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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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Women's rights, gender and ICTs: Empowering household workers in Jamaica

Institute for Gender and Development Studies Mona Unit, University of the West Indies and Mona ICT Policy Centre, University of the West Indies
Leith Dunn and Hopeton Dunn
leithdunn@gmail.com and hopetondunn@gmail.com

Introduction

Household or domestic workers around the world have been using information and communications technologies (ICTs) to organise for gender equality and their basic rights as women and as workers. A range of ICT platforms are being used to conduct public education campaigns and lobby their governments to ratify and implement a new convention approved by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in June 2011. Convention 189 (C189) concerning decent work for domestic workers promotes the Decent Work Agenda for an estimated 53.5 million domestic workers, one fifth of whom live in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Jamaica, an estimated 100,000 household workers, the majority of them women, are using ICTs to encourage the adoption of C189, which is based on four principles: 1) employment promotion (access to employment and a decent wage), 2) working conditions and social protection, 3) fundamental principles and rights at work, and 4) social dialogue.

The rapid expansion of ICTs globally has facilitated the C189 campaign in many parts of the world. The case study of the Jamaica Household Workers' Union (JHWU) provides opportunities to reflect on the current policy situation of women's rights and differences in access to and use of ICTs for the future. The analysis focuses on how ICTs can significantly enhance women's political and economic empowerment, human rights and gender equality.

ILO conferences are major international events providing considerable access to and use of ICTs. In this global campaign, a wide range of ICT platforms have been used to communicate the messages. These ICT platforms have helped to transform the president of the JHWU, Shirley Pryce, from a national and regional advocate into one of the global spokespersons for women domestic workers' rights worldwide.

The use of internet and social media at ILO conferences in 2010 and 2011 which she attended enabled events to be streamed live around the globe. The use of websites, special listservs and e-networks facilitated coverage and comment on the events as they developed. These ICT platforms enabled excited JHWU members and other stakeholders in Jamaica to participate virtually in celebrating the ILO's adoption of C189. Shirley's message – "We did it" – resonated with excitement across many digital platforms.

While ICTs played an important role in the global media campaign, many of the world's 53.5 million household workers were oblivious to this historic event because of the "digital divide". This demonstrates the gap in access to and use of media mediated by class and gender, including the limited access of the majority of domestic workers globally to diverse new media outlets and differences in women's and men's access to and use of ICTs in different regions and countries.

Policy makers play an important role in closing the gender-based digital divide and ensuring more equitable ICT access and gender equality for all citizens. Broader access to ICTs will support national development goals and human rights commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment. A 2011 study on broadband and ICT use in Jamaica by Dunn et al.[1] highlighted a gender divide in access to and use of technologies. It noted rapid expansion of telecommunications and ICT services in the last decade, following the government's policy of telephony deregulation, initiated in 1999, the adoption of the Telecommunications Act of 2000 and phased implementation culminating in 2003. The study noted that mobile penetration was over 100%, with ICT infrastructure growing to facilitate increased wireless access. This was consistent with ITU data for Jamaica[2] which reported growth in mobile subscribers per 100 inhabitants from 14.2 per 100 in 2000 to 108.25 per 100 in 2009. A 2010 ITU report[3] also noted growth in wireless, as well as a reduction in fixed-line connections per 100 inhabitants from 19.1 in 2000 to 11.1

1   Dunn, H., Williams, R., Thomas, M. and Brown, A. (2011) *Caribbean Broadband and ICT Indicator Survey: Jamaica Report*, Telecommunication Policy and Management (TPM) Programme, University of the West Indies.

2   ITU (2013) *ICT Usage Statistics*. www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

3   ITU (2010) *The World in 2010: ICT Facts and Figures*. www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf

in 2009. The Dunn et al. study found that while there was rapid growth in mobile telephone penetration, there was low growth in adoption and use of computers and the internet.

This low ICT use was evident among household workers examined in an ILO-funded Situation Analysis of Household Workers in Jamaica.[4] The 2011 ICT study provided reasons, noting that the high cost of computers and internet resulted from high consumer taxes on computers and IT services. In the ITU's 2010 study,[5] only 22.5% of households in developing countries had access to computers and 15.8% had access to the internet. By comparison, the 2011 ICT and broadband study by Dunn et al. reported that approximately 24% of households in Jamaica had access to a computer and 15.6% had access to the internet.

It is therefore not surprising that the majority of household workers consulted reported that their main point of access to ICTs was the mobile phone. However, in a 2013 focus group with JHWA members, the majority of these women reported that they would like to have access to email, computers and the internet. They also used their mobile phones to manage their personal household affairs, caring for their children and elderly family members while they were at work, and a few used their mobiles to earn additional income.

Gender inequalities

The estimated 56,000 to 100,000 household workers in Jamaica reported by Dunn are part of the country's population of 2.7 million, which includes 51% females and 49% males.[6] The daily lives of these women reflect contradictions in the situation of women in Jamaica compared to their counterparts in many industrialised and developing countries. A very high percentage of women in Jamaica are pursuing education and are enrolled in tertiary education institutions (70% compared to 30% of males). For example, at the University of the West Indies (UWI) 70% of students are female and 30% male.[7]

Advanced education of women has not, however, translated into equality in labour force participation, wages and access to power and decision making, or the elimination of gender-based violence. While there have been significant advances in gender equality in many occupations and employment in Jamaica, several barriers remain, which undermine women's rights and their development. ICT platforms provide opportunities to build awareness of gender disparities, unequal wages and working conditions and can mobilise action to change laws, policies and practices.

Examples of gender inequalities in data from the Statistical Institute of Jamaica (STATIN)[8] and the 2011 Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica (ESSJ)[9] show that women as a group experience lower levels of labour force participation (46% women compared to 54% men); lower rates of employment (83.2% for women compared to 90.5% for men); and higher rates of unemployment (16.8% for women compared to 9.5% for men).

Ascribed gender roles for each sex are the main causes of these gender inequalities: the female family caregivers and the male family breadwinners. However, in Jamaica the reality is that almost half of women (46%) are the main caregivers *and* breadwinners. Nevertheless, the ESSJ reports that more women than men are among persons outside of the labour force (446,200 women compared to 290,800 men). In addition to gender, other factors including age, class, ethnicity and disability also intersect to influence the development status of women and men.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2012[10] indicates that the labour force participation rate for women in Jamaica was 61% compared to 78% for men, indicating a similar trend when compared to STATIN's 2011 data.

Current gender inequalities also reflect historical precedents. Consistent with the demographic profile in Jamaica's 2010 census data, over 80% of Jamaicans are descendants of enslaved Africans who worked in the sugar cane fields and in great houses of British planters between 1655 and 1838.[11] The ancestry of household workers in Jamaica would likely not deviate from this pattern. Current struggles for decent work reflect historical occupational challenges such as labour exploitation and sexual harassment from employers. Jamaica's ratification and implementation of C189 will therefore help to improve the wages and working conditions of over 100,000 domestic workers at high risk of poverty.

Expanding access to and use of ICTs will enhance household workers' political power. This will enable them to influence national policies and decision-making processes more effectively. Gender

4   Dunn, L. (2011) *Situation Analysis of Household Workers in Jamaica*, ILO Caribbean Office, Port of Spain.

5   ITU (2010) Op. cit.

6   Dunn, L (2011) Op. cit.

7   UWI (2011) *UWI Annual Report 2010-2011*, UWI, Kingston.

8   www.statinja.com

9   Planning Institute of Jamaica (2011) *Economic and Social Survey of Jamaica 2011*.

10 World Economic Forum (2012) *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*.

11 Statistical Institute of Jamaica (2010) 2010 Census.

inequality at the highest level of decision making persists, despite Jamaican women having attained universal adult suffrage and the right to vote in 1944. In 2013, females are 51% of the population, but only 13% of members of parliament are women, and 20% of government ministers.[12] Jamaica also has a female prime minister. Portia Simpson-Miller first served as prime minister from March 2006 to September 2007, and was then re-elected and took office on 5 January 2012. While she is publicly very supportive of household workers and women in general, gender inequality in the system of governance and in political and public leadership means that the process of institutional change is slow, hence the need to use ICTs to accelerate advocacy to address structural gender inequalities.

Many household workers are single female heads of their families. They are among the poorest quintile in the population. They are at higher risk of poverty and face increased economic hardships associated with Jamaica's structural adjustment programme newly negotiated with the International Monetary Fund. Impending layoffs in the public and private sector will in turn negatively impact employment levels of household workers as their employers are mainly middle and upper class employees who, if retrenched, are less likely to be able to afford their services.

Poverty is a problem not only for Jamaican household workers but also for the ILO-estimated 53.5 million domestic employees worldwide, one fifth of whom work in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2011, Jamaican household workers earned an average wage equivalent to USD 50 per week, according to a pilot survey of domestic workers conducted for the ILO Caribbean Office.[13] Not surprisingly, the majority of household workers consulted in that study reported that they were unable to cover their basic family expenses. Their low socioeconomic profile would also explain their low level of access to and use of ICTs reported by Dunn et al.[14] and the ITU.[15] Members of the JHWU, therefore, depend on their mobile phones to lobby for decent work and the Jamaican government's ratification of C189.

Household workers' interest in ICTs

In response to JHWU members' expressed interest in learning computer skills to enhance their development, the union is establishing a training institute which includes training members to acquire computer skills. The union's recent acquisition of a computer and internet access in their Kingston office has facilitated increased access to national, regional and international partners and broadened options for advocacy and organising members. Having increased membership to over 2,000 women and established 11 chapters island-wide, using mobile phones, the expectation is that with increased access to and use of the internet and other ICT platforms the union will over time be able to reach and register the estimated 100,000 household workers in the country. If successful, the JHWU would become the largest trade union in Jamaica. This was the view of noted trade unionist Dwight Nelson, now lecturer at the Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Institute at UWI's Mona campus. He made the point while delivering training in trade unionism at three capacity-building workshops for JHWU members held across Jamaica in May and June 2013. This was part of a UN Women-funded project with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. JHWU parish organisers used their mobile phones to mobilise members in the rural parishes of Portland and St. Elizabeth and in the urban centres of Kingston and St. Andrew.[16]

The Jamaican government's accelerated implementation of ICT policy will result in improved access for the majority of citizens to technology platforms. This will have several direct economic and social benefits to household workers. Impacts in the short term can include improved capacity for the JHWU and its members to communicate with each other and with other stakeholders via email and a JHWU website for advocacy campaigns. In the medium to long term, impacts can include improved access to online education, training and certification for members, enabling them to access more diverse and more highly skilled and paid jobs.

An important example of the digital divide with gender and class providing differential access to and use of ICTs was evident in the current campaign to build awareness of C189 among stakeholders in Jamaica. In June 2013, a sensitisation workshop was organised for employers in partnership with the Jamaica Employers Federation (JEF). JHWU members at the low end of the ICT spectrum depended mainly on mobile phones to organise events. JEF members, mainly from middle and upper class backgrounds, were at the higher

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12 World Economic Forum (2012) Op cit.

13 The 2011 minimum wage was equivalent to USD 50 per week for a 40-hour work week at an exchange rate of JMD 90 per USD 1. The National Minimum Wage Order of 25 July 2012 established an increase from JMD 4,500 to JMD 5,000.

14 Dunn et al. (2011) Op. cit.

15 ITU (2010) Op. cit.

16 The workshops for JHWU members were part of a project funded by UN Women with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and implemented by the UWI's Institute for Gender and Development Studies Mona Unit.

end of the ICT spectrum, reflecting use of a broader range of ICT platforms to organise: computers, email and internet, smartphones, Blackberries, iPads and the JEF's website.

This digital divide also influences the capacity of each organisation's members for follow-up. JEF members have immediate access to the electronic presentations from the seminars, while most household workers will have to depend on printed copies which are more expensive to produce and disseminate. This reality reinforces a point made in the ICT studies by Dunn et al. and the ITU that low socioeconomic profile is correlated with low ICT access and use. It also confirms that ICT policies are not gender neutral. Attitudes, access, use and benefits from ICTs are influenced not only by gender and class, but also age, religion and disability, among other factors.

This example of the digital divide also underscores the importance of government policy supporting the UN's ICT for development (ICT4D) agenda. ICT4D is an initiative that seeks to overcome the digital divide between the "haves" and "have-nots" – both related to geographical locations and countries as well as to demographic groups such as the JHWU members and JEF members. The ICT4D agenda also seeks to promote economic development by promoting equitable access for all groups to a wide range of ICTs such as computers, network hardware and software, satellites, radio, television and of course mobile phones. This agenda also includes access to services and applications associated with ICTs such as distance learning and videoconferencing.[17] As household workers increase their access to and use of ICTs, many new opportunities will emerge to achieve their rights as women workers and their goal for gender equality. The process to transition from low to high ICT users and to benefit from the process is clearly explained by Heeks, whose conceptual framework of the transition from ICT4D 1.0 to ICT4D 2.0 is characterised by a state of readiness – awareness of ICTs, infrastructure and the digital divide and also availability of ICT supply. Over time, he argues, changes to ICT4D 2.0 are characterised by an update in ICT demand, usage and use divide. The impact of ICTs is then evident in the achievement of economic and social development goals.[18]

This is great news for household workers. With a supportive ICT policy framework, they can expect to achieve economic empowerment though decent work, improved wages, compensation for overtime, formal instead of informal work contracts, greater social protection, improved professional status, and improved respect and value accorded to household work and its financial contribution to national income statistics around the world. Ratifying and implementing C189, ICT policies and the ICT4D agenda supports the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially MDG 1 on poverty reduction and MDG 3 on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Policy framework for gender equality and ICTs

Gender equality policy

The government of Jamaica has established an enabling policy framework for promoting both gender equality and ICT4D in Jamaica. This is good news for household workers as they advocate for ratification of C189, decent work and women's rights. In March 2011, Jamaica's parliament approved the National Policy for Gender Equality (NPGE). The NPGE promotes gender mainstreaming in all policies and programmes as a strategy to eliminate discrimination against women. It also supports the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Jamaica has ratified.

ICT policy

The government's telecommunications policy decision in 1999 to deregulate the then existing telephone monopoly and to open the market to competition in mobile telephone services[19] has helped to close the digital divide and gender gap in women's access to and use of ICTs in the last 15 years. The mobile phone has become an essential tool for women and men across social, economic, political, religious and other categories, who use the technologies to manage their work, family and social responsibilities.

Gender and ICT research

This analysis of household workers' use of ICTs to promote their rights and decent work underscores the importance of interdisciplinary research on gender and technology. One such study is *Genderstanding Mobile Telephony: Women, Men and their Uses of the Cellular Phones in the Caribbean*,[20] which was the result of collaboration between the

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17 whatis.techtarget.com/definition/ICT4D-Information-and-Communications-Technologies-for-Development

18 Heeks, R. (2009) *The ICT4D 2.0 Manifesto: Where Next for ICTs and International Development?*, Development Informatics Working Paper No. 42. www.oecd.org/ict/4d/43602651.pdf

19 Dunn, H. and Dunn, L. (2006) *Genderstanding Mobile Telephony: Women, Men and their Uses of the Cellular Phones in the Caribbean*, DIRSI.

20 Ibid.

UWI's Mona ICT Policy Centre and the UWI's Institute for Gender and Development Studies Mona Unit. Caribbean studies noted that women were the dominant mobile phone users and reported using them for security, linking family, work and social contacts. For some women, it was their "lifeline". Men used them for networking, profiling and work tasks.

Conclusions and action steps

Globally and in Jamaica, household workers are embracing ICTs to promote their rights for gender equality and decent work consistent with global and national development goals. The JHWA with the support of its tripartite partners and other stakeholders can better galvanise the 100,000 domestic workers using more advanced ICTs to advance the gender agenda for social, economic and political equality for women. To propel this movement forward it is recommended that:

- The Ministry of Labour and Social Security conclude the legal reform process that will enable Jamaica to ratify and implement C189.

- The Ministry of Finance should remove taxes from computers and internet-enabled ICT products to reduce costs and increase access and use.

- The JHWU and its partners should seek additional funding support to expand computer and ICT training programmes to enhance the skills, confidence and ability of its members to increase their use of ICT platforms. This would improve their education, employment options, organising and advocacy to achieve their goals.

- The government should facilitate greater cross integration and collaboration in areas of technology policy and gender equality strategies to enhance women's development and help redress the digital divide.

- Researchers in gender and development, in science and technology and in telecommunications policy in Jamaica and the Caribbean should improve their collaboration to promote women's increased use of technologies for development. ▪