# Empowering Homemakers to Become E–Homepreneurs

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## INTRODUCTION

A number of factors explain why homemakers would want to transform themselves into home workers. Among these are the desire to rebuild confidence in one's own abilities by earning money after years of being a homemaker, the formation of a new network of mother friends who are also business partners, and the learning of skills needed for a home-based business (Ping, 2000). One of the skills that are increasingly being developed among groups engaged in business enterprises is the utilization of ICTs for work. For example, an ICT project in South India involves the setting up of telecenters that enable rural families to access ICT. The training of educated youth, especially women, in operating information shops has resulted in groups of women with small business enterprises and savings cooperatives (Balaji, Kumaran, & Rajasekarapandy, 2002). An important feature of the groups' use of ICTs for work is the strong sense of ownership that the communities develop for the telecenters, as well as the participation of women in the management and use of the telecenters. Close consultation between the project staff and users, gender sensitivity, and the use of local language in the computer programs are the important features of the project.

To specifically address the needs of disadvantaged women in Malaysia, the eHomemakers (http://www.ehomemakers.net) network started a pilot project in 2002 known as Salaam Wanita. The Salaam Wanita community consists of aspiring home workers and homepreneurs from the Klang Valley and Ipoh. Members are urban-based, low-income, and unemployed homemakers (single mothers, disabled persons, caregivers for disabled or aged dependents, and those who are chronically ill like SLE [systemic lupus erythematosus] patients who cannot work or go outside to work due to sensitivity to light and susceptibility to injuries). They are mostly homebound because of physical disabilities or home situations. Some are plagued by depression and suicidal tendencies. Consequently, they are economically constrained due to their inability to find work or business opportunities outside their homes. The Salaam Wanita project is designed to empower these women to network, and to gain ICT and microentrepreneurial skills for socioeconomic self-reliance.

## JUSTIFICATION OF GENDER-GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D) is increasingly recognized by the development community and governments as an effective means for poverty alleviation. Helping the poor and disadvantaged to become e-entrepreneurs requires organizational as well as governance and business-model innovation if the microenterprises are to be integrated into a market-based ecosystem for them ("Imagineering Rural Friendly Solution," 2005). Development goals can be attained if the information and skills transfer is based on a social-justice approach through the building of webs of exchange for the use of the marginalized (Gurumurthy, 2005).

The gender-governance framework[1] was propounded based on eHomemakers' experiences.

The key elements that form the basis of the framework are as follows.

### Empowerment Must Reflect Women's Own Voice

ICT is proven to empower poor women, rural farmers, and slum dwellers in selected cases from Africa to Asia (Gerster & Zimmermann, 2004; Masud & Paim, 1999). These recent analyses show that suc-

cessful ICT4D should be people centered, acknowledging the reality of people's lives with appropriate responses.

Tan (2000) cautions that the information age empowers the individual to become the epicenter of the world, affecting changes with impacts on the psyche as well as the physical body. Racing the engine of change indiscriminately will undermine the well-being of those least able to adapt and affect their ability to act rationally on their own.

Field Belenky, McVicker Clinchy, Rule Goldberger, and Mattuck Tarule (1986) propound that sanctioning women's voices in development allows each individual to be understood on her own terms, helping her to be responsible when her conception of self is rooted in a sense of connection and relatedness to others. Women's roles and maternal practices shape women's thinking about human development. The authors group women's perspectives of knowing into five categories: silence (women experience themselves as voiceless), received knowledge (women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving and producing knowledge), subjective knowledge (truth and knowledge are conceived as private matters), procedural knowledge (women learn and apply objective procedures to obtain and communicate knowledge), and constructed knowledge (women view all knowledge as contextual and experience themselves as knowledge creators). As such, women's development is about helping women to develop authentic voices, emphasizing connection, understanding, and acceptance of women's realities.

An increase in disadvantaged women's ability to go from silence to the other four perspectives of knowing will enable them to enter and sustain viable e-entrepreneurship. Such transformation must be carried out in a lifelong learning manner to promote the knowledge gained.

## The Need for Women's Space

Inclusive women's movements and organizations should be for all women who are part of them. However, a mechanism is needed for integration and meaningful participation (Alpizar & Wilson, 2005). The centrality of indigenous gender knowledge production, and the communication and sharing of information among women stakeholders are essential for gender transformation with the use of ICTs (Radloff, 2001).

In addition, as disadvantages of ICT4D sometimes outweigh the benefits, the issue of gender exclusivity gives rise to the need for safe and secure electronic spaces for women. Such spaces will lead to women-led and women-defined development models (Wood, 2000).

## Control and Ownership

As affirmed by Barch and Leon (2000), redressing unequal power relationships needs different empowerment levels: conscientisation (the disempowered become convinced of the need for actions), recognition as legitimate interlocutors (who determines what issues should be the bases of actions, and who get to be the players), and the building of power to negotiate issues of concern. If these empowerment levels are to be applied to disadvantaged women within the context of e-entrepreneurship development, it means that having the know-how to use ICT creatively and strategically (find, manage, produce, disseminate, decide, and intervene proactively at the individual level) is more important than access to ICT after conscientisation occurs. An ICT-development framework, for disadvantaged women and by disadvantaged women, instills leadership growth and sustainability momentum because the control and ownership belong to women.

Such a framework can also transform the benefactor-beneficiary relationship into a principal-client one with ICT as the catalyst.

## Governance as Accountability

If the poor and marginalized are to gain basic assistance, they need to gain ownership of both the process and the outcomes (Rakodi, 2002). For development organizations to achieve true human security, they need to redress gender inequity and be accountable to women's rights (Rao, 2003). A motivated group under a development framework with strong governance principles (for self and others) brings positive changes to the group members.

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