under 29 years old suggests that this group of women users will soon become smaller when they are older and get more involve in family commitments. Although E-mail is the major information technology application that individual women use, time constraints as well as gendered limitations will make Internet use difficult for women.

Except in upper-income family, most women who use Internet use it at work. Despite lack of reliable figures, it can be estimated that generally women using computer at work as a tool of routine office work, data entry, manufacturing, programming, and related work rather than using as a tool of communication. Therefore, the most prevalent application of computer technology as electronic networking, knowledge and political empowerment has less benefited to women. It is also the fact that women are under representation in the IT workforce. Few women are producers of information technology, whether as Internet content providers, programmers, designers, inventors, or fixers of computers.

Although ICT is a new field, gendered division of labor has already rooted in the society. However, women are making their ways into higher levels of the IT workforce. The appointment of Khunyin Tipavadee Meksawan as a new secretary-general of the ICT ministry in November 2002, though causing some arguments, shows a one step attempt of Thai government to include women in the decision making structures in National ICTs. Khunying Tipavadee, a former secretary-general of the Civil Service Commission, has been working towards endorsing the gender mainstreaming in governmental policies for many years. It might be expected that with her influence, the national ICTs policy may be shaped or reshaped to narrow gender digital divide.
There are a number of issues considering as barriers to number of women from participating in the IT workforce and environment. Apart from literacy, education, language and geographical location of facilities, there are series of barriers derived from gendered bias in social and cultural structures. These are:

- The marginalisation of women in ICT needs to be considered in the context of women’s general relationship to science and technology. The issues of what technology is and the way it becomes gendered are complex. It is the constantly recurring misperception of the role played by socialisation that technology is identified as part of gender identity.

- Crucial to gendered socialisation, there is a substantial research which indicates that men have dominated the co-ed computerised classroom. It is not uncommon to see boys of all ages actively seizing the machines, and physically pushing the girls away. This violence can be accompanied by taunts about how girls cannot ‘do’ computer, and how screens and controls are a boys’ toys (Spender, 1995).

- It is also a factor of economic when the costs of purchasing a computer, training and time on the net are disadvantages for general women who have an average lower income. It is a case of information-poor getting poorer.

- In science and engineering, women lack mentors to help them along. Women faculties in engineering represent only small percentage of that population. Moreover, women have much less developed networks than men in the business and high-tech industries. There is also not much body of research to find out an account of the growing gender gap in this sector.

- The contradiction between family and work balance can contribute to the women’s barriers. Although it may be arguable, some employers in this competitive and highly intense field may perceive women as potentially less dedicated than men and more likely to be torn by family ties. In effect, the important responsibility such as raising children may undermine women in the IT workplace. Women and men experience sufficient time to use and become proficient with ICT differently. Women are much less
likely to find time to use ICT, either as a work or as a leisure due to their given status in the gendered division of labour.

- Sexual harassment on the networks is a problem being reported by many women and many sites. The forms of sexual harassment vary from sexist jokes, abusive messages, pornography, violent games, virtual rape and sexual crime that flow through cyberspace. This type can be identified as violence against women that turns women off from the centre of ICT.

- Lack of regulations and forms of consumer protection especially framing laws for the control of sexual harassment can widen the gender gap. The difficulty of law-makers to keep track on the superhighway has allowed offenders to abuse women and children which, in turn, discourages women’s involvement.

Although these barriers are laid on the structure of power deeply rooted in gender relations, ICT is not without its benefits to women. There are cases that women who are committed computer networks, speak positively about their experiences and earn benefits from acquiring knowledge, skill and encouragement. Therefore, it is indeed time to start thinking about what turns women on ICT rather than only finding out what turns them off. According to Sadie Plant (1997), the first woman referred to as a cyber-feminist, women should feel comfortable in cyberspace. Plant continues to research women’s experience and banishes some of barriers that have kept women out of cyber-culture. She suggests that ICT has the potential to be egalitarian, to bring everyone into the network arrangement and to provide opportunities for creating new community. In other words, ICT offers a powerful tool for women to empower themselves and to overcome barriers. This is one of the reasons that Spender strongly asks more women to engage in ICT. Spender’s message for women is - the electronic medium is the way we now make sense of the world, and this is why women have to be full members of the computer culture. Women have to take part in making and shaping the cyber-society, or else they risk becoming the outsiders. (1995: 168)
The policy frameworks of Thai government under the establishment of ICT ministry

Two major policies concerning ICT in Thailand are IT 2000, the first national IT policy, and IT 2010 the developed plan of ten-year period. According to NECTEC, IT 2010 aims to move Thailand to the “Knowledge-Based Society and Economy (KBS /KBE) (Thuvasethakul and Koanantakool 2002). For IT 2010, with powerful influence from Sufficiency Economy ideology, humanistic dimension is added and highlighted, the development therefore is not solely emphasizing on the “technology,” but rather on the good use of ICTs for directing the nation to both economic and social development. Thuvasethakul and Koanantakool (2002) stated that in achieving the goals, five main flagships have to be developed as follows:

1) E-Society, covering issue such as digital divide, quality-of-life, culture, health, public participation;
2) E-Education includes issues of life-long learning, computer, literacy, human resource development, virtual education, etc;
3) E-Government, including public service via electronic service delivery, employment, legal infrastructure;
4) E-Commerce, with special focus on e-services’ including not only finance, tourism and IT services, but also other industries;
5) E-Industry, focusing on e-manufacturing and IT-related industries, plus such as standardization.

The policies themselves seem to be incredibly perfect; however, the shortcomings can still be analyzed especially from the gender perspective. The fact that Thai society is still in the process and movement of cultivating flourishing gender society inevitably makes us find the huge Black Hole of gender-blind in the ICTs policies. The important concern that is missing from the policies and regulations is the notion of gender justice. Do the ICTs policies state or even consider about gender justice and equality perspectives on ICTS? Do they promote the equal employment opportunity for women? Are women guaranteed by the law of equal access to those new technologies and the Internet? Are women and men protected by the law from all harmful and risk impact from using the Internet? The answers to these questions are quite clear that they show not any single signal of gender sensitivity. The vacuum
reaction of the government and the policy-makers to the event that a schoolgirl was raped by the guy whom she knew and talked via the Internet can powerfully confirm the answer stated above.

Actually, there are so many things that the government and policy-makers can do; however, it seems that first of all they should begin by considering the fact that women and gender issue are still at the deepest bottom of the development hierarchy. Resource and opportunities are often less accessible to women, and in this case they are ICTs resources and opportunities. Beginning with this recognition will bring them to create more holistic policies and regulations that will provide welfare to all people, the rich and poor, men and women, and so on.

Furthermore, the policy-makers themselves have to reengineer their gender structure both physically and mentally. Namely, the under representation of women in the ICT sector is significant, and the understanding towards gender issue is minimal. Therefore, the final conclusion from this section is that the advocacy on these issues must address decision-makers at all levels from the local to the global in emphasizing and implementing gender policy in ICTs development. The potential ICTs policies with gender justice can be focused as follows:

- Ensure that women have equitable access to the benefits of ICTs
- Increase women’s participation in all levels of the ICTs sector to further gender equality objectives
- Design and provide ICTs technologies and services which focus on women’s needs and requirements;
- Include and promote gender sensitivity training program in the ICTs sector to enhance an understanding about gender equality and justice.

**The movement of women’s cyber users**

The main notion of this section is to illustrate the use of ICTs as tools for the advancement of women, and gender issues. In the last five years, Internet culture in Thailand has emerged within various groups of gender users, namely women, men, other gender identity groups, and women’s movement or organizations. Due to the fact that sexual and gender issues in Thailand have been framed and limited for years, Internet which comprises of many unique qualifications such as interactive, anonymity,
invisibility of the users, privacy use, and etc. has become the most powerful channel in promoting gender and sexual, dialogue, and spheres. A number of women, men, women love women, men love men using Internet for exchanging sexual/gender knowledge have been increasing. At the same time, the gender and sexuality issues are spread and transmitted widely to the outer sphere of the society.

The fact that Thai people learn and exchange more sexual/gender information via Internet can be considered as positive signals for the society. This can be named as the refreshing era for various Thai gender groups to expose and create the dialogue. The interesting example can be illustrated from the case of “http://www.anjaree.com” which is the cyber-sphere for the women love women group and others launched in the beginning of 2000. Thai society has marginalized this group of people for a long time, they think that this group of people is different and excluded. It can be noted here that having Anjaree and other gender concern websites shows the insightful step of gender justice movement in Thailand.

Moreover, the fact that women’s movement/organizations makes good use of Cyber-technology for practical and strategic objectives must be explored in this paper. According to Cabrera-Balleza, the women’s movement in Southeast Asia region is slowly becoming more aware of the significance and location of ICT issues in gender equality and development. In Thailand, there are many Internet accounts created by the women organizations. The groups working for gender justice have earned many benefits through organizational efficiency and cost savings. With Cyber-technology, both women organization and individual users can expand their access to information resources. Another practical benefit is that those organizations can establish the network of global and regional mailing lists and websites NGO activities around the world. For example, the Internet is currently used as a tool for the protection of women’s human rights such as Women’s Human Rights Net. This is electronic network linking over 50 international women’s human rights organizations for informational sharing, campaigning and capacity building (Marcelle 2000, 22).

These Internet networking processes can contribute to the women’s empowerment and practical participation in democracy. What these electronic network of both individual users and women organizations should profoundly consider is that when there are opportunities, should participate fully in ICT policymaking processes to make a further change of gender justice in ICTs.
Ensuring women’s empowerment through ICT

With an increasingly significant value of ICT as agents for development, it is necessary important to include women in the area of information and communication technology policy and regulation. There are certainly some arguments of cyber-feminism that cyberspace is an area where women are taking control and subverting the technology towards their own ends (Adam & Green, 2001) Therefore, women need to enhance their potential, ability and confidence in order to take advantage of opportunities offered by information technology.

*Reshape women as the subject user*

It is important for feminist and IT scholars to look not only at categories of gender as they have been defined, but also as they could be redefined and changed through the influence of ICT. The appeal is clear: if we reshape our view to see the user of technology as a subject, rather than an object, we provide an avenue for women to act as agents of change (Lawley, 1993). This suggestion indicates that technological systems and their effects can be viewed as a form of ideology, shaped by the designers and managers of technology who can act as user and producer at the same time. With the characteristic of interactive technology, Internet can provide women (and marginalized groups) a space to reshape their appearance and/or identity through representations that flow from words and images. These systems allow women to break boundaries and redefine themselves outside the traditional categories of ‘object’ or ‘others’.

For scholars, looking through a number of these websites, for instance geekgirls, they will be able to make clear argument that gender is construction, and technology needs not only reflect the pre-existing gender, instead it can be an area for the reshaping of those marginalized categories. Furthermore, creating better representations of women in the cyberspace can help more women become comfortable users of communication technology. It will be possible for women and other marginalized groups to accomplish training and educational programmes in order to be effective users and producers of information technology.
Engendered the policy

To ensure of being a gender sensitive information society, the gender implications of technical policy areas such as code and regulation, network architecture and available, deployment and pricing, training and education, as well as consumer protection need to be taken on board and made dialogue among IT and gender policy makers. A forum that contains diverse perspectives, for instance technological base, gender base, economic base and cultural base, should be provided to exchange experiences on IT strategies and identify best policy and practices, where they can learn from each other.

There are a number of important considerations along the process of development and implementation of policy making. These are:

- making arrangements that support women’s universal access to ICT;
- extension of infrastructure, particularly wireless and satellite communications and other forms of public access, to rural areas and urban poor areas in places that convenient and accessible to women;
- increasing effective collaborations with various institutions relating to ICT and gender in order to ensure that the reduction of gender digital divide is addressed in all policy and strategies of government and industrial sectors;
- empowering women’s participation in ICT by increasing more useful and comfortable contents that suitable for women’s everyday lives, such as health, education, family, trade, law, farming, energy resource, and other women’s development areas.
- encouraging a bottom-up development model that makes communications, information and other self-help tools directly available to communities and poor women to overcome their constraints. This bottom-up model requires partnership with government, NGOs and business to provide women basic practicing to use IT to meet their basic needs, develop small business connection, and share experiences with others across country. The bottom-up model will also empower women to take charge of their own development.
- ensuring that women are addressed and concerned particularly in the master plan of the community telecentres which are the pilot project of government, non-government and some private companies. The community telecentres was born out off Thailand ICT policy plan in order to support self-sustainable programmes and participatory democracy of Thai communities through ICT networks. Some effective community telecentres are centre for community information (www.codi.or.th), Thai Rural Net (www.thairuralnet.org), Internet Tambon (www.khonthai.com) which offer information resources on many development issues for communities as well as serving as a centre for community business and political empowerment. Unless gender presents distinctly in the programmes, there is no guarantee that the usefulness of the community telecentres will meet the needs of women in communities.

- promoting women’s participation in all levels of ICT government and industrial sectors and to enhance women in these sectors with gender perspectives by providing training, forum and other forms of activities to raising gender awareness.

- empowering women, community and NGOs or civil groups to form networks, link to the Internet to monitor governments’ and private sectors’ performances. Such effort can enable transparency and exercise people fundamental rights.

**Education with gender integrated**

Education and training are the most important factors in improving the ability of girls and women to take full advantage of information technology. The effort to ensure girls’ and women’s access to equal education in all levels could be strengthened by integrating gender perspective into science and technological education. It is responsibility of every social institution, from family to school and community to ensure that individual girl is allowed to expose to technologies at her earlier stages. Most of all, all form of ICT education needs to be conducted with gender sensitivities or more women friendly, prevents any types of discrimination, abuse and violence that effect girls’ and women’s involvement. To ensure more
accessible of girls and women to ICT educational, the development of local languages in the ICT systems is also very important.

Gender dimensions of research

In order to develop body of knowledge on ICT it may be necessary to begin formulating a more reflexive research in relation to women and ICT. This new theme should address at least two key questions: how are the new social geographies of ICT access being gendered? How can we intervene to direct the shaping of new technosocio relations in more democratic, transparent, inclusive, and neutrally gendered ways? Thus, it is necessary to increase the use of gender analysis in producing data and research findings and, however, it should not begin with women as a homogeneous category but diversity since there is no universal woman. Gender analysis can offer a broad and realistic vision to examine the emerging information and communication society and its impacts on development of the country, and to explore women’s ability to improve socially and politically effective in information society. Therefore, more women academics and researchers who have gendered mind should be supported and encouraged to participate in ICT research and to widely disseminate their research results.

Women’s movement via ICT

For women’s movement in Thailand, making use of ICT can be advantages and empowerment. ICT networks can help these women’s groups to bridge the world of differences among gender, race, class and identity, and to learn from each other’s experience. Therefore, a number of women’s movement programmes, for instance women’s human rights programme, stop violence against women programme, etc. should apply the ICT issues into their campaigning, agenda and political strategies, as well as involving in the ICT gender networks. On the other hand, the women’s groups need to continuously monitor that the national ICT policy has reflected women’s concerns and integrating gender perspectives into policy formulation.
Conclusion

The goal of equal access to information and communication technology connects with the neutrally gendered society. Ideally, ICT culture should be seen as neutral, with no regard for people’s gender, race, ethnic, class, age or locality. Although, the argument for equal access is important, it also remains very limited. This paper has explored the common barriers to women’s access to ICT in Thai culture. It has argued that in order to narrow digital divide of information technology, the national ICT policy and other related sectors would need to be engendered. Societies have to put their energies into this project in the belief that, without positive action by gendered sensitive civil groups, the information networks will soon be ‘no place for women and marginalized groups’.

References

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Source: http://www.wsisasia.org/materials/wil.doc

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