Open Learning Communities for Development: Revisiting the Gender Dimensions

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge systems are undergoing a meaningful shift beyond service provision to shaping a new landscape of learning opportunities. The transition from conventional telecentres to knowledge centres should create "diverse, layered, interconnected open learning communities". Ariyabandu (2009) described the transformation of conventional telecentres into more development-oriented knowledge networks for improving livelihoods and attaining sustainable development. Knowledge hubs are emerging as the intermediaries between telecentres and knowledge networks.

The undoubted potential of open learning communities must be viewed in the light of the reality of gender-based inequalities. Schnuttgen (1997) identified some notions of open learning communities (OLCs) indicating shifts towards gender-aware learning systems with learning as relationship building. Revisiting the gender dimensions will enable practitioners to bridge the gender divide which superimposes itself additively on the existing 'digital divide". Kanwar (2007) emphasizes that the digital divide is also a gender divide as evident from the differential access to and use of ICTs. Hafkin & Taggert (2001) have highlighted the fact that most women in developing countries sink into the deepest part of the digital divide. Women are further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share. As Gurumurthy (2006) suggests, the fundamental issue in reaching poor women is creating a set of technology-mediated services and products that allow women to be part of emerging opportunities.

Although learning may enable mobility, new alignments and identifications, a contrasting reality suggests that women may not be able to fully exercise choice. Open learning communities cannot succeed unless they acknowledge and celebrate differences, seeking to create and construct pluralistic environments which promote and foster these differences (Jain 1997). Conceptual models which emphasize notions of co-evolution (learning and changing together) and partnership between open learning communities (OLCs) need to be developed and expanded.

RECREATING AND RESHAPING SPACES AND RESOURCES FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER EQUITY

Documented experiences of telecentres from Ghana, Mozambique, Lesotho, Uganda and South Africa (Latchem & Walker 2001) discuss limitations and constraints while illustrating their potential for distance learning applications. The Common Service Centres being set up across India are a major contribution to bridging the digital divide with the Government rolling out 83,569 centres in rural India (CSC-India 2010). The IGNOU community college experience lends itself to creation of a well-organized network of open learning communities already engaged in provision of ODL in India at the grassroots.

Barriers encountered by women in accessing telecentres have been widely studied across Africa and Asia (Islam & Hasan 2009, UNCTAD 2007, CSDMS 2008, Gurumurthy 2006,Green & Trevor-Deutsch 2002, Hafkin & Taggart 2001).

Based on extensive research and experiences documented of the gender divide, a gender analysis framework can be developed. Some of the key questions which need to be asked, answered and addressed include:

1. Who occupies, owns and controls the physical space, virtual space or mindspace? Can women explore, share and grow in a "safe", non-threatening space?
2. What are the text, sub-text and context?
   - How is knowledge discovered and meaning created? Are women consulted as repositories of knowledge? Is their indigenous knowledge valued? Are they involved in collating the knowledge and enabled to socially appropriate the process of meaning creation? Do men contribute to this process?
   - Is the knowledge freely shared and modified by individual women in groups? Are the women free to interact with men in public spaces or are the spaces "women-only" and "outsider-proof"?
   - What are the implications of content construction? Does the content propagate gender stereotypes/ biases? Does it promote positive imagery and representation?
   - Do women have the freedom to search for creative alternatives, authenticity and voice?
   - Is the learning environment situated and pluralistic redefining context, texture and motivation?
   - Are there opportunities for learning together – building social relationships, negotiating differences, resolving conflicts?
   - Is the content open? Free or paid? Who owns it? Who uses it? Who disseminates it? Women, men or both? Alternatively, are these functions performed by NGOs or government agencies?
   - Are information intermediaries involved to translate and interpret content? Are they local women or adolescent girls?
   - Do women engage with knowledge building or are they merely recipients of information?
   - Which content is relevant for women or men or both women and men? Is content gender disaggregated according to need?
   - Is the learning relevant to regional/local/individual context? Are the applications, creation and repackaging of knowledge and information sensitive to local gender relations? Is it gender-neutral, gender-specific or gender-transformative?
   - Does the community use its embedded potential to challenge or alter existing norms and knowledge bases?
   - How can women themselves facilitate meaningful, gender-aware, inter-generational, cross-cultural interactions within and across communities?
   - Are women trained to manage fluid open systems in perpetual flux? Can they promote creation of new communities, link and connect them?
   - What are the learning tools employed? Are these accessible for women? What is their cost?
   - How can individual and group-held cognitive social capital be expanded? Do women form and sustain self-help groups and women's organizations for planning and action? Are these organizations mobilized to become codified learning centres?
   - How can the informal and formal knowledge environment be linked in learning networks?
   - How can distance learning be used as an instrument for addressing relationships and linkages in favour of women's active participation?

Roman & Colle (2002) highlight the challenge of involving poor women in the use of ICTs, helping them participate in telecentres in India. Intermediaries can act as "catalysts" and "gatekeepers". In India, women's self-help groups have been identified by Roman & Colle (2002) as preferred

village level collectives which can act as intermediaries. Advantages of SHGs include gender-sensitivity, participatory processes, cost-effectiveness and engagements with the grassroots. Training of SHG representatives to use ICTs with training material built around microenterprise management could be useful. Four roles of the SHG representative were envisaged: information source; groups' and individuals' liaison with the telecentre; trainer for informal ICT peer training within groups and most significantly facilitator for distance and self-learning programmes for the SHG or its individual members.

There is evidence from other countries to support the role of community infomediaries as the linkage between individuals and the knowledge and content available through ICTs (UNCTAD 2007). School girls from the local communities who generally learn computer skills rapidly could be trained to serve as infomediaries for the older women.

Jorge (2007) advocates an active effort to consider the disparate needs of women and men in the communities served by telecentres. Different user groups may need to develop different training curriculum. She suggests providing women-specific or gender-aware programmes such as literacy projects, ICT training, e-commerce initiatives and women's health information projects. She reports that experiences from telecentres across the world suggest that women are more comfortable with women-trainers and in some cases, more comfortable in women-only training environments. Policy options should encourage ownership and management of telecentres by women (UNESCAP 2008). Few women are producers of IT, whether as internet content providers, programmers, designers, inventors or fixers of computers. In addition, women are also conspicuously absent from decision making structures in IT in developing countries.

The potential of women as innovators in the South Asian context has been explored by Byravan (2008). Assessment and reflection is required on which sectors women have had access to and which are closed. In most places women's knowledge and contributions are not valued or validated. However, women can and have played an important role in innovation systems, especially institutional innovation.

GENDER RELATIONS AND THE LIFELONG LEARNING IMPERATIVE

Open learning communities should promote both group and individual learning; construct individual and shared visions. The aim of lifelong learning is to create social learning capital by interlinking social capital, informal lifelong learning and the idea of quality learning conversations (Balasubramanian & Daniel 2010). Rogers (2006) commented on the "absence" of gender in the discourse on lifelong learning. Women learners may benefit from "shared trajectories" of learning; avoiding "atomization" of learning opportunities.

Gender conscientization based on informed gender analysis is particularly interesting in the context of open learning communities. This process can foster development of tools to reveal gender-specific learning processes, knowledge and learning systems in a learning community (Schnuttgen 1997). Programmes focusing exclusively on women with little interaction with men were relatively common. Involving both women and men in reflecting on existing gender relations is inherent in building gender equality in open learning communities. Such interactions can help to reconstruct and redefine gender relations. On the other hand, experiences in several developing countries advocate sensitivity to cultural constraints operating to limit interaction of women with men in public spaces (Gaiani et al 2009, CSDMS 2008, Gurumurthy 2006)

While open and distance learning (ODL) is hailed as a harbinger of gender equality, realities may be quite different (Mlama 2004). An exposition of the gendered face of the learner population would be needed. Innovation is the key to sufficiently interrogate, articulate and analyze the gender construction in which ODL is delivered. While the assumption is that women and girls are disadvantaged, this may not be universally true. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that

underachievement of boys should not be equated with the marginalization of women and girls due to patriarchal structures and institutions.

Some of the key questions to be addressed in overcoming the impact of gender relations negatively skewed to the disadvantage of women and girls include:

1. Are there areas of knowledge demonstrating gender differentiation? Are there areas of knowledge traditionally held by women and socially recognized as "women's domain"? Similarly, do men dominate certain areas of knowledge?
2. In emerging knowledge economies, what is the gender based division of labour in knowledge creation, use and dissemination? Is there an evident bias with women occupying end-user, lower skilled spectrum of tasks and men dominating ownership and production?
3. Are participatory methods used to include women in designing and developing content and learning especially focusing on women's livelihoods? How is the choice of methods influenced by gender relations?
4. Is the instructional design of distance learning inputs gender-sensitive, gender-appropriate and gender-disaggregated?
5. Is an effort made to ascertain different priorities accorded by women and men depending on varying needs for livelihood and improved quality of life?
6. Who makes the effort to factor women's indigenous knowledge and their concerns, interests and rights into production and dissemination of content? Do men contribute?
7. Who creates, owns and uses channels of communication for awareness generation and dissemination?
8. Even in the case of open educational resources, reusable learning objects, wikis and other online resources, what proportion of women are aware of them and have the requisite basic skills to use them?
9. Is there a gender differential in access and control; in the power of choice?

The primary axes around which gender relations need to be examined include:

1. Content (accessible language; local relevance; indigenous knowledge; production and dissemination; gender disaggregated needs; repackaging, augmenting, documenting and storing, sharing information and knowledge by and for women);
2. Time availability (does time famine of women result from inequitable gender relations?);
3. Cost and ability to pay;
4. Creation of "safe" spaces contributing to confidence building;
5. Provision of training, resource support and skill upgradation;
6. Scale and utility of operations;
7. Ownership and management of knowledge and information centres;
8. Provision of child/elderly care support;
9. Availability of technology hardware and infrastructure.

Telecentres offer a natural platform for promoting open learning communities. The transformation of existing ICT access points in selected countries around the world into knowledge hubs of global knowledge networks has become the focus of recent UN projects in Africa. Increased engagement of target beneficiaries especially women is envisaged in these knowledge networks. This involvement would serve to deploy relevant knowledge pertaining to key areas of sustainable development such as employment, education, gender and health.

Drawing on the Women's Net experiences in South Africa, Holmes (2004) has suggested a framework of gender analysis of telecentre evaluation methodology focusing on national policy and planning; selection of telecentre sites; ownership of telecentres; training of managers; services offered by telecentres; women as information creators and users/ non-users of

telecentres. Analysts seek to explore ways to empower women through appropriate use of ICTs. Holmes suggests that if women are to be truly empowered, the process of practical, personal empowerment should ideally run parallel with a supported process of personal exploration (through access to appropriate equipment and materials, a supportive environment and relevant training.

Key issues of concern include constructing learning systems sensitive to women learners and their needs, style, pace, culture, interests and aspirations; constructing and managing learning systems linked to identifying and realizing women's development and empowerment priorities; shaping learning systems comprised of dynamically inter-connected diverse learning communities sharing information, culture and experience in women-owned repositories; creating learning systems engaged in gender-sensitive organization of learning. Technology applications empower women through efficient and effective access to previously intangible information (Nath 2001). Beardon (2006) documented pilot projects in Burundi, India and Uganda and suggested the need to constantly engage the human communication dimensions of ICTs especially for marginalized groups including women. Aji et al (2010) noted the central focus of capacity building of women to make choices in the social, political and economic spheres. Their constructs of empowerment theory include interpersonal, interactional and behavioural components.

Gigler (2004) and Grunfeld (2007) applied Amartya Sen's capability approach to determine whether ICT can play a role for empowerment of marginalized groups. While no direct and causal relationship could be established between ICTs and empowerment, a dynamic, multi-dimensional interrelationship between technology and the social context was revealed. A more proactive approach to gender mainstreaming within ICT policy would ensure equal and non-discriminatory access to ICT infrastructure and connectivity. This is an essential initiative to empower girls and women to participate in ICT use and application.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from the African and Asian experience, the paper suggests frameworks for promoting development of open learning communities which promote gender equity and gender equality. There is ample evidence to suggest that telecentres can be ugraded into knowledge centres providing appropriate content generated, collated, used and disseminated by women. Such centres would have a key role to play in provision of open and distance learning, thus ushering a technology-mediated network of open learning communities. Reflection is needed on ownership of knowledge and creation of gender-disaggregated content within the context of local gender relations. Though technology can be an instrument of change, implications of open learning communities forming through face-to-face interaction and occupying our mindscapes should be emphasized as well in promoting gender equity and equality.

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