I recently spoke at the World Bank conference entitled “Empowering the Poor Through Rural Information Centers: What Works and What is Sustainable?” on 2 December 2002. As part of the panel on Organizational Structures and Approaches to Create and Support Local Multipurpose Telecenters and Programs I spoke on the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the lives of Afghan women. I began by introducing myself and the organization, and expressed Women for Women International – Afghanistan’s interest in engaging Afghan women in ICT through proposed activities like our own ICT and Internet Training Center, and marketing women’s products online.

The conditions in Afghanistan make any ICT intervention challenging. The country faces a 70% illiteracy rate, 85% among women. This is the highest illiteracy rate for women in the world. The country’s infrastructure was decimated during the 23 years of war, and as a result is virtually non-existent. The population is largely rural, many of whom are displaced. Refugees are returning daily from neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan, and establishing makeshift homes in an saturated Kabul City. According to statistics, only 4% of households have electricity. Very often, car batteries are used to provide simple lighting for homes. The Internet, previously banned by the Taliban, is still not readily available. Only the international population has relatively easy access.

So, what would be the goals of Afghan women in information and communication technologies given the above conditions? I would argue that, firstly, what Afghan women need is a voice in the virtual development dialogue. They also want basic communication to connect with their families in the diaspora. ICT could also serve as an education tool for these women, who have previously been denied access to education. Afghan women will engage in ICT if it enables them to move from being beneficiaries and recipients to active citizens. Finally, their interest in ICT will be contingent upon whether it provides economic opportunities with immediate and visible impacts.

Afghan women face many obstacles that prevent them from accessing ICT for the above goals. Illiteracy is a large stumbling block. ICT in Afghanistan is cost prohibitive. Technology is a largely male-dominated sphere in Afghanistan. This presents a particular challenge as Afghan women are often restricted from activities that involve excessive public exposure. This stems from the Afghan tradition of nemoos, the chastity of women. [The greatest insult for an Afghan man is to tell him that his women are bi-namoos, without chastity.]

Present Status of ICT in Afghanistan
A few opportunities do exist in Afghanistan, some exclusively for women. Kabul has two Internet cafes open to the public. These are mostly populated by the international staff of international NGOs who do not have access in their offices. While these cafes are largely frequented by expatriates, the few Afghans who do make use of the cafes are men or Afghan-Americans. The local population – particularly women – doesn’t even know these cafes exist.

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) established a U.S.-financed computer learning center in mid-2002. While this was slow to start, the computer classes are now filled with women – mostly those who work at the Ministry – who are interested in learning.

In mid-November, the UNDP opened the first of five Information Technologies Training Centers to train Afghan officials – very few of whom are women – in technical skills and capacity building to assist the Afghan transitional government.

There are smaller computer learning centers sponsored by Afghan women’s NGOs, such as the Afghan Women’s Resource Center (AWRC). These centers cater exclusively to women and are popular with other Afghan women’s NGOs.

Most Afghans have access to radio, using it as a source of news, information, entertainment, and education. But, radio in the past was the voice of authority. The challenge today is making radio a democratic and participatory process. Particularly for women whose social mobility is restricted, radio is an important link to the outside world.

ICT for Afghan Women

In discussing appropriate technologies for Afghan women, we can talk about them in two groups: poorest women – the ones we work with, and Afghan women’s NGOs – in principle, the voice of the poorest.

Who are the poorest women? Among them are beggars, widows, the disabled, displaced. Most of them no longer have family or community networks to rely on. Many are refugees, having come to Kabul from neighboring Iran and Pakistan where they waited out the war. These women need access to family members in other parts of the country. The poorest women, 1000 of whom are enrolled in our program, feel that information technologies are out of their reach. When I surveyed them, they told me that what they wanted most was an opportunity to learn.

What technology would be most appropriate for these women?

Public Phones

Public phones are available in limited numbers in the bazaars. The women who were able to circulate said that they had no problem going to the bazaars to use the phones, but their main obstacle was cost. What the women want is access to phones that is not cost-prohibitive. Increasing
service and decreasing cost is a challenge in a country with virtually no landlines.

Cell Phones

In a land without landlines, it seems only logical to leapfrog in terms of technologies available. Kabul already has cell phone service, but it is saturated and can not accommodate the high demand. Cell phone providers are also becoming available in provinces. Service is bound to improve as more providers enter the market. A good model to employ would be Grameen cell phones for villages where one woman is the keeper of the phone and the community has access to it.

Internet

The women felt that they had many obstacles to tackle before being able to use the Internet. First they said they needed to learn how to read and write in their own language – either Dari or Pashtu. Then they needed to read and write in English – what they called “the computer language”. Once they have mastered these two skills, they need to learn how to use a computer. And then they can try to use the Internet.

I received a variety of responses when I surveyed the women in our program about their knowledge of and interest in computers and the Internet. The women had never used computers, but they all wanted their children to learn how to use them. One woman said that she has seen computers and people tapping keys... if she had a computer, she would just start tapping keys and see what happens. All women expressed confidence in their ability to learn how to use computers, if only they had the opportunity. They called computer a “television of information”. They saw this television as helping to organize their lives, especially their finances, so they can know how much money they need to live. The women knew that through computers they would be able to contact their families and speak to people directly. They also knew that computers were a source of education, and even that computer programs could teach them how to read. One woman told me that computers are for warriors to make plans for war, but she will use them to rebuild the country and ensure freedom. Many women sought to send messages to the world. One woman said that she would write the story of her life and share it so people can understand what it is really like to be an Afghan woman.

The Internet as a communication tool is the ideal communication medium because it is anonymous, so women risk less by exposing less, therefore guarding their namoos. The Internet will enable women to communicate with friends and family. The women will even be able to talk to other women in the world... thereby connecting with the global sisterhood.

The Internet can also be used for e-commerce. The idea of selling products online may generate money and interest in Afghanistan, particularly if we target the Afghan diaspora. However, the economic impact of ICT was not directly apparent to the women.
Community Radio

Community radio programming is already coming to fruition through international organizations investing in independent media. Community Radio is a low-cost and highly effective way to contribute to reconstruction, development, and democracy. It is also the best way to transmit messages in country that is mountainous and isolated. Such radio programming uses members of local community, instead of professional journalists, to create discussions around development objectives and community priorities. Radio can be a tool to stimulate dialogue based on community ownership. Women can serve as the community “communicators” to create programming exclusively for women.

Women for Women International has created a manual called “A Woman’s World” that is uses in all the countries in which it operates. The manual serves as a discussion on women’s rights and role in society, politics, economy, health, etc. and presents holistic look at women’s lives. The Manual allows women to determine for themselves where they fit in the spectrum. The goal of the manual is to expand women’s range of choices. Manual topics and discussions can be very effective as a radio program for women.

Computer Programs for Illiterate Women

Education programs for illiterate women allows for women to skip over their first two prerequisites - literacy in their own language and in English - and jump immediately into learning how to use a computer to access information. Tarahaat.com in India is an ideal example of a source of information that is made to suit the needs of women at the village level. In this website, pictures are used to represent things that are important to women in Indian villages, such as clinics or schools. The women click on the object and access information such as why it is important to educate daughters.

ICT for Afghan Women’s NGOs

Afghan women’s NGOs are small local organizations, largely under-staffed and under-funded. There are twenty such organizations in Kabul alone. Our goal should be to support their agenda as they are more intimately connected with the women and have been most active on the ground.

Their needs include capacity building in terms of computer skills, internet literacy, etc. These NGOs are asking for training in non-traditional skills. ICT are viewed as “modern skills” that empower women. Afghan women's groups seek access to virtual development dialogue and international policy dialogues on Afghanistan through Internet. They need to operate in a space by women for women... a private space where women can reclaim their public voice. These organizations need to transmit their message to global women’s movement for networking, knowledge dissemination, access to donors and funding opportunities, etc. The obstacles they face include high cost, lack of access and connectivity, and the perception that ICT is a male-only activity.
Where Do We Go From Here?

In order to provide the best possible service for Afghan women, we need to take advantage of what already exists. MoWA, in collaboration with UNIFEM, is building women’s centers in provinces. It is imperative that we work in provinces to ensure that access and efforts aren’t only Kabul-centric. The infrastructure for the centers will exist, but they need our support on the content side to fill the center with projects for vocational skills training, literacy, etc.

If we use part of these women’s centers in provinces as telecenters, the technology will be available because Internet roll-out to major cities will be quick. But the obstacle will be equipment. Donors often do not like to support hardware costs of projects...

We must be sure to engage women in the design of centers. We will work with local women’s NGOs to ensure that issues like cost, travel, time, family obligations, literacy, language, etc. are taken into account. The space needs to be for women only so that there are no objections to women’s participation from society and family and no challenge to namoos. Programs need to take varied levels of education into account. We must be particularly careful not to alienate illiterate women.

Sustainability of telecenters is always a contentious issue. It is clear that the center should provide free or reduced cost access to women, students, teachers, the poorest, health care workers, etc. – in short, the ones who need it most. For others, a tiered pricing system can be put in place so center can be open to those who need it, but also remain financially sound.

The most important component to take into account is that we must ensure a 2-way flow of information. Programs should not just be for education and training for Afghan women. Afghan women need to share their knowledge and engage in dialogue. This is where an initiative like the Development Gateway.

What Can We Do To Help?

Multi-organization collaboration needed to make these centers effective. Different organizations can provide technology, software (for illiterate women), ICT Training, other relevant training (such as literacy, vocational skills training, etc.), and microcredit opportunities so the women are able to put their newly-acquired skills to use.

Women for Women International has a prominent role to play for women in Afghanistan. We are the only international NGO that works exclusively with women in the country. And we sit at intersection of local NGOs, international NGOs, and UN agencies, etc. that work with women in Afghanistan. We act as the convener of afghan women’s NGOs, bridging the gap between local and international NGOs that work with women. We have access to poorest and most vulnerable women, our beneficiaries.
We can provide the base and content for Internet or community radio learning materials through our Manual. A visual manual is also in process that can be digitized.

To Conclude...

I asked the women we work with what they would like me to tell you all when I learned that I would be traveling to the U.S. They said that what they want most is education and access to economic opportunities. Afghan women feel that other countries pity them... they want the world to know that – had their been peace in Afghanistan – their country and people would be just as educated and successful as any other. One woman said: “Tell them that Afghan women are very strong and they will do anything for the future of their country and their children”.