

ICTs & Women's Employability/Employment

Paper prepared for

Women take the ICT Leap: Gaining Entry to Service Sector Employment

28th April 2005
World Bank

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I argue that women will only be able to take the ICT leap to the extent that their countries are prepared and have the political will to end exclusion and inequality. Preparedness, as well as women's ability to gain employment, are uneven *within and among* countries and are in part contingent on:

- resource endowments;
- the existence of infrastructure that facilitate reliable and affordable connectivity;
- telecommunications and labour market policies;
- skills and educational levels;
- the provision of multiple points of access to equipment such as in schools, libraries and community centres;
- socio-cultural norms;
- women and men's positions in the processes of production and reproduction; as well as
- the position of their country in the global order.

With the rise in information and communication technologies, the services industry is increasingly seen as an important component of economic productivity and competition. Further, ICTs as a tool is re-shaping the labour market in the services sector: depending on the service or good in question, it is a source of employment gains and losses. Further, as communication links improve and costs continue to decrease, the incentives for specialisation, off-shoring and out-sourcing of service activities are expanding within the private sector and specifically among multinational

corporations¹. Firms are increasingly specialising in their core competencies and offshoring and outsourcing necessary inputs.

the Services Sector

The services sector facilitates many aspects of economic, political and social life. Further, the services industry is increasingly facilitated by information and communication technologies, which enable the distribution and provision of services in various forms and with increasing speed. As a result, many services that were once considered nontradable and non-productive are now actively traded.² New products such as telemedicine, as well as qualitative changes in the provision of existing services, such as distance education, are increasingly exchanged because of advances in information and communication technologies.

Within the services sector the majority of trade occurs between high wage countries. This is an important fact to keep in mind as we discuss the development potential of information and communication technologies within the reality of the so-called digital divide. As world trade in services increases and multinationals expand their offshoring and outsourcing activities, women's employment in the services sector has also grown in specific locations, the most popular examples being India and Barbados.

¹ Hoekman, Bernard M. and Carlos A. Primo Braga. 1997. "Protection and Trade in Services: A Survey". Washington DC: The World Bank.

² Riddle, Dorothy. 2000. "General Agreement on Trade in Services: Opportunities for developing countries", in International Trade Forum. Stephenson, Sherry. 1999. Approaches to Liberalising Services." Policy Research Working Paper #2107. Washington DC: Organisation of American States. Braga, Carlos A. Primo. 1995. "The Impact of the Internationalisation of Services on Developing Countries." Washington DC: The World Bank. Bhagwati, Jagdish. 1984. "Splintering and Disembodiment of Services and Developing Countries", in *World Economy*, 7(2): 133-44.

An increasing number of women are employed in professional services such as accounting, banking and information technology, including airline booking, mail orders, credit cards, word processing and tourism related occupations. Several studies indicate that during the last 25 years women's opportunities for paid work in the services sector have increased in many countries. More specifically, women are the preferred workers in the lower- and middle- skilled service sector jobs. However and despite these gains, gender disparities persist in training, wages, and access to credit and skilled employment. Increased access to employment opportunities in the services sector, while positive, is insufficient to increase well-being. Gains in the demand for female labour must also be compared to the rise or decline in the proportion of jobs that have security of employment, health insurance etc.

For developing countries, rapid technological changes in information and communication technologies present both opportunities and challenges. Some are of the view that technological shifts offer opportunities for developing countries to provide new goods and services for export, as well as to attract services related foreign investment.³ This thesis holds for certain countries. However, many poor- and middle-income countries lack the relevant institutional and regulatory infrastructures and simply cannot take that leap.

Thus, international organisations concerned with using ICTs as a tool for the promotion of development and equity should be inspired to take into consideration the importance of:

- resource endowments;

³ Braga, Carlos A. Primo. 1995. "The Impact of the Internationalisation of Services on Developing Countries." Washington DC: The World Bank.

- infrastructure;
- telecommunications and labour market policies;
- skills and educational levels;
- socio-cultural norms;
- expansion of public/private partnerships;
- women and men's position in the processes of production and reproduction; and
- the digital preparedness of the country in question

in the development of ICT for development strategies and programmes.

Further, given that women are often positioned differently from men within the labour market, it is critical that programmes and projects that aim to increase women's well being be designed (as appropriate) with the gendered specificities of the sector, industry, community and/or country in mind.

In the context of ICTs and the services sector and framed by the contingent elements of above, gender sensitive programming aims to bridge the gendered digital divide by situating women and men's access to, and use of, ICTs within their everyday lived realities. Such strategies go beyond questions of male prejudice and preconceptions to the development of projects that identify and address the concrete barriers that women and men face. Further, gender sensitive development strategies acknowledge that the gendered digital divide partially reflects and can intensify inequalities within households, communities, labour markets and the larger economy.