

WOMEN AND ICT IN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

**CHANGING SELVES,
CHANGING SOCIETIES**

**EDITED BY
INEKE BUSKENS
AND ANNE WEBB**



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About the editors

Ineke Buskens works internationally as an independent research, facilitation and gender consultant and has published on qualitative and emancipatory research methodology; women's health and HIV/AIDS; gender and information communication technology; and open development. Ineke was head of the Centre for Research Methodology at the Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, from 1991 to 1996, where she designed and facilitated South Africa's first experientially based, qualitative research education modules and provided some of the first opportunities for social science researchers of different ethnic backgrounds to learn together. Ineke has been the GRACE Network's research director and project leader since its inception in 2004 and this has been the highlight of her career so far.

Anne Webb focuses on the design and coordination of qualitative research and learning processes to address and reduce gender inequality in Canada and internationally. To this end she has been working with communities and research teams for over twenty years, involving people from many walks of life and locations in Canada, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Anne's approach to feminist qualitative research brings together elements of participatory action research, socio-economic analysis and critical self-awareness. She is currently designing and coordinating a two-year multi-country research and learning process. From 2005 to 2013 she was the research coordinator of GRACE.

More praise for *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East*

'In this welcome addition to the growing literature in the field of women, development and ICT, a range of case studies elucidate both the emancipatory nature of ICT and the formidable structural and cultural obstacles that remain.'

(Valentine M. Moghadam, Northeastern University)

'This is a rich, challenging and rewarding read for anyone interested in better understanding the role of ICT in women's empowerment. This book offers reasons to be optimistic about the transformative potential of ICT without losing sight of the power structures in which they are embedded.'

(Martin Scott, author of *Media and Development*)

Foreword

The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them. (Einstein)

We've all had that 'ah-ha' moment when suddenly things become a whole lot clearer. It is as if a veil has been lifted and we are seeing the world with new eyes. Sometimes it is as if the world itself, and our position in it, are forever changed.

Such insights come only when we are ready for them. This is a natural part of the process of human growth. Only when we are mature enough do we begin to see our parents as humans with their strengths and weaknesses. And, as Steven Covey explains in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, only after we have become truly independent beings can we begin to accept and take advantage of the reality of our interdependence.

This book is the end product of a long journey that has intertwined research and personal growth. The research and methodologies in this book were made possible by the experiences from the first GRACE Network, which cumulated in the path-breaking book *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment*. Each step along the way since then not only saw a deepening of the substantive knowledge of the interaction between gender and information and communication technologies (ICTs) (first in Africa, later to be expanded to the Middle East) but was equally a process of deepening self-awareness for all involved.

In a world where the subjugation of women isn't always disturbingly blatant, but rather exceedingly subtle and hidden from our day-to-day consciousness, buried under layers of deep-seated, calcified assumptions and identities, researchers have to be able to bring these subtleties into consciousness. Only then is it possible for those researchers to do justice to the lived realities of research respondents and researcher-selves, both from an empirical and from an engagement-for-change perspective. As this book clearly reveals, research then becomes as much an empirical examination of the external world as an internal process of self-reflection.

But the unique methodological approach applied by the researchers in this book is not just a contribution to ICT for development (ICT4D) or ICTs and gender research; rather it is applicable to research for development writ large. It is a means and process that provides researchers with the tools to counteract deeply ingrained biases, and helps keep them aligned with their ultimate purpose of making the world a better place. This coherence is critical – otherwise we increase our risk of being unwitting participants in or even contributors to the social injustices that we seek to overcome.

Humanity is pressed with deep and systemic challenges: poverty, climate change, pervasive inequality. To address these challenges, Einstein's proverb is more relevant than ever. Changing our level of thinking, however, is not easy – but it is possible. What the experiences within this book teach us is that, if we want to change our level of thinking in order to solve a problem, perhaps we should first seek to change our level of being.

Matthew L. Smith

International Development Research Centre

4 October 2013

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We also want to thank our partners, families and friends who kept the home fires burning (sometimes even financially) when we were elsewhere writing or travelling, bringing home sometimes disturbing thoughts and experiences, and drawing our inner circles into our cauldron of change. Thank you for standing by us, for being the sounding boards we needed, for staying with us and changing with us.

Working with the women and men who shared thoughts, emotions, experiences and perspectives with us has been an absolute privilege and honour. Thank you for sharing and collaborating with us. We hope that we have been able to do justice to you and to your sharings, and that the changes our projects have already set in motion and may further effect in the future, will bring benefit to all of you.

As a network of twenty-two teams (twenty-one research teams and the coordinating team) spread over fifteen countries, so many individuals, organizations and institutions have helped us along the way that it would be impossible to mention them all. We appreciate you and your support deeply. We hope that the bonds of collaboration that were forged and strengthened in and through this work will make other good work possible in the future.

We also want to thank ourselves and each other for our focus, patience and tenacity as researchers and for staying with our knowledge quests until we reached satisfactory levels of insight. Even though this research discipline at times took all that we had and all that we were, this book stands as evidence that surrender to a knowledge quest yields rewards commensurate with commitment. Lastly, whilst this book represents a temporary closure in our work, we are satisfied with this outcome and will gladly welcome any feedback that will contribute to our ongoing journeys of learning and becoming.

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Introduction

INEKE BUSKENS

The time and space we live in

With this book on women, gender and information communication technology (ICT) in Africa and the Middle East we, as the Gender Research in Africa and the Middle East into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) Network, are, for the time being, concluding our work as a research network, which has focused on the nexus between women's empowerment and ICT since 2004. The twenty-one research projects conducted in fourteen countries that are the ground from which this book has emerged were conducted in the period 2008–12, a period that presented both great opportunities and great challenges, not only for ourselves and our research associates and respondents but also for people across the globe.

Our time is the era of the networked society, of the information or knowledge society. GRACE, as a network, would not even have existed without the technology that allowed us to connect when we wanted to and share what we needed to. ICT is enabling effortless and almost instantaneous sharing and is making scientific collaboration and therefore the scientific enterprise as a whole exponentially more exciting and effective.

Furthermore, many resources (books, articles) have become available for free download from the Internet, making it possible for scholars and activists from the Global South, such as ourselves, situated in areas or countries sometimes without access to well-stocked libraries and bookstores, to become acquainted with and hence participate in recent thinking and debates.

And yet this time is also one of rising inequality, of crises, wars and disasters (Ryan-Collins et al. 2009; Cohen 2012). In our particular regions we experienced revolutions, sectarian violence and civil war and ongoing occupation.¹ Globally the scramble for the natural resources that are needed to sustain our 'modern' way of life has created unprecedented destruction of social and natural habitats. How unsustainable our 'developed' and now increasingly global way of life actually is has become painfully clear over the past few years. As Naomi Klein (2011) put it: 'The new normal is serial disasters: ecological and economic.'

As the place where many of the resources coveted by the 'developed' North are located, the global South has had more than its fair share of the fall-out of this scramble. Minerals, oil, agricultural produce, currencies (Jabbar 2013) and human talent continue to be extracted from southern lands, facilitated by civil war and unrest, by slave labour prices and practices and by the crippling debts that participation in the global financial system has created for many countries in the South.

Increased liberalization and expansion of international trade, which occurred in the aftermath of the Cold War, has exacerbated the level and intensity of conflicts in resource-rich African countries to such a degree that there is indeed reason to speak of 'the resource curse'. The minerals that are essential for the production of ICT electronics, such as mobile phones, laptops and MP3 players, are, to a large degree, extracted from the Congo. Called 'conflict minerals', coltan,² cassiterite, wolframite and gold have thus prompted renewed debate around the tension between African national sovereignty and property rights reform on the one hand and the transnational governance of minerals on the other (see Gorilla Organization 2008).

While e-resources travel from the South to the North, e-waste has started to travel more and more from the North to the South (see Greenpeace 2009). One of the new hotspots for this dumping is Accra, Ghana, where the way in which the waste is processed presents grave health risks for the people handling it.³ The irony is, of course, that the people who mine the minerals and process the waste, while probably happy with the fact that this provides them with a livelihood, are not in the position to really make full and empowered use of the technology that is created and disposed of by their work.

Although the above just touches the surface of the way power (economic and financial) and ICT can intersect in our globalized world, it may help to sketch the contours of the complex dilemmas facing scholars in development studies in general and ICT for development (ICT4D) in particular (Gurumurthy et al. 2009), especially when they are from the global South, as we are. Acknowledging how the current neoliberal global economic and financial systems are causing pervasive damage to our ecosystems and endangering the well-being of so many people especially in the South, we had to carefully examine how to think about the way we worked. While focusing on development as freedom (Sen 1999) and realizing the powerful and empowering experience and manifestation of individual choice (Kleine 2013), we had to acknowledge both the constraints and enablers that were our respondents' realities in a profoundly sexist and deeply unjust globalizing world (O'Hearn 2009). The following questions presented themselves to us:

- Will it be possible to turn ICT into a force for the good for the developing world, or will ICT, despite its tremendous capacity for connection, sharing, mobilization, communication and education, only increase the already growing inequalities between rich and poor nations, organizations and individuals?
- Since ICT has become an inseparable part of our human, social and economic life, how might ICT as space, as way of life, as technology and as science be influenced and formed by notions of social justice and sustainability?

Summing it up for us was the question: 'What value systems should guide us and how should we be guided by those values?' In the broadest sense, the GRACE research vision is aligned with a world where all people are free, a world that is grounded in social justice and sustainability. The question of how this almost trans-personal and transcendental vision should guide the research had to be answered and realized by each researcher individually. The researchers did not align their projects to this purpose in the sense of action steps that would lead to this goal in a linear progression. The overall vision functioned rather as a 'true north', a magnet that would influence decisions on all matters of research choice.

Research for the purpose of social transformation

Since it was imperative to bring what we were envisioning, planning, designing and conducting in line with a loving, just and sustainable world, we needed to develop our capacity for ethical agency and learn how to bring this to bear on both research purposes and processes (Van der Velden 2008). In the first GRACE phase (2005–08), researchers' agency was also important, but more as a methodological asset in the sense that being in touch with one's own agency sensitizes one to understanding respondents' capacities, opportunities and hindrances for agency better; this was the overall purpose of this phase (Buskens 2009, 2010).

Within this second phase, which started in 2008, after the completion of the first book, *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment*, the research projects were grounded in intentional purpose-aligned thinking on various levels (Buskens 2011b, 2013). Researchers would formulate not only a research question but also three social change purposes that they would love to see their project contribute to: one that was specific for their project, one for their region and one for the project as a whole. This purpose-aligned thinking strengthened their conative, intentional mental capacity (Huitt and Cain 2005; Huitt

2007) and helped them to become cognizant of their own agency in relation to their own aspirations and environmental conditions and learn how to develop it.

The researchers chose their individual project purposes for strategic reasons in relation to the most prevalent forms of gender inequality in their country, and on the basis of personal research interests and/or methodological or theoretical strengths. The overall GRACE Network purpose was 'women's empowerment through ICT'; the regional purpose for the Africa group was 'the transformation of Africa in the sense of Africa taking its dignity back' and the regional purpose for the Middle Eastern group was 'to see women thrive and flourish'. The vision of a better world for all bound these purposes together.

While this purpose-aligned research approach was innovative in its ontological and epistemological aspects and normative in its alignment with the various levels of values the researchers embraced, methodologically the projects followed traditional protocols and quality criteria that were appropriate for the respective methods and techniques. The studies included quantitative approaches, mixtures of quantitative and qualitative methods, qualitative descriptive research (sometimes with participant observation), collaborative inquiry, participatory action research and normative action research processes. In terms of research participants, some researchers worked with academic groups, some with professionals, some with unskilled/semi-skilled women and some with mixed groups. The research methodology and research-capacity-building methodology that formed and informed the knowledge-construction processes that ground this book are further explored in Chapter 22.

Gender and ICT4D research: conforming, reforming and transforming

The approach we have chosen to work with in the field of gender and ICT4D is by no means the only one. Taking as a point of departure the view-points of researcher perspectives, both on gender relations and on the socioeconomic-political-religious structures that support them, combined with researcher intentionalities regarding the social change they want their research efforts to contribute to, presents us with the distinction between conformist, reformist and transformist gender research approaches (Buskens 2014). Although all three stances will result in projects that bring about personal and social change, they do so in very different ways and the ultimate effects will also be very different.

In assisting women to conform to existing gender relations and society as it is, researchers will inevitably contribute to maintaining and

strengthening the status quo. Reformers want to see measures taken to address gender inequality through education and various policies but without directly challenging the existing societal and economic context. In a sense, reformers will also contribute to maintaining the status quo, although reformed gender relations can lead to profound changes in society, as can be witnessed in advanced economies in the Global North. Transformers, on the other hand, want to see society transformed in all its aspects since they see systemic gender biases not only as problems in themselves but also as symptoms of a deeper problem plaguing human societies (Jain and Elson 2010, 2011). Transformers will thus want to address in and through their research the underlying reasons that society has always and almost everywhere been a non-level playing field for women (Buskens 2015).

Transformation has been the leading thought in efforts towards gender-mainstreaming of policies and regulations. Indications are, however, that gender-mainstreaming has failed as a strategy towards effective and sustainable change towards gender equality and women's empowerment in development interventions (Brouwers 2013). Transformation in the form of gender-mainstreaming could theoretically also inform research processes, but, given the fact that the most important research instrument remains the researcher's own mindset and that all environments and cultures are still sexist to various degrees (Eichler 1991), gender-mainstreaming efforts that would focus on conceptual and procedural research design and process decisions while excluding the persons of the researchers would probably have limited success. The most successful approach towards transformation as a strategy for gender equality in development research in general and ICT4D research in particular would be one where researchers engage transformation of their own gendered selves in and through their research processes.

The process of transformation in and through development research thus differs qualitatively from the processes of conformation and reformation for all stakeholders. In processes of transformation, personal and social change are on the agenda for everyone: in critiquing received values and identities crafted in response to environments that are grounded in and constitute such values and identities, personal change will bring about social change and social change will affect the sphere of the personal. Since research with the purpose of transformation will inevitably affect researcher selves (to the degree and depth that they allow this), a 'methodology of the personal' will thus have to be integrated into research design, research processes and capacity-development. These dynamics are further explored in Chapter 22.

Researching for or researching with?

In her study 'Designing for trauma: the roles of ICTD in combating violence against women', Sarah Revi Sterling brings to the fore the dilemma of design for women's empowerment in a sexist world: 'we are designing for criminal events that should not happen to anyone, but do' (Sterling 2013: 160). Questioning the feasibility of participatory design (how to design with rapists and rape victims?), Sterling problematizes design that presupposes that there is such a thing as a typical rape or attack: 'What does prototyping entail when there is no archetypal attacker – but there are cultural patterns of movement and behaviour in each community, as well as regional and local discourses of sexuality and violence?' (2013: 160).

In raising the question whether it would be possible to design in an iterative, participatory way for a rape-prevention technology, Sterling distinguishes between intended design impact and preferred design methodology. This is a crucial distinction that can be made in the field of ICT4D research in general. Although there is a definite resonance between knowledge interests and research approaches,⁴ they cannot be equated. However, since participatory design processes are (when conducted well) often experienced as intrinsically empowering, it is possible that designing with is perceived as more transformatory than designing for. In the efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment, however, this is not necessarily the case (Buskens 2015).

Women's adaptive preferences (Nussbaum 2000) – the ways they have learnt to live with and think in terms of a discriminatory reality – and the ways gender relations and technology socially co-construct each other (Wacjman 2009), could even make women co-researchers agents of their own disempowerment. Especially in participatory approaches, it will thus be important for women to develop next to their capacity for critical agency (Sen 2001) and critical voice (Buskens 2011a) their capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004). When normative action research design is infused with researchers' perspectives and intentionalities, aligned with gender equality and women's empowerment, and grounded in the possibility for dialogue (Smaling 1995, 2008), it can be more transformatory in process and impact than participatory action research, where the knowledge quest is led and defined by women respondents and researchers adapting to such without questioning or dialogue.

This book

In our first book, *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment*, the authors described how they had witnessed