

Book Review

**Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East:
Changing Selves, Changing Societies**

Edited by: Ineke Buskens & Anne Webb

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Will it be possible to turn ICT into a force for the good for the developing world [...] and how might ICT [...] be influenced and formed by notions of social justice and sustainability? (p.2). These are the questions explored in this edited volume: a collection of reports on twenty-one research projects undertaken in fourteen African and Middle Eastern countries by the Gender Research in Africa and the Middle East into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) network. Although the research reported in this volume was undertaken between 2008 and 2012, GRACE has been in the field since 2004 and previously published *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (2009). The GRACE network conducts research “for the purpose of social transformation” (p.3), specifically, how ICTs might enable desirable interventions in gender relations and the “socioeconomic-political-religious structures that support them” (p.4) based on an assumption that “ICTs can benefit women greatly and contribute to women’s empowerment and gender-equality endeavours” (p.7).

Excluding a methodology section at the end, the book’s twenty-one essays are divided into three parts that are meant to reflect the “processes of personal and social change that (need to) take place when women in the South set out to explicitly empower themselves in and through the use of ICT” (p.7). These “stages” or “clustered experiences” women encounter on their journey of empowerment “with ICT, through ICT and in ICT” involve agentic use of ICT (as opposed to unintentional use), “participation in ICT space” their “ICT-enhance being, doing, relating and becoming” (p.8). Hence, part 1 (chapters 1-7), ‘Agentic ICT use: the aspiration for emancipation versus the power of gender traditions’, discusses the use of ICTs in women’s personal and professional lives against the backdrop of structural inequalities and systemic biases that have deep socioeconomic, religious and cultural roots. The cases implicate ICTs in issues like high maternal mortality and gender-based violence (Yemen), equal access at tertiary level (Sudan), gender policy in tertiary science and technology education (Zimbabwe), work environment for women (Kenya) political participation (Senegal), and women’s legal rights (Tunisia). This mosaic of cases are unified by the core section narrative of agentic use as well as a subtext of changes in the digital divide, made possible by widespread new technologies like mobile phones.

Part 2 (chapters 8-14), ‘Developing critical voice in and through safe ICT-created space’ is about the role of ICTs in raising gender awareness and thereby creating a safe space for women’s participation and self-expression. The gripping and insightful set of cases are woven around themes of women’s critical voice in patriarchal and sexist social contexts and explore ICT use in relation to issues like resilience during sectarian clashes (Nigeria), body image and self-esteem issues (Egypt), teenage girls’ ‘sexting’ (South Africa), gender awareness (Yemen), gender empowerment (Jordan), and expression (Palestine). Part 3 (chapters 15-21), ‘ICT-enhanced relating and becoming: personal and social transformation’ explores the potential for ICTs to enable personal and social transformations through relational ties, community and local participation. The cases are drawn from Zambia, Sudan, Egypt, Uganda, and Cameroon and address the implication of ICTs for such diverse issues as

female sexual expression (Zambia), Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (Sudan), democratic participation (Cameroon), land tenure (Egypt) among others.

Methodologically, the general approach taken in the case research is referred to by the editor as “normative action research” which is “purpose-aligned” and “future oriented” and produces knowledge that would be ‘able to do things’, ‘to make things happen’ and “change people’s behavior and environments” (p.7, p.293). As such, the main research questions are not hypothesis driven or hermeneutic-interpretive, but rather, ‘how to’ questions (p.297). This approach is rooted in pragmatic action research (Coenen, 1987) as well as normative action research (Baburogul and Ravn, 1992), emancipatory action research (Buskens and Earl, 2008) and planning monitoring and evaluation method of ‘outcome mapping’ (Earl et al. 2001) (p.294).

Overall, the empirical account is fascinating and the aims of the research project worthwhile. Furthermore, aside development practitioners who will find the volume illuminating, the action research method will be eye opening for ICT4D scholars who are not used to this approach but may be keen to explore it in their own work. Despite these strengths, the book has drawbacks, chief among these being the brevity of the articles. Cramming 21 research articles into a 326-page book did not allow for sufficient treatment of the subject matter or related analytical and methodological issues in each of the articles. Given this limitation, it is hard to assess the rigor of the studies, even according to the volumes own criteria outlined in the methodology section, as there is not much exposition and analysis.

A substantive critique relates to the general assumption upon which the project is built, namely, that “ICTs can benefit women greatly and contribute to women’s empowerment and gender-equality endeavours” (p.7). This claim is reminiscent of what Orlikowski and Iacono (2001, p. 123) term the “tool view of technology”. They note that this view “represents the common, received wisdom about what technology is and means [...] the engineered artifact, expected to do what its designers intend it to do. As such, what the technology is and how it works are seen to be largely technical matters (separate, definable, unchanging, and over which humans have control).” Despite the currency of such ‘tool view’ among practitioners, the field of Information Systems has over the last few decades problematized it by insisting that technology is not independent of the social and organizational arrangements within which it is developed and used. As such, even in action research, rather than taking for granted the potential of ICTs for social and organizational change, some degree of skepticism might be in order.

Reference

Orlikowski, W.J. and Iacono, S.C. (2001) Research Commentary: Desperately Seeking the “IT” in IT Research- A Call to Theorizing the IT Artifact. *Information Systems Research*, 12, 2, 121-134.