

## Chapter 5

# Small but Focused: Women (Self) Empowerment in a Rural Village

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, we will offer some reflections on ICT accessibility, uses and perceptions by rural women. Using a sociological conceptual framework based on discussions on gender, ICT gap, and women empowerment (Stromquist, 2014; Mezirow, 2006), we will try to understand, in an innovative way, the available statistical data collected in national and international surveys on this subject; we will also add qualitative data collected in an exploratory study, conducted in a Portuguese rural village. This study was a multi-site ethnographic research project (Falzon & Hall, 2009) with participant observation and in-depth interviews. We analysed the infrastructure conditions and constraints, with the aim of giving a voice to the interviewed women, in order to better understand their representations of ICT and the reasons for their use and non-use. The results allow us to advance some possible paths to mitigate some of the constraints to ICT empowerment among rural women.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Some studies stress that nowadays boundaries between rural and urban tend to be more diluted (Schaeffer et al, 2013). The services society has brought together people from urban and rural backgrounds and has extended the urban area to the adjacent zones, called peri-urban. The role of Information and Communication Technologies ICT has had a considerable role in this phenomenon is considerable. Once the television was introduced, there we are no more isolated places as there had been in the past (Giddens, 2000). Both mobile telecommunications and Internet have also played an important role connecting places and people (Castells, 2002). Therefore, Some authors argue that there are no more places profoundly rural no longer exist because of the pervasiveness of ICT, which take the global to every local (Hetsroni, 2010). But is this actually the broad reality for every population or just a discourse rather than a practice? Moreover, even if there is a TV set and a mobile phone in every house of a small village is the world really liveable through television and/or phone calls?

There is a gender divide concerning ICT. Some cross-cultural studies have shown that ICT can represent a fourth level of exclusion in cumulative gaps that women face: exclusion from education, from the labour market and from income and wealth (UN, 2005). The digital divide is a complex phenomenon that, like any other stratification process, is a form of social inequality (Ragnedda & Muschert 2013). The most used indicators to assess the digital divide are the Internet access (versus non-access), number of sites used to access the Internet, users' skills using the Internet, amount of time spent online, and the variety of activities carried out digitally. It is usual to find, among the literature on the subject, the concept of digital divide based only in the first indicator: the differences between those who have access to the web versus those who do not. Academic research should go further because such a binary classification is limited (Hargittai in Ragnedda and Muschert 2013).

UN points out that women's capacity to explore new ICT potential as an empowerment strategy is constrained in more than one way (2005). One of the constraints affecting women is the traditional gender role that persistently to consider women as the main person responsible for their homes and families, pulling them away from social participation (Primo, 2003). Nevertheless, women usage of ICT is widely different, depending on the technology. A recent study about digital literacy showed that not only the usage of the Internet continues to be gendered, but it also tends to present an age effect among senior women, as senior women use the internet much less the internet than men the same age (Dias, 2012). Concerning mobile telecommunications, women still own fewer mobile phones than men do, although male and female ownership are converging (Cardoso, 2012). On the other hand, women spend more time watching television than men. Television continues to be central

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