Book Review: Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: Changing Selves, Changing Societies by Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/01/04/book-review-women-and-ict-in-africa-and-the-middle-east-changing-selves-changing-societies-by-ineke-buskens-and-anne-webb/

04/01/2015

*Based on analyses from twenty-one research teams in fourteen countries, this contribution explores what it takes to wield the emancipatory potential of ICT. The case-studies never fail to arouse curiosity, though some chapters are a little short, writes **Morgane Colleau**.*

Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: Changing Selves, Changing Societies. Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb. Zed Books. 2014.

Find this book:

Driven by a vision of freedom and equality between men and women worldwide, and the wish to produce knowledge that would contribute to social change, the Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment network (GRACE) set out, in 2005, to investigate whether and how ICT can improve the lives of women and influence greater social justice. GRACE's initial research findings were published in 2009 in the much acclaimed book *African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment.* In 2008, the GRACE project expanded to include the Middle East and North Africa, thus becoming an impressive network of 22 teams based in 14 countries. *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: Changing Selves, Changing Societies* is the culmination of a four-year long journey of rich collaboration and research.

The book comprises an impressive collection of 22 case studies. In looking at the main 'stages or clustered experiences women typically encounter on their journey towards empowerment with ICT, through ICT and in ICT' (p. 8), the first three sections reflect the great plurality of contexts and experiences the book covers. They also efficiently map out the strengths and limits of ICT as a tool of emancipation, as well as the strategies women have put in place to overcome the obstacles they face.

Section 1, 'Agentic ICT use: the aspiration for emancipation versus the power of gender traditions', provides valuable insights into how and why ICT is a double-edged sword for women across Africa and the Middle East. Although ICT may enhance their personal and professional experiences, it often does so within the constraints of established gender roles and norms. Chapters 1 and 5 reveal the complex relationship between ICT and empowerment through the diversity of social contexts and experiences of women across the region. Chapter 1 focuses on the Yemen Grace Health Research team's desire to increase reproductive health awareness among Yemeni women who, as a group, continue to suffer from a shockingly high maternal mortality rate. Their research in conservative and / or under-resourced areas revealed that poverty, illiteracy and'women's perceptions about their self-worth and capacity to make their own decisions to seek the health care they need' challenged the very implementation of ICT for the purpose of disseminating valuable health information (p. 31). Within such socio-economic and gendered-divided environments, where women's health is not a matter of public concern and women are socialised to obey and care for others, ICT could do little to increase their health awareness. Ibou Sané (chapter 5), for his part, shows that female political leaders in Senegal have used ICT to enhance their professional capacity. In particular, the internet and SMS have allowed them to remotely participate in political meetings, often because it is inappropriate for them to be out in the evenings. This has, however, also served to maintain their society's gender divide rather than address their entrenched inequality.

Section 2, 'Developing critical voice in and through safe ICT-created space', investigates when, how and why a

technology that protects anonymity has provided women with important avenues for expression and personal development. Mervat Foda (chapter 9), for example, wished to understand why online communication played an important role in the lives of young Egyptian women who felt unworthy and ashamed of their physical appearance. In so doing, she hoped to strengthen their 'capacity to have and to cultivate 'voice' – to know and express themselves so as to improve their sense of self, their well-being and their capacity to aspire to lives they have reason to value' (p. 124). Her findings indicate that, whilst disconnecting from the public sphere, the respondents were using online spaces to voice their feelings and thoughts in a social and cultural context inimical to such expressions. In organising group discussions, Foda helped these women understand the social processes that drove them to online spaces in the first place. In sum, 'on their journey of self-expansion', women often 'need the nurturing that a safe ICT-created space can provide' (p. 12).

Section 3, 'ICT-enhanced relating and becoming: personal and social transformation', emphasises how ICT can 'create a space of dignity and freedom' (p. 11) for isolated and struggling women. Nagwa Abdel Meguid (chapter 17), Director of the Clinic for Children with Special Needs in Cairo, provides a powerful account of how ICT has helped Egyptian mothers of disabled children connect with each other (empowerment through community building) and deepen their understandings of genetic disorders (empowerment through knowledge). This was important since such mothers often felt shameful, isolated and stigmatised for their children's conditions. Meguid's research initiative was successful: the education website 'became a virtual open clinic, allowing intense sharing and knowledge exchange between mothers' (p. 231); mothers found a place to share fears and coping strategies; and a respondent opened a new centre for children with special needs. In other words, ICT helped women connect with one another and begin a journey of personal discovery and social change.

Besides their diversity of target groups and environments, the case-studies also include an eclectic range of qualitative approaches. The introduction and conclusion explain the GRACE network's desire to reflect its vision for an ethical world into its research purposes and methods. To implement a 'purpose-aligned research approach'(p. 4), the researchers had to be given great freedom to identify and develop their own projects, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Those originated in their disciplinary and professional backgrounds, knowledge of their particular environments, and values and aspirations for the future (i.e. the social changes they aspire to). Furthermore, the network's vision and aims for 'normative action research' (p. 7) required that the researchers be able and willing to reflect on their own agency and personal transformation, hence the book's subtitle, *Changing Selves, Changing Societies*.

Overall *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East* makes a valuable contribution to the field of ICT for development and gender. While it manages to remain accessible to knowledgeable and unfamiliar readers alike, the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches may be relevant to anyone wanting to conduct research for the explicit purpose of social change. Though the case-studies never fail to arouse curiosity, the chapters are very short (average ten pages) and tend to gloss over much-needed contextual details and complex social realities.

Morgane Colleau is currently completing her PhD studies at the University of Exeter, where her project explores Iran's foreign policy during the Ahmadinejad presidency. Prior to studying for her Masters in Middle East Politics, she completed her undergraduate degree at the Institute of Political Science ('Sciences Po') in Aix-en-Provence where she read Politics and International Relations. In addition to teaching modules grounded in both Politics and Middle East Area Studies, she has written several pieces for *Ethnopolitics* and worked as the managing editor of the 2013 'After the Spring: Prospects for the Arab World in 2013' publication for the United Nations Association of the UK.