Spotlight on Women

Thinking Outside the Blog: Women’s Voices and a New Generation of Communications Technology

By Ashley Belyea

As inter-governmental and nongovernmental organizations attempt to identify and help address the needs of women around the world, innovative new communications technology can provide an invaluable tool. With mobile phone and internet connectivity, women can report violence, create networks of support and communication, and even evaluate aid programs. However, many of the existing generation of communications-based programs were designed without considering women’s underlying economic, legal, and social inequality. Implementing these programs will not only fail to provide the desired results but, by purporting to provide access for (and to) women, may serve to mask the reporting problems that currently plague national and international efforts in addressing women’s needs.

Introduction

“We can no longer afford to minimize or ignore the contributions of women and girls to all stages of conflict resolution, peacemaking, peace-building, peacekeeping and reconstruction processes. Sustainable peace will not be achieved without the full and equal participation of women and men.”

– Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General (1997–2006)

On Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking technology as diplomatic tools:

“They’re an incredible resource that needs to be harnessed.”

– Jared Cohen, Policy Planning Staff member for Secretary of State Clinton

Ashley Belyea is a master’s candidate at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, focusing on international organizations and international law. She has a BA in international relations and Russian and East European studies from the University of Virginia.
A technological platform is only as good as its design—and those who seek to reap the benefits of communications technology should bear in mind that inherent limitation. The last ten years have seen increasing enthusiasm for communications technology in U.S. markets along with rapid and exciting advancements in the potential for mobile devices and internet connectivity to facilitate everything from “traditional” diplomacy to crisis response and development work. However, unless program designs take into consideration how people communicate, all the good intentions in the world will be insufficient to achieve the programs’ desired ends. This limitation is particularly salient with regard to women’s ability to access communications technology, experience the anticipated benefits of increased information interconnectivity, and ensure that their voices are heard and responded to by those turning to communications technology for their data and access points.

This paper will explore the potential of communications technology to facilitate some of the long-standing challenges associated with implementing nuanced gender and development (GAD) and human security policies. It will highlight the challenges inherent to such efforts and the ways those challenges are related to: the nature of applied communications technology; the slow process of integrating a complex gendered analysis into already complex analyses of international development projects and humanitarian concerns; and the logistical constraints on those projects and those who implement them. The paper will then turn to assessing the early examples of this promising field and the ways in which these efforts illustrate the potential, challenges, and limitations faced by those attempting to employ communications technology to address the needs of people in developing countries, including the necessary compromises practitioners must make to balance the pursuit of transformative change for gender relations against the desire to alleviate women’s immediate suffering. Of particular interest is the importance of those compromises to the long-term impact that communications technology can have in the hands of women (or if those tools ever make it into their hands at all).

The source of this field’s potential to generate valuable changes in the way people around the world participate in both information transmission and communication is also the greatest challenge to its analysis: the field is new and constantly evolving in diverse and diffuse ways. This makes it difficult to assess the impact of projects and to determine which (if any) aspects of that impact are attributable to program design around communications technology and gendered analysis. Very little has been published on the intersection of gender and communications technology in development and crisis response work and, of what has been published, it is difficult to find any critical analysis of that nascent relationship. To address that challenge, conversations with practitioners have informed this research. The consistent theme in those conversations was that this is a crucial and, as yet, almost completely unexamined question. In that light, this paper is a work in progress, serving to identify important questions and to highlight some ways in which people are employing communications technology in search of answers.
Part 1: Framework: Potentials, Challenges, and Compromises

There is huge potential for communications technology to improve the way that diplomacy, development, and crisis response understand and address the needs of women in a particular situation as different from the needs of men. The internet—and the social media programs it makes possible—provide a much-touted, low-cost global forum through which both domestic and international actors can raise awareness of previously isolated populations (whether they be isolated by geography, violence, or social structures). This linking can help overcome the isolating effect that often accompanies gender-based violence by allowing women within a community to share their own stories and access the stories of women with similar experiences.

New tools allow international and domestic actors to gather reports from and to connect with diffuse populations. This method is called “crowdsourcing” and involves collecting data from citizens experiencing an event (whether that be an earthquake or a political protest) in real-time. Collecting data this way can eliminate biases in survey construction or dissemination that leave women, and their concerns, uncounted, thus highlighting those biases and laying the groundwork for transformative change. While crowdsourcing has, to date, been used to gather information on crime prevalence and material needs following a disaster, there is the potential to expand the scope of this technology to include a more dialogic element. Individuals could use these programs to provide evaluation of programs or create a nation-wide search function of other citizens’ “posts” via mobile phone. The potential appears limitless.

Perhaps the most exciting potential of communications technology is that it is highly adaptive. A well-designed platform will allow individuals to mold their use of the tool to their particular needs, often discovering new uses for elements of a tool that the designers had not envisioned. This was evidenced by U.S. Department of State advisor Jared Cohen’s observation that young people in Iran had found a use for Bluetooth that the tool’s inventors had not intended to provide (as quoted in the epigraph above). They realized Bluetooth would allow them to text everyone within a certain radius who had their Bluetooth enabled, thus allowing them to circumvent strict laws governing behavior and social prohibitions on certain types of communication. While this was initially used in “frivulous” ways, young people in many countries have employed this technology to stage large-scale protests at almost no notice.³ Technology, it seems, could even be the David to authoritarianism’s Goliath.

These potentials of communication technology inspire enthusiasm, admiration, and funding from many Western sources. However, an unanalyzed application of
communications technology to the needs of local populations as understood by
governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and
development groups runs a serious risk of riding roughshod over the ongoing and
complex incorporation of a gendered analysis into development and crisis response.
A poorly designed program could fail to reach the target population, meaning a waste
of resources and frustration for all involved.

Threatening perhaps even graver long-term consequences for women than would the
general failure of the technology is the possibility that information and communications
technology (ICT) would only fail to provide communication tools useful for women.
One of the exciting promises of ICT is the ability to create an alternative flow of
information and communication beyond that of state statistics; however, an ICT
program that appears to function in a given setting but fails in its design to consider
the “communication ecosystem” in which the tool will be used, runs the very real risk
of gathering information that simply confirms the opinions of those already in power.

As Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz observe, states pay attention to that information
that they deem to be “valid” when determining how to allocate resources and direct policy.⁴ Right now, communications technology offers new alternatives to traditional
data collection that could challenge official “ignorance” of the prevalence of women’s
experience of sexual violence.⁵ However, if programs fail to adequately create access for
women, the resulting data will likely undercount their experiences—and, even worse,
strengthen misconceptions of women’s experiences and miss this unique opportunity
to challenge policies to improve their attention to the gender realities of citizens.

Gendered analysis of development and crisis response and the use of ICT have an
important commonality: both suffer from being treated as a distinct component of a
larger goal, to be addressed by a special division within an organization. This is the “add
women and stir” or the “hire a kid to run the technology” effect. In the field of gender
analysis in development, this approach was embodied by the “women in development”
(WID) strategy initiated in the 1970s, which “incorporated” a gendered analysis in
development aid by adding women’s programs to existing structures.⁶ This has been
cast alternately as an essential first step in global consciousness-raising or as a co-opting
of feminist concerns into a system uninterested in taking on the demands of feminism
for a genuine re-evaluation of social structures. Criticisms of WID prompted a shift
to the “gender and development” (GAD) approach in the 1990s, which attempts to
maintain a focus on the gender dimension of all issues. As Cecile Jackson observes, “one
of the main features of gender analysis is the insistence that gender identity patterns all
social life and that therefore gender awareness is not about “adding women” but about
rethinking development concepts and practice as a whole, through a gender lens. This
insight is one of many which appears to have been lost in translation.”⁷

Recent decades have seen some great success in this respect, though many organiza-
tions—including the United Nations—still predominantly operate on a WID approach
of separate programs, divisions, and reports. Even with long-standing development
aid structures, such organizations have failed to integrate gender analysis into the heart
of projects or rethink how that work is done. That is, perhaps, precisely the problem.
With long-standing structures and funding sources, it is difficult to reassess both the 
*modus operandi* and *raison d’être* of an organization, so most opt for the cosmetically 
sufficient one—they appoint a “Director of Gender” who is supposed to advise on 
“women’s programs” rather than re-examining the entire organization. Technical advances, 
however, have an inherent potential to radically change the way development work and crisis responses are conducted and, therefore, could be exactly the departure from the old structures needed to integrate gender into the core of international and 
domestic aid and response work.

Unfortunately, Emily Jacobi, co-founder of Digital Democracy, has seen the opposite 
result. She shared an account of her interaction with a group creating an early 
monitoring and warning communication system in Liberia. The group was composed 
entirely of male researchers. They had spoken with a few women leaders but had 
conducted no systematic assessment of how women communicate or how their current 
status would affect access to that technology and thus the system’s access to information about their well-being.8 The failure of efforts to fully integrate gender analysis into pre-
implementation development and response has meant lost opportunities to build this 
nuanced understanding into new technologies as they develop rather than attempting 
to retro-fit solutions in the future.

This maddening state of affairs helps explain why many current uses of communications 
technology in development and crisis response have resembled a WID approach rather 
than a GAD approach. Gender analysis of the potential of communications technology 
may not take center stage, which tragically limits the transformative potential of ICT 
with regard to gender relations and the lives of women in the long-term. Furthermore, the 
priorities of the prevalent WID approach have meant that organizations direct ad 
hoc ICT programs to target only the high profile symptoms of gender inequality in the 
developing world, such as sexual violence, legal access to education, access to funds, and 
isolation from news sources. However, other symptoms of underlying gender inequality 
will be harder to address without working intentionally to transform those underlying 
sources. These symptoms include: a lack of recourse for women to their state’s justice 
system and attendant exploitation; low wages which keep women in abusive family or 
marital relationships or which make education unaffordable; and the highly vulnerable 
position of many women who, because of war or abandonment, become the head of the 
household without the training and tools to support their families. These symptoms 
of gender relations feed back into and reinforce the underlying dynamics, making it 
harder for communications technology to find an access point for breaking this cycle, 
which makes it even more important to find a way to do so.

Part 2: Surveying Current Innovation

This section will examine the extent to which the current applications of these 
technologies live up to their transformative potential (and the degree to which 
they fall victim to the challenges linked to development theory and those linked to 
practical limitations facing practitioners). This question draws on the ways in which 
nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) balance the logistical pressures, exciting
potentials, local needs, and international agendas, as well as the ways individuals equip themselves with technology in order to meet their daily needs, expand their communication horizons, and engage with the world around them in transformative ways. The primary tools that are being employed by individuals and NGOs are social networking platforms, mobile phones, and new spins on old broadcast technology.

In assessing the current application of each type of technology, this section will introduce examples which represent potential advances in using new ICT to address gender concerns, while raising questions about the long-term implications of the compromises program designers have made in addressing underlying gender dynamics. This dilemma parallels debates regarding the tactics of organizations, such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which pursues immediate gains for women’s material conditions at the cost of cooperating with a system that continues to structurally disadvantage them. Important questions remain unanswered in assessing programs that address these symptoms: for example, does alleviating or altering the symptoms carry the potential to change society over time, or is it likely to produce backlash? More time will be required for many of these programs and technologies before it is possible to answer that question with any certainty. While symptom-focused programs risk backlash, programs that only target underlying gender dynamics risk obsolescence. Unless programs are very carefully designed, entrenched social dynamics will likely keep technology out of women’s hands.

**Current Models of ICT**

Social networking has gained huge popularity in the Western world, allowing anyone with a computer and an internet connection to send their thoughts into cyber-space, connect with old classmates, or research any question from their home. Social media tools could perhaps prove critical in women's work to change the underlying gender dynamics that frequently manifest themselves in a variety of types of violence. These changes would necessarily occur over time and would require women be able to acquire the technology, education, and time to pursue these changes.

However, a reliance on social media poses significant challenges for women in developing countries in attempting to address any of the symptomatic gender dynamics—i.e. those forms of violence that the long-term use of social media would hope to end. The use of social media requires a high rate of connectivity within a population to produce meaningful domestically driven engagement and change. For example, Ruthie Ackerman’s inspiring project, *Ceasefire Liberia*, facilitates an innovative “blog bridge,” aiming “to create a dialogue between Liberians who remained in the country during and after the war and those who fled.” In applying the much-touted Western tool of citizen media activists, Ackerman actively attempted to recruit and retain women bloggers, but out of twenty-seven initial members, only two were women and they soon left. Ackerman has cited primarily economic reasons for low levels of women's participation and this makes sense—membership in the blogosphere is time-consuming and many women cannot afford that time away from childcare, family obligations, and low-wage work even if they have access to a computer. Attitudes toward privacy and appropriate realms of communication also influence this unbalanced
gender participation in social media. As an additional barrier to the efficacy of social media for addressing the symptoms of violence-filled gender relations, these platforms are frequently (and increasingly, if Facebook is any indication) open to public consumption. In traditional cultures where women are circumscribed to the private sphere, such public exposure could either prove inhibitory or dangerous.

Ackerman’s blog bridge provides a unique and much-needed vehicle for Liberians to communicate for themselves to the Liberian diaspora and international organizations about the aftermath of the civil war. Unfortunately, underlying gender inequality means women do not participate at the same level as men. Consequently, the voice heard and the perspectives shared are male; the problems highlighted are those that affect men rather than those that affect women. Even more problematic, silence around the lack of female participation means that the few (male) voices heard become the voice of Liberian post-war experience. Social media programs would need a baseline of female participants in order to increase public recognition of women’s perspectives. Unfortunately, the very conditions such programs would seek to address have sharply limited women’s social media participation. As such, this approach is likely to result in the failure to engage the target population, which will render target programs irrelevant. If the United Nations and other organizations seek to transform societies in conflict by using technology to engage women, they must think outside the blog.

Cell phones might provide some unexpected, but not uncomplicated, answers. With much higher rates of mobile phone network (versus internet) coverage and the comparatively low cost of mobile phones (versus computers), mobile phone-based communication technology far outstrips computer-based communication in the developing world. While low levels of literacy still pose a challenge for short message service (SMS) text-based programs (often the cheapest pricing plan available), there are voice-based programs that can allow women with no literacy to communicate using inexpensive mobile phones.

The combined force of these circumstances makes mobile-based programs an obvious choice for many who seek to develop programs using “indigenous technology,” i.e. devising software applications to make use of devices people are already using. There remain, however, both logistical challenges for and analytical concerns about some of the resulting programs. The logistical concerns are, as noted above, that low levels of literacy impede the use of the most cheaply priced option (texting). Western NGOs and international organizations face an analytical challenge in designing mobile-based programs. They must resist the temptation to simply transpose the ways in which they use their own phones.

Abby Goldberg described the ongoing work of the NGO Digital Democracy to design a reporting system for sexual violence in post-earthquake Haiti. The organization
briefly floated a plan for a “hotline” but had to reject it after speaking with Haitian women who were unfamiliar with and resistant to the idea of calling a stranger about an emotionally charged personal issue that represented a potential threat to their personal security. Lacking the Western cultural norm around such hotlines, the idea of sharing such personal information is actually shocking. With the added ethnic tensions in Haiti, the crosscutting identities that many women feel may also inhibit them from calling an internationally-run “hotline.” Perhaps more problematic, the justice system in Haiti has never served to protect women from sexual violence and, in the absence of a clear benefit, they are unlikely to challenge the social hurdles to an anonymous voice-based system similar to a Western hotline.

Where some literacy can be counted upon, new options for text-based programs can blend the affordability of mobile technology and the broad access of social networking. The program, Handheld Human Rights, currently being used in Thailand, allows Bluetooth-like texting to a large number of recipients for the cost of one text and can transmit that text by email around the world for those without internet access but with phone service. This provides the ease of a mass email without the expense and connectivity issues but with the added benefit that the sender can designate a limited number of known recipients, thus minimizing privacy concerns. Digital Democracy is currently working to use this program to give a loose network of eighty-three women’s shelters in Eastern Congo the ability to contact each other quickly and provide a lifeline to each other in the very real event that violence flares or a shelter is in need of supplies.15

This application of a tool these women already possess gives them the potential to connect with each other despite technological, geographic, social, and economic constraints. It gives them the invaluable ability to help protect each other against violence. There remain, however, practical and analytical concerns. Handheld Human Rights still requires literacy and therefore, like many SMS-based programs, will “fail to benefit the most vulnerable populations.”16 With roughly 60 percent of the world's population illiterate,17 orally based communication technologies are vitally needed. To this end, Abby Goldberg is currently working with Google Voice to provide low-cost voice applications.18 However, designing such a program from the West for use elsewhere circles back to the problem encountered in establishing a hotline. Western uses of technology are the product of cultural attitudes and practices that are not universally shared and those uses predispose our sense of the potential for similar tools.

Crowdsourcing (usually conducted via mobile phone) is one of the primary ways that communications technology is challenging traditional state monopolies on information; and when it comes to funding, international support, and mobilization, influence over the flow of information and the determination of “valid” data are crucial. Three organizations are front-runners in this area: Ushahidi, a software platform that compiled the texts and Tweets of thousands of Haitians following the January 2010 earthquake to provide emergency responders and NGOs with accurate information about people’s needs and locations; HarrassMap, an Egyptian NGO’s mapping function which makes use of Ushahidi’s software and compiles information from individual women reporting cases of sexual assault; and Handheld Human Rights, which was described earlier. HarrassMap demonstrates the ability of global practitioners to use
technology developed for other purposes (Google Maps and Ushahidi) as the platform, meaning they did not have to use limited resources to develop their own maps. The real benefit of crowdsourcing, as HarrassMap vividly demonstrates, is the ability to render the crimes that socially-isolating responses to sexual violence have kept invisible. By making clear and countable the ways gender violence manifests itself, HarrassMap provides data similar to that which governments consider valid. The problem, when seen clearly, is harder to ignore.

Crowdsourcing is not without its critics and its shortcomings. First, most versions still likely require literacy (or highly effective publicity campaigns and pricing plans that would allow for voice). Potentially more problematic, a poorly designed program would, as discussed in Part 1, run the risk of failing to gain the buy-in and participation of women. In the absence of a “negative response” function, not communicating with the program equates statistically to a non-response, meaning that a failure to generate participation among women leads directly back to undercounting their experience. Unfortunately, they would then be undercounted by a tool that purports to include data provided directly from women.

In the face of the connectivity, pricing, and literacy concerns that organizations employing mobile phone- and internet-based tools are combating, an organization called Voice for Humanity has attempted to combine the portability and durability of new technology with a more traditional technology. This organization has built incredibly cheap, durable, and rechargeable (solar or crank) voice players that local groups can record with locally produced content and distribute to their populations. This group has colored the players pink for women and silver for men with the idea that women will be able to retain access to their player. The “male” and “female” players are recorded with the same content so as not to be viewed as a threat to men. Content can range from promoting civic participation and voting, to reproductive health and literacy education. In Afghanistan, the player included civic education and human rights information; in Iraq, the player held forth on civic education and reconciliation; while in East Africa the programs discussed HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care. The goal (and apparently with some success in the Afghan case study): to create space for dialogue; challenge social conceptions in a way that all people can participate in; and bring information (and the opportunity for dialogue) to people (especially women) in hard climates with little or no access to technology, radio or mobile networks, or electricity. These appear to be admirable goals and a seemingly logical response to the logistical impediments to establishing programs like those described above.

However, in attempting to introduce something akin to ICT in places where the logistical challenges are highest, the Voice for Humanity player perhaps induces the strongest analytical concerns and questions. First, in an effort to attract listeners, this approach risks providing content that people want to listen to rather than content that actually challenges. In order to make the content palatable to men, that content will, arguably, be insufficiently challenging to social norms to generate any change in established gender identities. This is reminiscent of Cynthia Cockburn’s recorded reflection from a Palestinian women’s activist: “Israelis want dialogue with us so they can sleep well at night. If Palestinians want dialogue it’s so that Israelis can’t sleep well at night.”
Second, the organization’s claim to produce a transformative effect by inspiring conversations begs the question: Does transformative dialogue require a receiver and a transmitter? The voice player itself does not allow responses. Rather it speaks at people while they listen, positioning itself, and by extension those organizations privileged to provide content and the international donors who have given “the voice” (as the device is named in each language), as a literally unquestionable authority. This dynamic is not conducive to the means required by those who demand a pre-figuring of the end result and so is highly problematic to any feminist turning her or his attention to international development and communication.

We return, then, to the question of compromise: to what extent should tools seeking to address women’s immediate needs be held to the expectation of meeting those needs through transformative uses of technology? The question seems to be the same one that the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom perennially struggles with: is it a greater ill to allow women to suffer now when you could do something or to alleviate their suffering at the expense of a long-term ability to change the entire system that creates that suffering in the first place? After all, the one-way transmission of information that currently characterizes crowdsourcing can hardly be seen as a transformative means of communication. It does, however, have the potential to allow women and men to communicate urgent information to gain assistance in a crisis or to report crimes that would otherwise go unreported.

By contrast, Voice for Humanity players provide no immediate relief of urgent physical distress. Rather, the organization’s claims are largely that their voice player will have a transformative impact by generating dialogue over time. In this instance, the requirement of the means pre-figuring the ends should be firmly in place and leads us to take a very critical view of this hybrid media/ICT device with regard to its ability to generate change in the gender dynamics it purports to address. Rather than a “great first step” toward a society-wide dialogue and process of choice, the voice player threatens to be a “good enough” measure that fails to create a dialogue able to push itself to become transformative. There remains, however, inescapably, another question: in the absence of connectivity, what is the best way (for both international and local actors) to generate dialogue (and, so, transformative change) in rural areas?

Conclusion

Throwing technology at a crisis is unlikely to capture the complexity of the gender dynamics at play, usually to the detriment of the women involved, who are often economically and socially dependent on male family members. And, as the above examples demonstrate, throwing technology at women is an insufficient means of successfully engaging women in a real exchange of information or at increasing their scope for expression and communication in ways that could be empowering and transformative. Conversations with practitioners at Digital Democracy—the organization which appears to have the most nuanced understanding of this important and complicated nexus of technology, gender, development, and crisis response—highlight a recurring theme: the projects that were the most successful involved extensive time on the ground to understand the local “communication ecosystem,”
training people on technology and building relationships of trust between local and international NGOs. Information and communications technology offers some genuinely exciting opportunities to increase the percentage of the population who can have their voices counted and their stories heard. First, however, one must figure out how to listen, which is a necessarily low-tech process. 

– Sakari Deichsel served as lead editor of this article.

NOTES

1 Report of the Secretary-General on gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping activities, February 2003, A/57/731.
3 Ibid.
8 Interview with Emily Jacobi, Co-Founder of Digital Democracy, June, 10, 2010.
11 Jacobi, 2010.
14 Jacobi, 2010.
17 “MobileActive.”
18 Goldberg, 2010.