

'I don't care about their reactions': agency and ICTs in women's empowerment in Afghanistan

Faheem Hussain and Sara N. Amin

Gender justice and women's empowerment are both an end and a goal of sustainable development, and ICT4D policies and monitoring needs to be informed by this understanding. This article draws on research from Afghanistan exploring how women's empowerment is conceptualized in relation to ICTs currently, and how ICTs are used in processes intended to support empowerment. Our research shows that women in Afghanistan have high hopes that ICTs will be enabling and empowering. Yet the majority of women's ICT activities do not realise that vision; with a few exceptions around women's health, ICTs usually only enable women to meet their existing needs, and do not enable them to challenge patriarchal power relations. According to our respondents, using ICT for purposes that challenge patriarchy – for example, using the Internet to learn about rights to divorce or citizen's rights, or sharing 'private' stories of abuse in social media spaces – has a high risk of social repercussions. We argue that these warnings and responses urge women to conform, and submit to control, and regulate women's interactions and movements. They limit women's choices, options, and power. However, some Afghan women in our research rejected these attempts to control and regulate - 'I don't care about their reactions'. This offers hope that for some individuals in some contexts, ICTs can put a dent in patriarchal power, supporting and furthering women's empowerment.

Keywords

ICT4D; Agency; Afghanistan; Women's empowerment; Gender.

Introduction

The post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have reinforced the importance of women's empowerment to sustainable development in Goal 5 – to 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg5>). Target 5b identifies Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a means in achieving this: 'Enhance the use of enabling technology, information and communication technology, to promote the empowerment of women' (ibid). In the different efforts made so far to put these words into operation, the focus has been on ensuring women's ownership of ICTs, especially mobilephones (UN Women 2015). While important, this emphasis on access to technology is important, it is not enough to define empowerment in relation to ICT (Bailur et al 2018). A focus on agency is also important.

In this article, we reflect on this, recall what the literature on women's empowerment tells us about agency, and offer findings from qualitative research into the impact of ICTs on women's lives in Kabul, Afghanistan. We focused on the older technologies of TV and radio in our research, alongside mobile phones and the Internet, to get a full range of information on all the sources of information available to respondents. We reasoned that the current interest in the new technologies that is widespread in development needs to be informed by knowledge about how mobiles and the internet are used, in the context of older technologies also, that are still significant in women's lives. The focus on just new ICTs may be creating a new divide and marginalizing women who may not be able to access new ICTs due to the infrastructure, patriarchal, and class issues.

Our study suggests that it is important to look at how ICTs of different kinds enhance women's agency, and in particular to understand that empowerment involves *transformative* agency (Kabeer 2005) – that

is, enabling women to challenge gender inequality. Our research is an effort towards figuring out new ways to evaluate the role of new ICTs in the gender equality agenda. If these ICTs are going to be effective tools in the empowerment of women, policymakers and practitioners need to evolve strategies that go beyond access, and beyond affordability, availability and awareness (the '4As' of the ICT4D agenda [Tongia, Subramanian, and Arunachalam 2005]), to agency.

Women's empowerment, agency, and control over resources

Empowerment is understood by feminists as a process of gaining agency – that is, gaining the ability to act on one's own behalf to further one's choices (Kabeer 2005). The empowerment processes that support a woman to gain agency involve changes at multiple levels (Stromquist 2002): a cognitive shift in which a critical understanding of one's reality is produced; a psychological shift where one's own self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence are enhanced; a political shift in which one becomes aware of both power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize collectively to effect change; and an economic shift, in which one is able to generate one's own income and own economic resources. However, empowerment is not only about individual change - it cannot occur without a change in societal power relations as well (Cornwall 2016).

Feminist understandings of power that understand this need for structural change as well as individual change have been written about extensively. Our research into the potential of ICTs for women's empowerment drew on various insights from feminist literature on power and empowerment. The literature tells us about 'power to' – individual agency. 'Power to' can be understood in terms of 'people's ability to make and act on their own life choices, even in the face of others' opposition' (Kabeer 2005, 14). Power to implies knowledge of oneself and the ability to be an active actor in one's own life (ibid). Agency can be passive or active, effective or transformative:

There is a distinction...between 'passive' forms of agency (action taken when there is little choice), and 'active' agency (purposeful behaviour). There is also a further important distinction between greater "effectiveness" of agency, and agency that is "transformative".

(ibid, 15).

'Effective' agency as Naila Kabeer understands it here relates to women's greater efficiency in carrying out their given roles and responsibilities. In contrast, 'transformative' agency is understood as women's ability to act on the restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenge them. These distinctions were important in the context of our analysis of ICTs and women's empowerment in Afghanistan, since we wanted to focus attention on the extent to which ICTs enhance women's ability to act transformatively.

Another key aspect of Naila Kabeer's account of women's empowerment is the importance of controlling the resources one needs to realise one's choices. In our thinking and research into the impact of ICTs on women's empowerment, ICTs are the resources that can expand agency. We find it helpful in this article to refer to having 'power over' those technologies. This contrasts with the more usual way feminist understandings of 'power over' have seen this as about controlling other people – in effect, using them as resources[1]

In our research into the empowerment potential of ICTs, the key issue for us was to consider how empowering access to ICTs can be. We understand expanding women's 'power to' requires them having 'power over' ICTs. It requires questioning whether women can use ICTs of different kinds to advance their economic, political, social, and physical (health, reproductive) interests both at home and outside. Ensuring that they are fit for purpose will require not only access to devices, but ensuring that these devices are appropriate for the purposes women need to put them to. This involves a focus on design and content which takes us far beyond questions of access.

Another key aspect of feminist visions of power is 'power-within' – self-confidence, critical consciousness and self-esteem – as gender inequality is socialized into both women and men as children, and hence awareness of it as an injustice cannot be assumed (Rowlands 1995). This points to the importance of examining how the kind of information acquired and communication conducted through the use of ICT impact on women's self-esteem, self-worth and self-efficacy. It also points to the possibility that - depending on both purpose of use and content - ICT can reinforce norms and self-conceptions that internalize women's subordinate position or challenge norms and self-conceptions, leading to critical awareness and questioning of one's position.

'Power with' is another very important component in feminist notions of empowerment. It focuses on collective action, from collective consciousness-building to ensure 'power within', to organisation for change. This dimension of feminist understandings of power refers to the scaling-up of 'power to' that comes when individuals band together through organization and movement-building. In relation to ICT and empowerment, looking at 'power with' would point to examining the extent to which women's access to - and use of - ICT facilitate feelings of solidarity, development of (new) support structures, and ability to act collectively to enact change in their lives and communities. Here, content and purpose again become important aspects to examine in relation to ICTs, going beyond the ownership and access issues.

This brief review of the concept of empowerment from a feminist perspective shows that while objective elements such as ownership, resources, and rights are central, relational and subjective elements are also critical in understanding what structures and practices need to be changed in facilitating women's empowerment. To summarise, it shows that if we consider these insights in relation to the potential role of ICTs in empowerment, questions about content, purpose and action in relation to ICT become important, and the question of access becomes an important first step, rather than the only goal.

ICTs and women's empowerment: a closer view at the 4As

It has been proposed that the value of ICT for a user depends on four interrelated features, the so-called 4As of ICT4D:

- Awareness—people must know what can be done with ICT and they must be open to using ICT;
- Availability—ICT must be offered with reasonable proximity, with appropriate hardware/software;
- Accessibility—relates to the ability to use the ICT, spanning literacy, e-literacy, language, interfaces, etc.;

- Affordability—All ICT usage together should, ideally, be only a few percent of one's income (under 10 per cent maximum on average); this covers life-cycle costs, spanning hardware, software, connectivity, education, etc.

(Tongia, Subramanian, and Arunachalam 2005, 29).

The same authors argue that 4As can potentially be enhanced through two processes: first, improving infrastructure, technologies and equipment which make ICTs cheaper, more user-friendly, locally relevant in terms of content, and safe; and second, increasing people's awareness of ICT options and their capacity to use them (ibid).

Women are increasingly gaining access to and ownership of ICT devices, and this is important in their empowerment processes. Clearly, though, much remains to be done to close the gender gap in access. Globally, women were still 14 per cent less likely than men to own a mobile phone (GSMA 2015, 44). In South Asia (including Afghanistan), the statistics were much worse: in the same 2015 statistics women are 38 per cent less likely to own a phone (ibid, 44). Women were also distinctly less likely to use the internet. Globally, women in developing countries are 16 per cent less likely to be online compared to men (ibid, 30).

However, a growth in female ICT users does not automatically imply significant changes in women's lives, their aspirations, social expectations of them, and the traditional socio-economic structures that shape gender relationships. Having better access does not necessarily mean ICTs will be empowering for women, as has been shown in research documenting online and mobile sexual harassment in Pakistan (Hassan, Urwin and Gudezi 2018). In fact, ICTs – like all technologies – are designed and used in social, economic and political contexts and cannot be assumed to be inherently benign or progressive. They are used in social settings where gender relations are unequal. Just a few examples of how ICTs are used within existing unequal gender power relations are:

- Men's use in Zambia of violence to control women's use of their mobiles (Wakunuma 2012).
- Men's greater likelihood of searching out health, reproductive and rights related issues online compared to women in India (World Wide Web Foundation 2015).
- Kenyan rural women face discrimination by male partners with allocation of screen time (Wyche and Olson 2018).

These examples show the constraints women face in exercising active and transformative agency, as well as highlighting the importance of building women's sense of 'power within' as a part of empowerment processes, and ensuring 'power with' – that is, the collective strength of women as a group – is available to support women who are facing violence and male backlash as they try to get online. Sarah Hossain and Melanie Beresford (2012) have argued that unless ICT4D programs' services and contents are customized in knowledge of these realities, so they reflect women's needs and the inequality they are experiencing, ICT4D initiatives will only make gender discrimination in the society worse. Currently, the 4As framework does not allow for the evaluation of whether, how and to what extent the use of ICT is empowering for women (Gurumurthy and Chami 2014). Discussions of 'successful' ICT-based women's empowerment models tend to focus mainly on 'access means empowerment' arguments (Bailur, Masiero, and Tachhi 2018), how ICTs can create or improve income-generating sources for women (Ndiaye 2013), and how information related to health and education are becoming available to women (Brown and Hussain 2016).

To ensure ICTs support women's empowerment, and support wider social justice goals, we need to move past the statistics on access and penetration rates, and need to probe more into the value ICT use brings in a society (Donner 2015). And to make ICT4D work for women, programmes need gender equality goals and should be informed by a thorough understanding of gender and power. We are not suggesting that a given ICT application needs to serve all aspects of empowerment. However, the argument that ICT access and use is empowering needs to be problematized, nuanced, and evaluated, in relation to the differing aspects of power and empowerment.

Gender issues, women's empowerment and ICTsin Afghanistan

By focusing on Afghanistan, we were able in our study to look at women's ICT practices within a socio-economic political context that is unstable, resource-constrained and socio-politically conservative and where women are experiencing both expansion of opportunities and entrenched resistances. It is a context in which ICT-related and gender policies are in the process of being (re-)formulated, and market penetration of ICT is increasing. Therefore, the study of Afghan women and their ICT usage gave us a unique opportunity to explore the promises and challenges of ICT as an empowerment enabler, outside traditional benchmarking processes.

In Afghanistan, there are clearly challenges to access and affordability of ICTs. The website ICTEye, which provides data and statistics on ICTs, reported that as of 2017, an estimated 67.4 per cent of the total population have a mobile telephone (see <https://www.itu.int/net4/itu-d/icteye/CountryProfile.aspx#AsiaPacific>, last checked 8 May 2018). 10.6 per cent of the Afghan population is using the Internet (ibid). In contrast, in 2014, only thirty-nine per cent of Afghan women reported using mobile phones, and only two per cent reported going online (The Asia Foundation n.d., cited in Equality for Peace and Democracy 2015, 62-3).

There is insufficient space here for a detailed analysis of the gender issues facing Afghanistan's women: however, a useful source with a review of different data can be found in Equality for Peace and Democracy's *Gender Report Card* (2015). Currently in Afghanistan, gender roles and relations are a stated priority focus for a very wide range of stakeholders, including women's rights activists and organisations working from local to national level. power-holders in formal institutions including the state, but also religious and community leaders, to a range of external powerful institutions and donors (Grau 2016). The many different stakeholders focusing on gender inequality in the country have varying views and analyses of gender issues in the country, and a range of strategies and policies are informed by different understandings of women's empowerment.

There is a new National ICT Policy for Afghanistan (2015-2024). While this does not have any specific section for addressing gender-related issues, it does mention the challenges women face due to ages old traditions and culture that prohibits them from using ICTs to their full potential, for communication, education, professional skill development, and other concerns. The policymakers propose the inclusion of more women in ICT related higher education and training centers. This policy furthermore envisions the presence of Afghan women in ICT oriented technical and management areas, both in public and private sectors (UN Women 2013). But given the high degree of gender inequality at lower levels of

education, this remains a very challenging task. Literacy rates of women remain at only 17 per cent of the total female Afghan population (Equality for Peace and Democracy 2015, 40).

Research aims and methods

The findings we discuss here are based on interviews with 97 individuals from 32 families (65 women and 33 men), in Kabul, Afghanistan. They come from a wider qualitative comparative study on the impact of women's education and employment on gender relations in the family in Afghanistan (N=97), Bangladesh (N=60), India (N=90) and Pakistan (N=54). Reflecting the focus on women's education in relation to ICTs outlined earlier, we included a set of questions in our semi-structured interviews relating to ICTs, and it is these findings we draw on here. All quotations given below come from these interviews.

The data collection was conducted in June-August 2014. Semi-structured interviews focused on frequency of ICT use, purpose, and ownership of devices – whether TV, radio, mobile phones or computers (in terms of both actual and practical ownership), and perceptions. Respondents were recruited through purposive snowball sampling (Creswell 2009). We aimed to have diversity in our sample in terms of ethnicity, age and social class, key characteristics associated with differentiating gender dynamics and attitudes in Afghanistan (Kabeer and Khan 2014). Given the larger study was focused on gender relations in the families where a woman had some form of education or work experience, we recruited three individuals from each family in the study: the woman and two other family members, usually one male and one female. Interviews were on average two hours long, and conducted in Dari [2] on a one-to-one basis in participants' homes. Interviewers were from Kabul themselves.

We anticipated that gender power relations in families would affect our sample. For example, during the recruitment process, sometimes even after a woman had agreed to participate, a male member (usually the husband) would ask her to withdraw her consent. At other moments, women would defer their consent to male members in the family, in which case, sometimes, men would agree to participate but would not want 'their women' to participate. These kinds of responses were the most common among conservative families of the Pashtun background. As a result, we think it likely our sample does not include the most conservative perspectives.

Another feature of our sample is that it had nearly half -42 per cent -Hazara participants. Hazara constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country. Hazara people have a reputation for more gender-egalitarian social relations than other ethnic groups in Afghanistan; they also have a history of being politically and economically marginalized (Kabeer and Khan 2014).

Among the respondents, 65 per cent of the women and 61 per cent of the men were married or widowed, and the others were unmarried. In terms of family structure, 47 per cent of respondents live in nuclear families, and 33 per cent in extended/joint families. The median age for our sample of women was 25-34, while for men it was 35-44. The different roles and relationships of respondents allowed us to explore how being in different positions in the family (for example, a mother compared to her unmarried sister) affects the perspectives and experiences of individual women (Amin et al, 2015). Our analysis is based on a sample that is more educated than average: see Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Analysing the findings

Interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed in Dari and then translated into English. Analytic categories and themes were developed through a mixed-method approach, where initial themes were derived from the literature and then Dari transcripts were re-read with these themes in mind. Then, new themes were added and existing themes modified as needed (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Agency at the point of access—who decides how ICTs are used?

As stated above, all the 97 participants who contributed to the findings we use in this article reported having access to either a mobile phone or a computer. Mobile telephone and TV were reported by our sample to be the most commonly used ICT service for both men and women, followed by the internet, and men were using all three more than women (see Figure 6). Like for male respondents, for most of our female respondents, ownership of the mobile phone and internet subscription was individual, while TV and computer were shared. According to a review of trends in radio and TV usage by Panjshiri (2016), use of radio has progressively diminished in Afghanistan and television is the most common broadcasting platform in Afghanistan, with 64 per cent of Afghans watching TV on a weekly basis, 87 per cent of Afghans with post-secondary education report watching TV, and ownership of TV in urban areas is at 90 per cent and 55 per cent in rural areas.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Women's experiences and attitudes, as well as men's perspectives, pointed to the constraints and limits women face in using ICTs in ways that can transform gender roles and relations – the 'transformative agency' that Naila Kabeer (2005) emphasizes as essential to empowerment. For some women, it was clear that they felt they had full control in deciding how and when they used ICT devices. For example, a woman teacher with a Bachelor's degree stated:

These mobile and computer are mine. I have not been seeing anyone telling me to stop using them

Reflecting patriarchal norms, respondents' experiences illustrated that in many homes, elders in the family, and usually the male head regulate decision-making about what content is consumed by different family members. This regulation was easily observable in relation to television, in a way that is less possible when it comes to hand-held devices. One woman in the 35-44 age group gave an account that showed gendered attitudes to current affairs as issues for men, not women or children:

If there is drama, both elders and children watch it. If there is my husband and all, they watch news but not us women. However, if there is hot news, we watch all together...mostly my husband and father-in-law.

(Interview, Kabul, 25 July 2014).

One woman, who is a school principal with a Masters degree and in her fifties, noted that it was her husband that decided what was watched on TV. This kind of control over access was not limited only to the TV. One father shared,

my sons mostly use computer and we each have phone, except girls because they don't need it.

Another male respondent aged between 25-34, who was a teacher married to another teacher, commented:

Men mostly have full control to use whatever (ICT tools) they want. In family, girls are allowed to use them (ICT) but ... they (women) are afraid to become part of the communication network.

This quote captures how structural advantage provided to men by patriarchy allows men to both access and use ICTs with greater agency than women. The issue of fear pointed out here in using ICTs is not an access question (Hassan, Unwin and Gardezi 2018). Women who potentially have access may actually choose not to use ICTs due to fear. If male disapproval in the family is strong, they may choose not to because of a desire to avoid male anger. For example, one young man shared that he faced pressure from his friends and neighbours to make his sisters stop using Facebook. He resisted because he felt ICTs (including social media):

...helps others to see the new images of Afghan women in the society.

These warnings, pressures on women to conform, and hostile reactions show the different ways that male family members try to control and regulate women's interactions and movements, and therefore their choices, options, power. However, women frequently shared sentiments indicating resistance – which in itself is evidence of transformative agency, challenging gender power relations. As one woman put it:

Now the whole world is familiar with technology and internet and we also need to know and learn. Through internet and TV programmes women get to know about their own basic rights, they will realize how men have to behave at home. It is good.

Another woman said:

My uncle says what do you do with computer? I mean he wants to say you are wasting your time and instead of that go and help your mother or sister in-law I usually says ok uncle but in fact I don't care about what he says...I don't pay attention, it is a normal thing to use technology so why there should be any reaction.

Another respondent, who is politically active, has contested an election, and has supported the education of her four daughters, stated:

My father-in-law always scolds me about why I let my daughters have personal cell phones and Facebook accounts. He has cousins who always say why [do] girls use Facebook...that is why my daughters make fake profile names on Facebook. They even say why [do] my girls use cell phones. My response always to

them is that my daughters use cell phones because we need to know where they are, and if sometimes they need to inform us about anything happening to them.

In this case, and in many others, security (understood in terms of being able to know where someone is), legitimized the use of mobile phones and social media against gendered norms. At the same time, insecurity (threats of harassment online/offline) also required the use of 'fake profile names'.

This question of security, freedom, and challenges to male surveillance that mobile phones offer is an interesting one from a gender perspective. In patriarchal families in Afghanistan, the idea of the *maharam* (the watchful and protective eyes of the male relative [Ganesh 2013]) - is key. The ability of a mobile phone to inform others about the location of the phone user potentially helps with this surveillance. If a phone user wishes to gain freedom from this watchfulness, this can be restrictive, but for a mother wanting to ensure the safety of her children (and potentially to justify giving daughters phones to create more freedom for them), the mobile phone can be presented as a positive technology with a protective function.

Our study also showed that while new ICTs are important, old ICTs like TV need to be paid attention to still in contexts like Afghanistan, when considering ICTs for women's empowerment. Women find the older technologies increase their agency by offering them access to information, and a focus only on the new ICTs risks creating a new divide and marginalizing women who may not be able to access new ICTs due to the infrastructure, patriarchal, and class issues. One woman pointed out:

For instance, for Afghan illiterate people, if they do not watch TV, how can they get to know the news and everything else? Every TV channel has programs in every national language like Pashtu, Dari, Uzbeki and English, so people can watch TV and understand everything they want to.

Agency after access: what are women doing with it?

Reflecting on their own practices and their awareness of ICTs, the women in our study had high hopes for ICTs (including mobile phones and online access) as enablers that had potential to empower them more and make their lives better. One married woman teacher in her late fifties, who has a high school education and whose ICT use is restricted to only owning a mobile phone, explained:

ICT can help women to better interact with the outside world... these facilities are so beneficial for women in our society because they do not have so much interaction with outside... using computer by women can help them to get better job... [Using ICT] women get new ideas. Sometimes they get to know of their rights.

However, the dominant message coming from our research participants is that ICTs enable women to be more effective in their existing gendered roles as wives and mothers. In sharing what women were using the internet for, the responses were focused on accessing cooking lessons, health care information and communicating with family members. Another highly educated female respondent belonging to an upper-middle class family in Kabul explained:

ICT is helping women, they can easily get information on how to raise children and how to behave and communicate with the children and some other information like this.

The older ICTs also offer the chance of relaxation in busy lives. In one Sunni Pashtun family, a 27-year old woman who had worked as a tailor and now has three children shared how she used the TV:

It is all about entertaining. Because we women do not have anything else to do at home other than doing family work.

(interview, Kabul, 19 July 2014).

Her sister-in-law, who is 30 years old, shared that she also uses the TV to watch cooking shows. Their 20-year-old niece, who lives with them watched Islamic programmes on TV and also talked about the benefit of cooking shows for women watching TV.

Clearly, supporting a woman to do her existing work more efficiently and confidently has its own worth and women clearly valued this as important to them – as well as valuing the recreational value of entertainment which enriched their lives. However, any claim that ICTs support women’s empowerment requires that they do much more than this. Another clear message that came through was that the information ICTs offer *is* potentially transformative, for example on women’s health, and they can also enable women to gain education. A Hazara female respondent who is head of the Gender Department in the Ministry of Survey and Geology, shared that she used Google and Youtube a lot. In addition she used her phone for communicating internationally:

The positive aspect, for example, without internet, it is too expensive to call outside Afghanistan, but with internet it is as cheap as I can even talk for 24 hours a day, because it is free. I can also find information from any part of the world or find information about my studies. This is the good part. Sometimes for psychological reasons, like if I have a headache, I can find the reasons on internet. This is the benefit of internet.

A minority of women reported that they use ICTs for purposes which do not align with patriarchal goals, such as learning about rights to divorce, issues of domestic violence, pursuing romantic relationships of one’s choice, and (re)presenting one’s body and identity in ways that do not conform to norms of modesty for women. The few respondents who did this (less than 10 percent of the total women respondents in this study), predominantly belonged to higher socio-economic groups. They highlighted the potential use of ICT to gain new work skills and to know as well as to better practise their rights. For example, according to a young woman who attended a private university, both new and older ICTs provide the opportunity to connect with the outside world, and inform her about women’s rights and also about the duties of men:

Now the whole world is familiar with technology and internet and we also need to know and learn. Through internet and TV programmes women get to know about their own basic rights, they will realize how men have to behave at home. It is good.

Another woman in her late 50s, noted:

these facilities are so beneficial for women in our society because women in our society do not have so much interaction with outside. Even if they have jobs, they are mostly in home or at work. By using these devices, they can increase their information.

While the group who used new ICTs in these ways was limited to those with higher education or from more affluent families, other women were aware of its potential to change society. One woman noted:

Social media can be used for bring social changes in the society....these technologies are needed for improvement and for sure they can help, but we need to learn to use them properly, ... if the young generation use it properly even fb can be a source of information and knowledge, so many social changes can start with help of social media".

Taking agency seriously when evaluating ICTs and empowerment: the importance of content and purpose

In this section, we consider the implications of our findings, to develop our argument that agency needs to become central in the analysis of ICT for women's empowerment. This would encourage a focus beyond access, to a consideration of how Afghan women are using ICTs for effective and transformative agency, and what ICTs really mean to them in the context of their struggles for empowerment.

To evaluate whether awareness and accessibility (including issues of affordability and availability) of ICTs translate into transformative agency, we have to look at what they are being used for—and in particular whether this reinforces or challenges traditional gender roles and norms.

As discussed above, the dominant narrative among both women and men about women's use of ICTs is that it enhances women's ability to be more effective in fulfilling their traditional gender roles. Women using ICTs – whether new technologies or older ones, including television - to improve their cooking is an example of this. And as discussed, while these uses are entertaining and may enhance women's ability to meet their obligations within existing gender power relations, this is not transformative and will not lead to an overall improvement in gender power relations in families or wider society. When looking at the ways women are using ICTs, it is important that the empowerment potential of this is evaluated with attention to the extent that this benefits the woman herself as an individual, or as a wife and mother. For example, we should also be asking to what extent women are utilizing the health information as mothers to improve the health of their family, or are they also using it to gain more control over their own bodies and improve their own health, including their reproductive health?

It is important to understand how use of ICTs, and choice of content, may be structured by traditional gender norms that privilege male members in the family. In our data, when women have unregulated access, they are mainly watching serials and entertainment, much of which usually tends to reinforce traditional gender norms rather than challenge it. Therefore, again, to evaluate the extent to which empowerment is facilitated by a given ICT, it is important to go beyond access and also examine how is it being used, and its correlate—why is it being used that way. Why are women generally watching content that focuses on cookery or entertainment more, and men consuming sports and news? Sociological research has shown that both gender socialization processes impact significantly on our

media consumption and that most entertainment media tend to reinforce the status quo in power structures rather than challenge it (Saito 2007; Emons, Wester and Scheepers 2010).

In an assessment for what works to support women's empowerment, Andrea Cornwall (2016) points to the importance of creating popular culture content that challenge patriarchal gendered norms. Development policymaking and planning around gender and ICTs need to take into consideration these insights and recognize the importance of challenging gendered social norms and the gender division of labour and responsibility, promoting greater consumption of non-traditional content – away from domestic concerns and the 'private' sphere, and towards issues seen as male, concerning public life, leadership and politics. Research and monitoring into ICTs and women's empowerment need to examine the content available, the gendered ways in which it is marked and promoted to audiences, and women's and girls' choices about content.

Mobile phone use also needs consideration from the point of view of women's empowerment. How do women use them? If communications are only facilitating women's ability to communicate in and develop their relationships in the family, the potential of ICT to facilitate political empowerment and create solidarity in producing change remains untapped. A review of how uses of mobile phones are gendered shows that women tend to spend more time on social networks, making purchases online and e-mail (Gurumurthy and Chami 2014). A framework that emphasizes agency of women in the analysis of ICT for women's empowerment would need to go deeper by interrogating the structure of these social networks. We need to ask questions such as the following:

- Do they affirm women's self-worth?
- Do they critically facilitate gender consciousness, and support women's ability to change their lives? or
- Do they limit women's communication to family, regulate their behavior and reinforce traditional gender roles?

There is ample evidence that ICT can enable self-expression, the creation of new relationships and communities and new options for how women can escape violence. However, none of these potentials are inherent and inevitable to ICT. What kind of agency can we speak of when women have to take on false identities or hide their use of ICT to be safe when using ICTs? Do women experience increased insecurity or even violence as a result of their use of ICT? Or do they curb their open ICT use in order to avoid repercussion from their male counterparts, thus restricting or curtailing their agency (Masika and Bailur 2015)?

Conclusion

Our research shows that while women in Afghanistan have started using ICTs, the impact of this on their daily lives, and on gender power relations within families and households, requires active monitoring that draws on feminist insights into agency and power. Evaluating the content and purpose of ICT use is not value-neutral; it is a political act. We need to understand women's ICT use in relation to questions of change (is it changing their self-worth, is it expanding their choices beyond dominant gender roles, is it changing the networks of women's support, is it facilitating women to change the relations they are

embedded in), in order to ensure that the potential for ICTs to contribute to women's empowerment is fully met.

Notes

[1] There is an important distinction here between 'power to' as expanding agency in a positive way, and 'power over', which – when considering power over *people* - is seen in the literature as making others do according to one's will even in the face of resistance, and *power to* which emphasizes the idea of being able to act on one's choices even in the face of resistance. Thus, *power over* implicates control and domination over others and the removing of agency of others.

[2] Dari and Pashto are both the official languages of Afghanistan and Dari is more widely spoken (80%) and across the diverse ethnic groups in the country. (CIA World Factbook, 2017, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>, last checked by author 7 May 2018).

[3] This evidence of male decision-making is interesting since research on gender equality has shown evidence that education and employment can often produce more decision-making for women in the family – a key reason why development donors often focus on 'economic empowerment' as a goal, reasoning that it will bring changes in political and social power also. In addition, patriarchal societies seem to provide some increased decision-making power for older women in the family (Kandiyoti 1988).

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Notes on authors

PLEASE ADD – your names, current occupations, emails and a postal address for one of you – thanks!

Dr. Faheem Hussain

Faculty, School for the Future of Innovation in Society, Arizona State University

faheem.hussain@asu.edu

Postal Address:

School for the Future of Innovation in Society

Arizona State University

PO Box 875603

Tempe, AZ 85287-5603, USA

Dr. Sara N. Amin

Lecturer and Discipline Coordinator of Sociology

School of Social sciences
 Faculty of Arts, Law and Education
 The University of the South Pacific
 sara.amin@usp.ac.fj

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