

## Why New Technology is a Women's Rights Issue

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New technologies impact women's lives all over the world. This is transforming our work for gender equality and presenting new challenges to women's rights and sustainable development. This primer will explore the complex ways new technologies affect women's rights and their place in a global agenda for gender justice.

**New technologies raise the stakes for gender equality advocates.** They are not neutral; they reflect and, in fact, incorporate social arrangements and power relations. Moreover, the science and technologies themselves are interrelated; the governments seeking to regulate them are linked by trade and aid relationships; the companies looking to develop and sell them use the processes of globalization to reach larger markets and to locate more resources and raw materials for that development.

Technological development often brings benefits to large numbers of people, and is often appropriately understood as a testament to human prowess. But today, the development and adoption of powerful new technologies

Some new technologies are more permanent and more invasive than most of the tools that have come before. Once technologies like inheritable genetic modification and GM foods, are adopted, there will be no turning back. A few organizations and individuals have already been active in certain areas, but **the majority of civil society has thus far been silent on these potentially lifechanging issues.**

As certain technologies become more pervasive and invasive, they can and do transform gender relations and roles and exacerbate the differences between rich and poor. The following are some concrete examples of the different kinds of effects that technologies have on gender equality and women's rights. Each of these cases shows how technology influences or reflects gender inequality. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of either technologies or their effects or potential effects, but an effort to illustrate the issues that arise and how they fit together with gender equality and social justice work.

### The use of the technology strengthens patriarchal attitudes and institutions.

In both places, there is a strong cultural preference for male children. When technologies like ultrasound allow parents to more accurately choose the sex of their future children, the use of the technology strengthens patriarchal attitudes and institutions. In this case, **reproductive technologies ensure the continuation of gender inequalities** by reinforcing or enabling social or cultural inequalities. Some argue that sex determination trends will increase the "value" of women within societies as they become scarcer. However, it has been observed in India and China that in fact a shortage of women instead leads to greater restrictions and control placed over them.<sup>3</sup> In China, the "shortage" of women for men of marriageable age has been associated with increasing violence against women in the form of kidnapping

and trafficking. Ultrasound and other reproductive technologies give women expanded personal reproductive choice and better medical technologies with which to diagnose and treat real medical problems, encouraging better reproductive health. However, when used for sex selection, these technologies enhance gender discrimination.

## ICT policy is only beginning to reflect gender concerns.

The potential positive impact of ICTs, particularly as tools for development and as a competitive advantage in the global economy, has become a priority for many international institutions and national governments, as evidenced by the focus of the World Summit on the Information Society, first held in Switzerland in 2003. The goal of the WSIS process is to develop policies for global coordination of ICTs and propose actions to “bridge the digital divide.” Countries in the North and South are now investing in infrastructure to attract ICT firms and jobs to “corridors”, “technology parks”, and “valleys” in places like India, Thailand, and the Philippines. These initiatives focus primarily on ICT policies as economic development and create new opportunities for some women and at the same time further exclusion for others.<sup>4</sup> Access to ICT is dependent on location, class, language, education, and as with other technologies, men have more access to and certainly more control over these technologies. ICTs become important for women’s rights, for example, when access to information is conflated with education for women, and when the right to education is considered met by providing minimal access through ICTs without focusing on full engagement and appropriate information.

### Technology Transforming Gender Roles

A specific problem of women’s entry into debates about science and technology is the (perceived) level of expertise and specialization required or “technophobia”<sup>10</sup>—a fear of technology. So far, women’s participation in developing technologies is certainly less than our representation in populations at large. **Where are women in production of these technologies?** Women tend to be presented as the labour or the receivers of the technology, rather than as the creators. New technologies are also often tested on women. Women’s rights are particularly threatened by new genetic technologies because their development requires extensive testing on women and their genetic materials. Now, as debates rage on about cloning and other reproductive and genetic technologies, the issue of experimentation and testing is often overlooked. Much of the stem cell research and cloning mentioned in these debates will require huge amounts of eggs, which must be donated by women. Egg donation is invasive and potentially dangerous. Debating the merits of cloning and this kind of human experimentation is premature without considering the health and safety of the women that would be required to pursue the research. Beyond safety, there are a number of other specific women’s rights issues that need to be addressed: access and equity, reproductive choice, commodification of life and specifically, of women’s bodies. Some women are involved in developing new technology but many more can become involved in critically interrogating it, asking important questions about its use, and presenting alternatives. In terms of GM foods and other agricultural technology related issues, a gender analysis is crucial yet often missing. While women are the majority of the world’s farmers, in most patriarchal systems they have very little access to resources and very little power. In other words, they are doing the work to feed their families and communities but are disempowered when it comes to getting their needs met or demanding appropriate technologies for that work. Women have typically been the holders of indigenous knowledge and wisdom, including seed saving and food and medicine preparation. Many of the new technologies discussed here are eroding these positions.

## Technologies can and do transform gender relations and roles.

Gender relations are also transformed as reproduction, thanks to assisted reproductive technology, moves into the laboratory and the domain of (often male) scientists and biomedical enterprises. Some kinds of technologies are immediately related to women and their specific social or biologically defined roles, but this does not mean that women should not be involved in debating other technologies such as biological weapons. **It is important to highlight not only what impacts on women directly, as women, but also what impacts on their equality and their ability to access and enjoy their rights.**

## REFERENCES

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“Women often have complex relationships with technology and machines as a result of being socialized over time to believe that machines and technology are a man’s domain and not for women and girls, thus generating a gender bias in attitudes towards studying or using information technology.” (Natasha Primo, *Gender Issues in the Information Society*, UNESCO (2003), p.38).

