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Empowerment of Women Through ICTs in the Muslim World

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is focused on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits. In this article the subject will be argued by presenting examples from several Muslim communities.

KEYWORDS: *ICTs, Muslim women, Empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

The first person to convert to Islam, back in the 7th century, was a wealthy businesswoman named Khadijah. She was also the wife of Mohammed, the founder of Islam. Mohammed is said to have encouraged women to participate actively in business, community decision-making, some say even combat. However, Samer Hathout, co-founder of the Muslim Women's League in Los Angeles, says today: "*Muslim women don't necessarily have the same status Mohammed granted those centuries ago. Women, she says, suffer from centuries of misinterpretation of Islamic tradition. But these ideas are being challenged on the Internet. The Muslim Women's League Web site posts background articles analyzing women's inheritance, marriage, divorce and political rights under Islamic law and tradition*". Muslims in the New World Order are confronted as the "new enemy" which according to Poole (2001) has resulted in religious identifications on the basis of world-wide inequalities. Islam is generally viewed through Western eyes, as static, traditional, anti-modern, and misogynistic and Muslim women are obscured by stereotyped representations (Nourai-Simone 2005)

The term "digital divide" refers to the differences in resources and capabilities to access and effectively utilize ICTs for development that exists within and between countries, regions, sectors, and socio-economic groups (Marcelle2000). When describing the term "digital divide", which according to Hafkin (2002) is actually several gaps in one, characteristics such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, education, income, geographic location, English-language ability, and physical and cognitive disability have to be considered (NTIA 1995). These inequities are more pronounced for women in general, for women from developing countries in particular (Gurumurthy 2004) and commonly find in high rates in the Muslim world.

Finally, as the authors of this article live in Greek Thrace where a minority of

Muslim people resides also there, their interest to investigate the connection of women of this community to ICTs has been high and was also the motive for their recent researches on this subject (Georgiadou et al. 2007a,b)

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The rural women agricultural producers in **Senegal** were provided cell phones with Web Access Protocol, thereby extending their access to the Internet. This technology helped women obtain information about market prices of the inputs for their food processing activities and for the sale of their produce. Women in the project appreciated the economic benefits of the technology (U.N. 2005).

At two villages of **Morocco**, rural women, mostly illiterate, sell the rugs and other textiles they weave, on the Internet, and this provides a solution to the perennial problem of marketing their products (Schaefer Davis 2004).

At **Bangladesh** the “Pallitathya Help-Line” project is based on an original communication system adapted to the needs of rural populations with scarce access to information about health, education, legal procedures or administrative hassles (APC News b).

At **Malaysia** the e-Homemakers portal a web-site programme, meant to provide management skills to run a home business, is set up. It contains valuable information in how to coming up with a business plan or registration requirements with the government (APC News a).

The “Putting ICTs in the Hands of the Poor” runner-up project is developed by the Seelampur Community ICT Centre in **India**, inside a “madrassa”. It is designed to encourage livelihood skills among women through vocational CDs, providing computer skills training, and developing linkages for marketing women’s traditional arts and crafts products (APC News a).

The **Jordanian** experiment “Netcorp Jordan” (women constituted more than 60% of the participants) helps build an ICT skilled workforce. Jordan has one of the lowest figures for women in the work force in the Arab World at 21%. The program manages to encourage entrepreneurship, voluntarism and benefit of life skills in order to shape a better future for the participants. Women especially demonstrated skill in training others in ICT (Wheeler 2006b).

VFH (The Voice for Humanity’s) distributed 41,000 solar-powered digital audio players, (called Sada), half pink-colored to women and half silver colored to men. The Sada content, produced in **Afghanistan** by Afghans, consisted of 15 hours of civic education material that promotes peace, national unity, democracy, civic engagement in the parliamentary election, human and women’s rights and relates rural development and health issues. Some of the project’s results are: women voted in the elections, women joined the work force (e.g. tailoring), women decided to educate their children, especially girls, increased decision-making regarding marriage for girls (Sengupta A. et al. 2007).

When women students in **Bangladesh** faced administrative inaction in response to increasing instances of campus rape, they publicized their situation on the Internet. The resulting international and national response pressured the university administration to conduct an inquiry (Alauddin et al.2006).

At **Kuwait** a sit-in was organized in late July 2000 by Kuwait University students to protest the new gender law which would divide the campuses along gender lines. One of the leaders of the protest, a young woman, noted that the 'non-aligned' student opposition movement intended to use the Internet to alert the world media and human rights organizations about their protest and about the ways in which the gender law violated women's rights in Kuwait (Wheeler 2001)

The Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) for rights, development and peace implemented an eight-week **Persian** online distance learning course on developing participatory leadership skills for women's rights activists in Iran. What emerged from the course discussions and activities is a collective concern and commitment for the restoration of the rights and freedoms of Iranian women by preparing women in their communities to realize their potential and participate equally in society (WLP 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

In the past century and the new one, marked by globalization and technology advancement, it is obvious that ICTs affect the social and economic structures and expand women's choices. The results of the projects described above can be used for planning actions for the Muslim women in Greek Thrace in order to improve women's lives and consequently the status of the Muslim minority.

ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. Women's empowerment is focused on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits (U.N. 2005). For computer literate women, ICTs contribute in terms of reducing poverty, economic empowerment, overcoming isolation, providing a voice of expression, accessing to education, training and employment opportunities, health, nutrition, religion and other human development opportunities, such as political participation, promoting voluntarism. Access to ICT can enable women to gain a stronger voice in their communities, their government and at the global level, to promote women's human rights, to share ideas on organizing, leadership, and self-determination.

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