

## Third World Feminist Perspectives on Information Technology

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# **THIRD WORLD FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, information systems (IS) researchers have conducted empirical studies of gender and information technology (IT) in business organizations. These studies cover a wide range of topics such as the under-representation of women in the IT workforce (von Hellens, Nielsen and Trauth, 2001) and the educational pipeline which prepares women for careers in computer-related fields (Camp, 1997; Symmonds, 1999). IS researchers have generally embraced an essentialist approach to examine gender differences in the adoption and use of IT (Gefen and Straub, 1997; Venkatesh and Morris, 2000), career selection (Nielsen, von Hellens, Greenhill and Pringle, 1998; Joshi and Kuhn, 2001), employment experiences (Gallivan, 2003; Sumner and Werner, 2001; Sumner and Niederman, 2002), and employment outcomes (Baroudi and Igarria, 1997). More recently, however, researchers have adopted anti-essentialist stances and extended IS gender studies to include individual differences among women (Trauth, Quesenberry, and Morgan, 2004; Trauth, 2002), as well as race and ethnicity (Kvasny and Trauth, 2002; Tapia, Kvasny and Trauth, 2004; Tapia and Kvasny, 2004).

In this growing body of scholarship, a few researchers have argued persuasively for the inclusion of feminist epistemologies in IS research (Henwood, 2000; Adams, 2001; Kvasny, Greenhill & Trauth, 2005). These proponents contend that feminist epistemologies provide theoretical and methodological insights for studying gender as a complex and multidimensional construct for understanding the use, management and regulation of IT in multiple domains such as business organizations, households,

reproductive health, built environments, and the military (MacKenzie and Wacjman, 1991; Ormrod, 1994). Feminist scholars have also called for research that considers not only gender, but also the intersection of racial, ethnic, and class identities (Kvasny, forthcoming).

In this chapter, we adopt a third world feminist perspective to examine perceptions of IT held by black women in Kenya and the US. In what follows, we define third world feminism, especially as it relates to women in the African Diaspora. Next we discuss our research methodology, which consists of interviews with women in both settings. We conclude by presenting our findings and implications for future research.

### **BACKGROUND: THIRD WORLD FEMINISM**

The term “third world” captures the discourse that typifies women of color from around the globe as an oppressed group having relatively less formal education, higher birth rates, and lower incomes. These discourses generally employ “emblems of oppression”, that is, the use of single practices such as foot binding in China, veiling in the Middle East, and female circumcision in Africa as emblematic of the totality of women’s experience in a particular culture. In doing so, women's experiences are collapsed into a single, “victimizing practice” which ignores the multiplicity of ways in which these practices are experienced by women and the ways in which women exercise their agency (Lorde, 1985).

Third world also carries the connotation of colonized populations located in geographically distant nation-states under the economic and political control of so-called developed nations in the West. However, women of color in Western contexts have

embraced a third world identity by applying the term “third world” to themselves and their politics to call attention to similarities in locations of, and problems faced by, their communities and communities in third world cultures (Narayan, 1997). It is a call for feminism without the borders of socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. To silence the voices of diverse women is to deny the opportunity to realize the connections as well as the differences among women. It constructs women of color as voiceless victims who are spoken about and constructed by privileged women in the academy. It is unfair to merely assume that working-class women, middle-class women, lesbians, women in developing countries, and women of color share a common oppression based upon a shared gender. This colonialist stance, according to Narayan (1997), replicates the problematic aspects of Western representations of third world communities, and thus poses an obstacle to the need for feminists to form communities of resistance.

For Smith (1981), “Feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women --as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.” Much of the gender and IT research has been about the under-representation of highly paid, college educated women employed in the primary IT sector. There are relatively few IS studies which employ an anti-essentialist epistemology for the study of the lived experiences of economically disadvantaged women of color engaging with IT to improve their life chances (Kvasny, forthcoming).

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

To gain a third world feminist perspective on IT and to understand what specific differences IT has made socially, politically and economically for black women, we interview 40 black female participants in IT training programs in the US (8) and Kenya (32). The women in the US were participating in a community technology center located in an inner-city neighborhood. The women in Kenya were enrolled in IT bachelor's degree program at a university. These training programs provided women with their initial entrée into the domain of IT.

Using Cameron's (1992) notion of empowering research, we conducted interviews to understand their motivations for participating in their respective IT programs, and expectations for outcomes resulting from this training. In what follows, we focus exclusively on the women's motivations for participating in IT training programs by recounting the common themes which emerged from their narratives.

## **FINDINGS**

Even though women in Kenya have traditionally been active in the informal economies around agriculture and local trade, and the women in the US had limited formal educations and held low-paying jobs in the service sector, they both perceived IT as a panacea for acquiring desirable job skills and employment that would lift them out of poverty. For instance, nearly one-half of the women in Kenya participated in the IT educational programs because they perceived substantial job opportunities upon graduation. The IT sector was described as "*an upcoming field*", and as "*a new field in Kenya and a very dynamic field which affects all aspects globally*". They also believed that there were few IT professionals and therefore skilled people have a competitive advantage. One woman remarked that "*not many people in Kenya have this sort of*

*information [and] this is because currently in Kenya there lacks professionals in this field". Not only were there "job opportunities that come with this vast growth", the jobs were seen as well paying. "I think IT is a field that will provide me with a means of earning good income in future." "IT program have proved to be better paying careers than other technical careers in the country".*

Many Kenyan women remarked specifically about acquiring skills which would enable them to integrate IT into business organizations. For instance, *"the integration of business in the IT program made it even more attractive for me". "This course is not a technical course. I am not interested in details about technologies...I am interested in how I can use IT more efficiently and a broader view."* US women mirrored this belief about leveraging IT skills in the workplace. *"I will learn a lot of computer applications when I finish this class. I will be able to get a better job and better opportunities. I will conquer the digital divide. We all need to learn these computer applications. We will need this information to be successful in the business world."*

Some women were more entrepreneurial, and saw IT as a way to start their own business. *"Since I have the basics of IT and my course provides a grounding I can build up on my own, I could start my own enterprise using this knowledge".* For some Kenyan women, business ownership was once a dream that now can potentially be achieved. *"Given that I would like to learn IT so that I run my own IT firm in future. If I do not take this chance to learn IT, then my dream will not be accomplished".*

We also found that the American narratives were not about gradual movement; they were about rapid escape from oppression and positive outlooks on the future. *"I have certainly had a successful computer orientation and beginning. It is truly an exciting*

*journey. My goal is to continue my training with the ultimate goal focusing on certification status. Then, it is look out world as I am on my way!”*

Kenyan women, in particular, were motivated by perceived gender inequalities. For them, IT offered an opportunity for overcoming oppression and achieving parity with men. *“Gone are the days when there were specific jobs/careers for men and women. Women now want the challenge.” “More and more women want to play an active role in their society and in the world...women want to be involved in the IT sector (not to be left behind by their male counterpart)”. IT represented a vehicle which would enable them to engage in an activity which has been historically perceived as a male domain. “The simple reason why women participate in this IT program is because men do the same thing. Equality is something that women have all been fighting for and have accomplished their goal. If a man can participate in IT, why shouldn’t a woman do the same thing?”* Women not only want to do the same thing as men, they want to adopt IT *“because it is beneficial to them too as much as it is to men... it will enable us as women to compete fully with men in jobs”*.

Women in both countries believed that women in IT-related professions are *“able to successfully represent other women in our country”* and *“able to adapt to contribute to society by raising awareness about what IT can do for a nation”*. Thus the training provided immediate benefits to the recipient, but also external benefits to other women and the entire nation. These were pioneering women who were not content to *“stick to the stereo type that certain jobs are for women”*. They wanted to demonstrate that *“they are clever enough to prove that they can master a tough course like IT and do well”*.

African-American women didn't speak of gender inequities, but they did speak of community solidarity. "*[W]e are taking computer classes that have connected us with the great information divide. We are no longer left behind... We are still traveling on the road of information freedom and enjoying every minute of it. There is so much to be learned, and the information is available because we made the first step, receiving information and taking the steps to change our future in the usage of the computer in our everyday life. We now realize that the Internet is the mode of travel for today as well as tomorrow.*" This woman often uses communal words like "we", "our" and "us" to signify the collective advancement of working-class people in her neighborhood. The sense of freedom and inclusion is important as it signifies a break from the isolation expressed by inner city residents.

## **FUTURE TRENDS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In an IS discourse community comprised of scholars working primarily from a western European frame of reference, what can a third world feminist perspective offer to the scholarly discourse about gender and IT? Third world feminism provides a lens for analyzing the oppression faced by women of color, and the perceived role of IT in alleviating inequities. This oppression comes not only from gender, but also from race, ethnicity, poverty, and institutional policies that limit their human agency. These factors are interwoven, which clearly suggests the need for scholarship that provides a more nuanced understanding of women's issues and IT.

The women in this study saw IT as a mechanism gaining access to other people's privileges. Notably, the two words "market" and "job" dominate the women's narratives, which hints that those women are still on the level of satisfying their most basic needs,

and are desperately seeking employment opportunities for improving their life chances. When examining employment, it is important to consider that jobs provide more than economic ends. Jobs also provide a sense of belonging to society and to a profession. Employment can improve self-esteem, feelings of accomplishment and independence, as well as provide access to healthcare and education.

The women were also attracted by these programs because popular discourses tend to romanticize IT and lull people into believing that practical computing skills are easily translated into high paying jobs. Here practical can be translated into skills desired by employers. Some women even mentioned directly that “*it will guarantee an instant job*”. Thus, the job market was seen as highly elastic for people with marketable IT skills. Women in both settings greatly privileged hands on training and frowned upon theoretical learning because practical training could be more readily converted to marketable skills.

Given the pervasive history of racial and gendered oppression, women across the African Diaspora have limited mechanisms for representing and demonstrating the fullness of their abilities, aspirations, and accomplishments. These women did, however, generate self-defined perspectives which grew out of their struggle to appropriate IT. The dominant discourse of IT as a mechanism for empowerment and increased workforce participation resonated with the women’s deep and justifiable frustrations. Even though they suffered, they believed that IT presented a real opportunity for change.

Gender-as-variable studies which measure differences in IT adoption, use and employment do little to enact social change; they simply measure the status quo. IS researchers should therefore adopt a feminist or other gender-as-relations approaches to

understand the situated nature of IT as experienced by diverse women, and enact praxis oriented methods such as action research and participatory design techniques to create socio-technical interventions that enable women to realize their economic, cultural and political potential. Then, perhaps, third world women can fully realize other people's privilege.

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## **TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

### **Anti-essentialism**

The belief that while there are biological differences between men and women, gender is not a biological matter; it is a social construction used to create and perpetuate systems of privilege. The term woman (feminine, weak, submissive), for instance, is socially constructed as a binary opposite from the term man (masculine, strong, assertive).

### **Essentialism**

Essentialism is the belief that women are biologically different from men, and that this biological difference has implications for the ways that we think and act.

### **Gender as Relation**

This is an anti-essentialist view in which women are believed to have unique experiences. The research aim is not to compare men and women, but rather to center women's needs, behaviors, ways of thinking, and experiences.

### **Gender as Variable**

This is an essentialist view in which gender is seen as an objective, often quantifiable, demographic variable. Women are perceived as a single group with common needs, values, and behaviors. Women are generally compared to men to demonstrate gender differences.

### **Feminism**

Feminism is a set of social theories and political practices that are critical of past and current social relations which privilege men as a group. Feminism involves the promotion of women's rights, and the belief that men and women should be politically, economically and socially equal.

### **Third World Feminism**

Third world feminism is a critical set of theories and political practices which gives voice to the issues of women of color from diverse socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Third world feminism challenges to mainstream feminism have highlighted the ways in which issues central to the lives of women of color have been misrepresented or rendered invisible, and have demanded recognition of the global imbalances in which mainstream feminist agendas are structured.