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FOSTERING FEMINISM

FEATURING YOUNG WOMEN'S VIEWS OF FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S HISTORY

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WHY SHOULD YOU BE HOLDING A **COMPUTER MOUSE** WHEN AT THE END OF THE DAY YOU WILL BE HOLDING A **BABY'S NAPKIN?**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Raftree is the Senior ICT4D Advisor for Plan International USA. She focuses on the integration of new media and technology in grassroots development programs working with children and youth. In addition to hands-on work and capacity strengthening with frontline staff and youth, Linda supports strategy, innovation and program design with a focus on community engagement and good governance.

Linda recently co-authored a paper for UNICEF on the use of new ICTs in communication for development approaches with and for marginalised adolescent girls. She contributed to the Girls and ICTs chapter of Plan's 2010 *Because I am a Girl Report* and Plan's 2010 *ICT-Enabled Development Guide*. Before joining Plan USA in 2001, Linda lived and worked in El Salvador for 10 years managing child media, child protection, post-conflict reconciliation, and disaster programs.

Linda writes '**Wait... What?**' (<http://lindaraftree.wordpress.com>), a blog widely read by development practitioners and technologists interested in the intersection of technology and development. She has been listed as one of the Guardian's Top 20 Global Development Tweeters.

This is the type of taunt that young women might hear when trying to sit in front of one of the computers at the school's lab, said Fabiola, a young woman from Cameroon, while speaking on a panel about girls, education, and new technologies at the 55th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

Fabiola was invited to the global conference to speak about her personal experiences as a girl studying a career in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). Fabiola went on to share how her parents had been instrumental in encouraging her to pursue her studies, even though she was one of few girls who decided to go down the STEM path [8].

In rural Kenya, a youth media group I was working with three years ago told the story of a girl who had become pregnant in secondary school. Rather than shame her as many parents do, her father went personally to the school to pay her school fees each month to maintain a spot for her. He knew that pulling her permanently out of school would severely limit her future. The youth group planned to make a short video about the girl's story to show to members of their community as a way of educating and encouraging parents to keep their daughters in school, even if a girl became a mother at an earlier age than desired. The young people understood how important it was for parents and community to support girls, who were also mothers, to continue their education so that their children would not enter into greater poverty and lack opportunities in the future.

When I was supporting a workshop for a project called *Youth Empowerment through Technology, Arts and Media* (YETAM) in rural Mozambique, a similar conversation came up among the mixed group of participating adolescent



boys and girls.

Staff had made a serious effort to reach a target of 50% girls participating, but ended up with only 15 girls and 40 boys. On the third day of the workshop the boys started complaining, “Why aren’t there more girls here? And the girls who are here, they never talk, they just sit there,” said one boy. “They don’t have the ambition or the drive to improve themselves, so they don’t even come to workshops like this when they have the opportunity.”

Most of the girls sat quietly, listening to the boys criticise them. “Girls, what do you have to say about this?” asked one of the facilitators. Silence ensued. “See, even now they just sit there and don’t defend themselves,” jeered the boys, exasperated. More silence.

Finally one girl spoke up. “You don’t know what it’s like. We can’t get permission to come. It’s difficult for us. Our parents don’t trust us. They think we are just coming to play. They want us to stay at home to do work during our school break.”

“But you have the same letter from the school that we do! Why can’t you learn to negotiate with your parents like we do?” exclaimed one of the boys. Again, silence. Finally the facilitators maneuvered the discussion around to one about effective negotiation skills and to suggest ways to communicate with parents so that they would allow both girls and boys to participate when opportunities came their way. “Our parents and grandparents are not ignorant donkeys,” concluded one of the youth. “They are just from another time. They have never had the opportunity to participate in projects and workshops or even to go to school. They don’t know why we think it’s important. We need to become better at talking with them, to counsel them and help them to see what we are doing so that they will allow us to join in these efforts.”

When it came time for the youth at the workshop in Mozambique to select focus areas to work on, the drama group decided to create a theatre piece that would address the multitude of factors that discriminated against girls and highlight the role of peers, parents and the broader community in supporting girls and ensuring that they have opportunities to pursue their education and extra-curricular activities and to achieve a better life that does not include early and forced marriage, early pregnancy, dropping out of school, spending all of their time doing household chores, and being otherwise exploited [9].

Being a girl in many parts of the world is not easy.

In many parts of the world, girls are up against greater obstacles than boys their same age when it comes to pursuing their goals in life. Not only do many girls face economic challenges, they also face cultural norms that prohibit them from achieving their aspirations. Even in the so-called ‘developed countries’, girls do not always feel free to pursue certain life choices or career paths. A study by the Girls Scouts Research Institute, for example, found that 57% of girls surveyed believed that they would have to work harder than a man to be taken seriously in a STEM job [3].



These overall economic and cultural barriers get in the way of girls accessing and using new information and communication technologies (ICTs). At the same time, when girls cannot access new technologies and social media platforms, they may be marginalised from information that could help them excel in other areas of their lives and their voices may be absent from important conversations. It becomes a vicious circle where gender discrimination, poverty, urban-rural differentiation and the digital divide come into play.

WHY DOES IT MATTER IF GIRLS ACCESS ICTs?

Seven important reasons that ICTs are important to adolescent girls [4]:

1. To keep in touch with others and reduce isolation in countries where this is an issue.
2. To further their education and acquire new skills.
3. To take an active part in their communities and countries.
4. In order to have the skills to find work.
5. To build specific skills and knowledge on subjects they might otherwise not know about, such as HIV and AIDS.
6. Because evidence has shown that learning to use these technologies can build self-esteem.
7. In order to keep safe.

Accessing ICTs is becoming more and more critical to girls as information is increasingly produced, shared, circulated and accessed via social media and digital channels. Those who cannot access digital means of communication are generally left out of the equation. ICTs, especially mobile phones, are playing an important role already in the lives of many adolescent girls around the world.

Access to ICTs can help girls reduce their sense of isolation, because girls can use mobile phones or the Internet to contact friends, family, and the broader outside world. This can be especially important in countries where girls' activities become restricted upon reaching puberty, and where girls and women do not enjoy freedom of mobility.

In addition, ICTs can help girls to further their education and acquire new skills. Access to the Internet opens a world of information and research potentiality. Knowledge of, and ability to use, new technologies and access to a mobile phone is becoming more and more critical for finding decent work or running a local business.

Technology is everywhere according to Manjula Pradeep from Navsarjan, a trust that works with low-caste girls in India. Speaking at the Making Cents Conference in September 2011, she commented that, "in Gujarat we have maximum mobile owners. The mobile is a status symbol, yes. In a family you can have three to four people owning a phone. And it does mean a lot when young women have mobiles, you can do your marketing, you have access to people, people can reach you on your mobile, you can put it on your shop board so people can reach you on mobile."

"In addition, computer training can allow girls to replicate and train others on computer skills," she said.

"A lot of girls have done computers; they are running classes for the children because children are not taught computers in schools. So the girls can teach this" [7].



As access and use of ICTs become more widespread, opportunities increase for girls to have a more active voice in their communities, countries and globally. Whereas before community radio was a one-way, broadcast-only communication channel, growing access to mobile phones now means that listeners can participate more actively in radio programming, for example by calling in or sending in SMS messages and answering mobile phone surveys.

ICTs can support girls to build specific skills and knowledge on subjects they might otherwise not know about, such as HIV and AIDS and reproductive health. The relative privacy afforded via a mobile phone can contribute to a greater willingness to seek out information on sensitive issues. The *Young Africa Live* project, for example, has partnered with Vodafone to provide information on love, sexuality, reproductive health, HIV and AIDS, and voluntary testing and counseling in a fun and social way via a mobile phone network [5]. The project website notes that, “If we conservatively say that 20% of the South African population is HIV-positive, that means 20% of the users on this mobile portal will be HIV-positive, but might not know their status and might continue practising risky behavior and putting themselves and their loved ones at risk of infection. It is therefore crucial that we use this platform to, through interactive discussion, create enough peer pressure that young people will test themselves for HIV.” Between December 1, 2009, when it launched and May 31, 2011, *Young Africa Live* has had over 36 million page views and more than one million comments.

Learning to use new technologies can build self-esteem among girls. In the YETAM Project in Cameroon, staff initially divided participating youth into three groups to focus on particular technology, arts and media areas. Each group elected a president, vice-president and secretary. At first, girls did not want to take on any of the leadership roles. However, after a few months in the program, girls began complaining that they were not able to make decisions and run things how they wanted. Staff split some of the groups in half to allow for more leadership positions to open, and girls were elected into them.

Some of the most common outcomes of youth media projects, as highlighted by young people during evaluations, are an improved ability to express themselves, speak in public, and dialogue with adults and other decision-makers to negotiate their needs and rights.

Security is another reason that ICTs, specifically mobile phones, are important to girls. A study by the GSM Association and Cherie Blair Foundation noted that nine out of ten women reported feeling safer because of their mobile phone. This feeling cut across all categories: age, location and social status [1].

GIRLS' ACCESS AND USE OF ICTs

Key factors that prevent girls from taking advantage of technology:

1. discrimination;
2. numbers;
3. confidence;
4. language;



5. time;
6. money; and
7. freedom.

As noted above, accessing ICTs can bring girls greater opportunities. However, for many girls worldwide, access to and use of ICTs is still a major challenge.

According to Plan [4], the following key factors prevent girls from taking advantage of technology:

1. **Discrimination**—girls are still viewed as second-class citizens in many societies.
2. **Numbers**—boys both outnumber girls and tend to dominate access to computers.
3. **Confidence**—because they don't have equal access at school, girls may be less confident than boys when it comes to going into IT jobs because they don't feel they have the same skills and knowledge as the young men competing for the jobs.
4. **Language**—in order to use these technologies, English is usually a requirement, and for girls with only basic literacy in their own language, this is a major barrier.
5. **Time**—girls' domestic roles, even at a young age, mean they have less free time than boys to explore and experiment with new technologies.
6. **Money**—girls are less likely than their brothers to have the financial resources to pay for, say, a mobile phone and its running costs, or access to the web in an Internet café.
7. **Freedom**—boys are also more likely to be allowed to use Internet cafés because parents are concerned about their daughters going out on their own.

Although the digital divide is often characterised in terms of broad economics, eg. 'developing' versus 'developed' countries, it is important to broaden out the notion to include other factors that impact on access and use of technology, for example: individual class and wealth status, gender, geographic location, age, disability, literacy, and language. These multiple divides all need to be taken into consideration when working with girls and ICTs.

It is important to be quite specific when talking about 'access.' Even girls living in the same geographic area may have very different levels of access, depending on a host of factors. Imagine, for example, the Internet access of an English-speaking girl living in an urban high rise with her upper class parents versus a girl who is not literate or English speaking who works long hours cleaning that same apartment and lives in a slum area nearby; or the mobile phone ownership capacity of the daughter of a relatively wealthy community leader who owns a small local business versus the daughter of one of the poorest families in the same village.

In places where men and boys dominate women and girls, men and boys also tend to dominate the use of available ICTs. Men may control the family's mobile phone, keeping it with them at all times, or they might monitor girls' and women's calls. In places where boys are more favoured, their confidence to try new things will tend to be higher,



meaning they may rush in to use ICTs in projects while girls shy back.

Girls often report that boys hog and monopolise ICT equipment. In addition to taunting girls who want to use school ICT equipment, boys may criticize, scorn and ridicule girls who are using equipment for the first time, and girls may feel too timid to try again. In many developing countries, getting girls to attend school at all is difficult. If girls are considered less intelligent or less worthy than boys, and their secondary school attendance (where ICT training might be offered) is not a priority, girls will have a very difficult time accessing and using ICTs.

ADDRESSING THE GAPS

Ways to close the gaps:

1. Address underlying causes.
2. Offer opportunities.
3. Change mentalities.

Three main areas come up as critical for helping increase girls' access to ICTs and, subsequently, supporting them to use ICTs as tools to access information and more fully participate in and benefit from their families, communities and societies.

1. **Address underlying causes**—if girls and women continue to live in greater poverty, with lower education levels, less access to healthcare and other services, less opportunity and lower access to work than men, and lower status in their societies, chances are that their access to, and use of, ICTs will not equal that of boys and men. Less access means that they will not enjoy the important longer-term information and communication benefits of these tools, and the cycle continues.

A recent study analysed data sets from 12 Latin American and 13 African countries from 2005-2008, and concluded that “the reason why fewer women access and use ICT is a direct result of their unfavourable conditions with respect to employment, education and income.” When controlling for these variables, the study says, “Women turn out to be more active users of digital tools than men. This turns the alleged digital gender divide into an opportunity: given women’s affinity for ICT, and given that digital technologies are tools that can improve living conditions, ICT represent a concrete and tangible opportunity to tackle longstanding challenges of gender inequalities in developing countries, including access to employment, income, education and health services” [2].

Getting more girls into school and improving the quality of education could help more girls access and learn to use ICTs, thereby helping them also gain more access to information, opportunity, and platforms to make their voices heard. Finding ways to encourage critical thinking and innovation within the education system and ways for girls to join in extra-curricular activities to stimulate new ways of thinking might also help more girls to build the skills and mindsets necessary to enter into fields related to ICTs and innovation or to invent



new ways to use ICTs to generate income in their local communities.

2. **Change mentalities**—in addition to directly addressing the underlying causes for girls' lower status and lower access to key services and opportunities, a shift in thinking is needed. This shift in thinking can contribute to changing the underlying causes, and it can also stimulate behaviour change that is more conducive to girls participating fully in their family and communities as well as at broader levels. Girls need to be seen as people who can and should take advantage of the potential of ICTs, but they cannot do this on their own. Broad and deep legal, attitudinal and behaviour changes need to happen in families, communities, institutions and society in general.

In this process of changing mentalities, men and boys should be engaged as allies rather than seen as adversaries. As the examples from Cameroon, Kenya and Mozambique at the beginning of this article show, when fathers and male peers are aware, engaged and supportive of girls' development and girls' rights, they often play a very strong role in changing broader norms and perceptions.

Public or localised education and awareness campaigns can help change mindsets and behaviours that currently limit girls' access and potential. (Not to mention that ICTs and social media themselves can be very effective tools in helping educate, build awareness, generate debate and discussion and change opinions). These campaigns can be directed at positively influencing the behaviour of boys and men, and the patriarchal or discriminatory rules that both men and women enforce when it comes to girls. Men and boys can be very supportive and helpful participants and partners in programs to support girls' access to ICTs.

Female role models and putting tech in the hands of women—for example, female primary school teachers, volunteers and students—can also help change mentalities. Having a device or new technology in their possession can increase the status and strength of girls and women as role models and enable them to carry out different and important roles in the community. Programs that train girls and women as ICT facilitators and trainers can also help change mentalities and prove that “girls can do it”.

In addition to positive modeling, fears around the use, abuse and privacy violations of new technologies need to be addressed and mitigated, as they can make adults resistant to girls (and children and adolescents in general) using new technologies, especially social media and social networks. It is important to address these issues openly, emphasising that ICTs themselves cannot be solely blamed for negative behaviours. ICTs are tools that exacerbate and extend already existing human behaviours, and the blame lies with those who are using ICTs for ends such as child trafficking, cyber bullying, early sexualisation of girls, trafficking, sugar daddies, sexting and behaving in otherwise negative manners associated with the Internet and mobile phones. Children who are bullied offline are often also bullied online. Girls who are vulnerable offline are likely also vulnerable online. Online is a manifestation of offline, and the root causes of girls' vulnerabilities online cannot be blamed only on the ICT tools themselves. Underlying causes for risk and vulnerability should



be considered and addressed holistically. Rather than banning the use of ICTs, girls should be supported to navigate these spaces and use them positively and safely with support from well-prepared adult allies.

Girls can participate actively in self-protection if given the opportunity to learn and practice. Teachers and adults can play a role as guides, coaches and support systems for girls to feel comfortable with ICTs and also to help them navigate and protect themselves online. Increasing girls' knowledge, abilities, self-esteem and desire to protect themselves may be more effective than setting strict external limitations [6].

3. **Offer opportunities**—addressing the underlying causes for the exclusion and marginalisation of girls and changing mentalities are long term efforts. In the short term, offering specific and accompanied support and opportunities for girls to access and take advantage of ICTs can help fill some of the gaps.

Educators can play a huge role in supporting girls to take advantage of the opportunities that ICTs can offer them. Learning about new ICTs and social media themselves and looking for ways to use ICT tools in the classroom is an important step for educators. ICTs can be incredible tools for engaging students in the classroom, making teaching methodologies more participatory, encouraging student-led research and building critical media and digital literacy skills in the process. In places where textbooks are old and outdated, the Internet can offer ways to connect with current events and up-to-date research and thinking on almost any topic imaginable. Adding gadgets to the classroom experience involves more than just having the latest digital devices, however, and careful thought needs to be paid to the teaching goals and desired outcomes before deciding on tools and devices. Mainstreaming ICTs into classroom activities can also help, and ensuring that in controlled spaces, girls have equal access to ICT equipment.

Where ICTs cannot be integrated into the classroom, non-formal education and extra-curricular activities can give girls a chance to interact with ICTs. Special effort should be made to convince parents to allow girls to participate and take advantage of these opportunities. Access is not sufficient for girls to take the most advantage of information and communication tools however. Training is an important consideration when encouraging girls to use and benefit from ICTs so that the use of the tools can be linked to real gains in life goals in addition to fun and social activities. Girls also need time to 'play around' with new ICTs in stress-free environments.

'Girls only' spaces can be very useful for helping girls feel more comfortable accessing and learning about technology. Physical spaces where girls can learn with other girls without having to compete with boys can free girls up from pressure and derision that they sometimes feel when working in co-ed environments [7].

IN CONCLUSION

Girls need to be empowered to use new communications technologies safely, on their own terms and in ways which promote their development and build their futures. In order for girls to reap the benefits of new technologies, a



number of factors need to be overcome. Long-term programs that address underlying marginalisation of girls, changes in mentality and attitudes, and provision of opportunities to girls now can help close the gaps and improve girls' access to ICTs.

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