

**Flexible, Open and Distance Learning: An Enabler or Barrier to Women's  
Empowerment through Education and Learning**

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## Introduction

This paper addresses the potential of Flexible, Open and Distance Learning (FODL) as a modality not only to deliver education equitably and equally, but one that removes barriers to women's learning and enhances empowerment, particularly in a development context. Since there is no single strand of feminist research that examines the complexities of this issue holistically, a review of the literature was undertaken from three perspectives: namely, that of feminist research and discourse on FODL, the approach of the 'technofeminists' to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on which FODL depends, in conjunction with an analysis of the writings of the main proponents of Gender and Development (GAD) theories.

While most of the early writings on women and distance learning focused on how its open, flexible approach could open up doors for women in developed countries denied access to intramural educational opportunities, concerns were raised as early as the mid-1980s that it might not have been as 'woman-friendly' as anticipated. This led to a number of studies being undertaken in tertiary distance education institutions over the next two decades examining what barriers women faced and how these could be overcome. The findings of four such studies, two from universities in the North, and two from the South, reveal very similar challenges which women encounter due to their socialised gender roles.

While these analyses were addressing gendered learning and pedagogical issues inherent in FODL, there was the simultaneous development of a separate discourse by feminists concerned with the rapid acceleration of man-made technology which was exclusive of women and female input. This approach focused particularly on the gendered exclusivity of ICTs, but did not consider how this could impact on women's access to educational delivery platforms that were becoming increasingly ICT reliant. In transferring such technology to education and learning in Third World countries, development specialists promoting gender equality and women's rights, have not evaluated how combining extramural learning with ICTs will impact on women's empowerment and gender-based discrimination in all areas of women's lives.

Given that these three theoretical strands have not been melded, this paper concludes by examining a most recent learning model which can be considered to blend all three gender frameworks. This is a most successful program of Lifelong Learning (L3) for women farmers in Tamil Nadu, India, which has factored in all the concerns raised about women's exclusion and inequality. This program has facilitated a process and system of "Life Long Learning" in rural communities leading to knowledge empowerment, particularly among women who have been enabled to translate the knowledge empowerment into livelihood security. It has done so by utilizing a modern ICT in the form of mobile telephones to enable uneducated, illiterate women to alter their lives remarkably, taking the journey from total personal and economic disempowerment, to where they are making key decisions about their own lives and that of their families and their communities.

## **Learning by Distance: A Gendered Experience**

The current application of media and technologies to enhance teaching and learning is an outcome of the ongoing global communications revolution which has accelerated over the past two decades. Once it was access to computers that posed challenges for online learning, now, however, it is connectivity to the internet and mobile telephony that defines the digital divide. It is not just connectivity to ICTs, but also interconnectivity between instructor and learner and among learners which has the potential to enhance the learning experience or present challenges to knowledge acquisition. While this is a global issue, it is one experienced more adversely in developing countries where the digital divide is more explicit between urban and rural areas, the rich and poor, and is particularly marked along gender lines, to the extent that concerns are raised that it is exacerbating rather than closing the educational gender divide.

Extramural, flexible, open learning offers, according to UNESCO<sup>1</sup> 'instructional systems in which many facets of the learning process are under the control of the learner'. It is learner-centred and aims to deliver 'learning opportunities where, when, and how the learner needs them.' (<<http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/lwf/doc/portfolio/definitions.htm>>). As such it was initially regarded as an ideal enabler for time-poor female learners who could access second chance, and often, first-chance education while managing constraints of home, family and workplace. Women, either 'housebound mothers of small children', (von Prummer 2008, p.182) or those undertaking the 'Third Shift' (Kramarae 2001, p.3) were seen as its primary beneficiaries. This defines women learners in their traditional gender roles which are the realities of women's lives but also challenges their capacity to benefit fully from the learning experience.

A number of participatory research studies have been undertaken over the past two decades by feminist educators involved in FODL examining how these gender roles impact access and outcomes. By applying a gendered lens to distance learning, a student survey undertaken in 2007 at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the largest in India, found that female gender roles placed additional responsibilities for women undertaking distance education programs. Its findings clarified that the type of support available for women very much depended on marital status, with gender roles determining marked differences in learner support. Women regarded study 'undertaken by the male learners,' as a 'family enterprise' whereas females had so '...internalised the gendered social world order' that they expressed gratitude for spousal support (Sharma & Samdup 2009, p.175) Other feminist scholars of distance learning have also noted that such gendered differences in socio-cultural roles necessitate women having to fit in their educational programs around 'domestic and childrearing responsibilities', and regard their learning needs as secondary, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. (Gouthro 2005, p.8)

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

The importance of the homeplace has been raised by a small number of educational gender analysts because often the home as a place of learning in itself can present barriers for female learners. Not only is the homeplace a site of learning by distance, it is also a metaphor for the knowledge women acquire in that environment. What is learnt at home is disregarded as knowledge acquisition since what is deemed worthwhile has according to Gouthro been defined by 'the marketplace', dismissive of gender differences, shaped by masculinist values, learning needs and learning styles. (Gouthro 2005, p.7) This reflects the concerns expressed by von Prummer who argues that '...the gendered effects of students' home also being their place of study are more pronounced in the "virtual" or "electronic" university'. (von Prummer 2008, p.190) This disadvantage can be greatly compounded if the home is a threatening environment, a place of discord and violence, which subordinates and disempowers women and erodes their self-worth and confidence. As such, the impact it can have on the female FODL student requires a lot more analysis from a gender perspective.

All educational delivery systems have been designed with the model of the male learner regarded as normative. So, providing a learning environment sensitive to gender differences and women's needs was the focus of a study conducted at the University of South Australia when non-interactive Web 1.0 platforms were deployed. Approaching the research from a feminist perspective, the author drew conclusions about the gendered nature of the '...issues of confidence, overcoming isolation, and connected teaching' (Hipp 1997, p. 41). Participatory, inclusive methodology with sensitivity to gendered differences, and 'a commitment to respect and include women's ideas, theories, experiences and action strategies...' was employed. While the author echoes the conclusions of many who regard distance education as a means of increasing the number of women '...by overcoming the barriers of distance, time and multiple commitments', she goes beyond to address issues of equality of access to and equity within the system. (Hipp 1997, pp.41- 42). What the study failed to consider was the importance of an inclusive FODL model which applied various modes of communication, support and gender-sensitive '... instructional design and learning strategies' (Green & Trevor-Deutsch 2002, p.7). Given that the vast majority of academics lack professional pedagogical training at a time when there has been acceleration in tertiary institutions adopting blended, flexible methodologies involving distance learning, this area of pedagogy requires immediate attention, particularly how gendered differences impact on learning outcomes.

A later study undertaken a decade ago at the University of Stirling went beyond earlier research to examine different learning styles and whether with online delivery modalities, these were gendered. (Monteith 2002, p.6). While feminist scholars had hitherto evaluated women and distance learning, this study noted that there was a lack of analysis of the simultaneity of gender issues and computer-based online learning. (Monteith 2002, p.9). The most relevant aspects of the study is its examination of key theories of gender and internet usage which regarded the internet either as a 'gender neutral' medium where males and females enjoy equal online participation, (Monteith 2002, p.9) or the alternative view which saw '...the virtual realm as a reflection of the offline world' one based on

gender inequalities, within a dominant masculine paradigm. Such a viewpoint was in fact reinforced by the study's findings which revealed that many of the female students interviewed deemed 'the virtual realm' to be gendered, setting '... a tone for their interactions...'(Monteith 2002, p.10)

The third theory, largely developed by Dale Spender, posits the idea that the internet (and by extrapolation the mobile phone) is a 'social/communication medium', a female domain, an egalitarian 'village square', for meeting and learning.(Spender 2000, p.1) As noted by Wajcman, feminists such as Spender responded much more positively '...to the dawn of the digital age'. (Wajcman 2009, p.147), seeing in Spender's metaphor, 'a feminine media, providing the technological basis for a new form of society that is potentially liberating for women.' (Wajcman 2009, p.148). This optimism was very much reflected by the United Nations in 2003, with ICTs regarded as providing '... enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the Information Society.' (<http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html>) Such a Society was envisaged as an enabler of '...women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality...'. (ibid). However, if this is to eventuate and the 'village square' is to be the learning environment for FODL with women's realities and preferred learning styles taken into account, it therefore follows that ICTs have to be regarded by the female learner as relevant, accessible and user-friendly. (Sharma & Samdup 2009, p.166)

### **Learning, ICTs and Gender Equality**

Since FODL is by its nature dependent on ICTS, the gendered impact of their application needs to be assessed before one can evaluate its effectiveness as a learning modality. FODL originated in the First World and is predominantly technology driven, dependent on contemporary ICTs to increase access to e-learning opportunities. Online learning with its application of ICTs to enhance distance education enables learning activities to become more flexible and distributed widely. The current move from non-interactive distance learning to interactive platforms has transformed the web into a learning medium that is '...more participatory, characterised by user-generated content and peer critiquing'. The second generation Web 2.0 employs social media tools such as '...blogs, wikis and social networking sites which '...offer a rich set of tools to support new forms of communication, sharing and networking'. (Conole 2010, p.142).

Yet in considering whether such technological advances facilitate or hinder women's learning and self-empowerment, one has to consider whether and how ICTs promote women's learning styles. This reality is reflected by Wajcman, who posits that '... women are largely excluded from the processes of technical design that shape the world we live in.' ( Wajcman 2009, p.145) Adopting a 'technofeminist' lens, Wajcman queries the role played by '...technology ...in embedding gender power relations' ( Wajcman 2009, p.144) and argues that the '...processes of technical change can influence gender power relations'.

(Wacjman 2009, p.143) Yet, despite closely examining the many gendered impacts of technology, Wacjman has not turned her technofeminist lens to FODL, a development which is very much needed to bring the divergent strands of feminist discourse together.

This recent shift to new generations of socially interactive platforms has the potential to expedite the transformation to learner-centred pedagogy which should suit women's learning styles. Yet, it has to be kept in mind that while such changes can be applied to improve the quality and the quantity of educational provision, they must be used appropriately in such a way that they facilitate a gender inclusive, participatory learning experience that benefits both women and men equally. This can be achieved if the potential barriers of 'relevancy, availability and usage' (Green & Trevor-Deutsch 2002, p.7) faced by women when accessing ICTs are addressed. Whether deciding to pursue continuing education or accessing first-time learning, women will weigh very heavily how relevant this is to their lives and families.

Concerned that FODL as a learning modality may not be compatible with connectedness, von Prummer, similar to Hipp in the earlier study, (Hipp 1997, pp.41- 42) , cautions that as virtual learning becomes more widespread there is a need to look to the impact of '...gender and the equitable participation of women in online education'. (von Prummer 2008, p.179). As Wacjman highlighted the alien nature of man-made technology, von Prummer coming from a pedagogical FODL perspective, notes that there are definite gendered differences in '...access to, and control over ICTs available resources'. In line with technofeminist thinking she raises '... know-how and computer literacy' as potential challenges for female distance education students, along with 'learning styles, communication preferences, and usage of ICTs' (von Prummer 2008, p.179). While these differences may have narrowed to Spender's 'village square' with the application of online social interaction platforms, computer-supported learning (CSL) still has the potential to reflect a '...gender imbalance that exists within society' (Gunn, 2003.p.14)

As indicated above, women's ways of learning have to be taken into account when examining the role that ICTs play in promoting their empowerment via FODL. Two leading Indian educationists argue for a feminist approach to pedagogy which promotes women '...reclaiming and validating the learning that comes from their life experience as women'. (Dighe & Reddi 2006, p.12) This argument goes beyond the validation of the homeplace as a female learning environment to the individuality of the female learner herself, recognising that women bring to the learning situation their own'... personal histories, learning styles and expectations ...shaped ...by a society characterised by male power and privilege'. (Dighe & Reddi 2006, p.12). These factors have to be particularly taken into account to redress what Wacjman regards as 'The neglect of women's knowledge, experience and skills as a resource...' (Wacjman 2002, p.357)

## **FODL: Learning for Development**

If FODL presents challenges to women's education and learning in the technologically developed world, the question has to be addressed of how can it be used to 'reach the unreached'. How can it be a vehicle to empower women and redress gender-based discrimination for the vast majority of women and girls in developing countries where women's socio-economic and political status lags far behind, and women's educational attainments are at much lower levels?

According to UNESCO, approximately 775 million adults 15 years and older still cannot read or write, with two-thirds thereof women. Even though the size of the global illiterate population is shrinking, the female proportion has remained virtually steady at 63%-64%. (<<http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/adult-youth-literacy-data-viz.aspx>>). Such a vast discrepancy resulted in the commitment by UN Member States at the Millennium Summit in 2000 '...to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and all levels of education no later than 2015' (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen 2004,p.3).This Millennium Development Goal(MDG) however, is unlikely to meet its targets, particularly through conventional learning approaches. It has been recognised by the Commonwealth of Learning, the only international, intergovernmental body focused totally on ODL, that 'traditional methods of education' will be unable to meet the 'massive expansion of human learning' required to redress such inequities. (<http://www.col.org/PROGSERV/PROGRAMMES/Pages/mdg.aspx>).

While the answer is seen to lie in the outreach capacity of FODL as a tool for development, such high female illiteracy rates in developing countries, coupled with women's lack of ICT expertise, present the most challenging barriers to women accessing both formal and non-formal learning via '...the information economy'.(Sandys 2005, p.16) Third World feminist educators are very aware that of the importance of ICTs with the gap between the illiterate and literate increasing 'the problem of digital divide'. (Dighe & Reddi 2006, p.5) Such a divide is reflected in 'the gender divide', with women not only the majority of illiterates but also '...in the minority of users'. (Gurumurthy 2004, p. 22) Thus, ICTs as a learning medium may be a '... a double edged sword' exacerbating gendered societal and class differences. (Melhem&Tandon 2009, p.5) Such barriers have to be overcome if FODL is to be applied to raising the status of women by meeting their learning needs.

One of the most powerful players in the development context is the World Bank which through its global programme, *InfoDEV*,<sup>2</sup> adopts an economic rationalist stance by regarding ICTs as having the possibility of ameliorating some of the challenges women face as learners. These not only include illiteracy but also '...poverty, time scarcity, sociocultural factors, mobility, and relevancy', thereby leading to 'women's empowerment and gender equality'. Yet while regarding ICTs as a panacea for women's learning needs, its approach needs to be more realistic about women's access to

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<sup>2</sup> Promotes innovative projects on the use of information and communication technologies  
(<http://www.infodev.org/en/Page.About.html>)

technology, additional funding to meet costs and the need for skilling in ICTs. (*InfoDev* 2010 p.4) This concern regarding access was echoed by Daly, who saw costs as a key factor in conjunction with women's limitations in the '...use of national or cosmopolitan languages'. (Daly 2003, p.5) While these approaches acknowledge the challenges within the system, feminists from the South such as Gurumurthy regard ICTs as being organised on 'elitist, patriarchal, techno-centric, non-democratic lines...', arguing for a more radical approach by adopting 'transformatory gender politics...' (Gurumurthy, 2004, p.46)

### **Feminist Discourse, Development Theories and Education**

Such transformation could be possible if feminist theories of development over the past four decades could be merged with pedagogical and technofeminist discourse to enable a clearer understanding of the role of ICTs in women's empowerment. This period has witnessed a complete change in how development theory has been influenced by the second wave of feminism and beyond. At the outset, in the 1970s, the focus was on women's exclusion from Third World projects, which generated the call for Women in Development (WID) to be recognised and women's labour to be utilised fully to lift these countries from poverty. By the time of the 1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, feminist analysis of gender roles and gender inequalities, shifted the debate to one of Gender and Development (GAD) which aimed to integrate women into development and in doing so, '...to transform unequal social/gender relations and to empower women'.(Dighe & Reddi, 2006,p.2).

Women were not regarded by GAD proponents as passively receiving assistance in a top-down paternalistic approach. (Tasli, 2007 p.2). With the influence of feminist thinking on how gender relations operated in society, power relations inherent in gendered value systems power (Luttrell & Quiroz, p.3), GAD emphasises empowerment which '... urges for radical changes in the socio-economic and political structures of our societies'. (Tasli, 2007 p.2) This theory has integrated fundamental human rights into its framework, moving the discourse from a needs-based approach to one of entitlement by rights. This advances the argument of gender equality since '... The language of rights lays claim to public space for women' (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2007 p.14) and women being active agents of change. The nature of 'power over' was questioned, with GAD advocates promoting 'power with' and 'power to do' as key to women's personal empowerment.

These theories have in turn had a direct influence on the role of women's education as a vehicle for their development and empowerment. One of the seminal African development feminists, Sara Longwe, has questioned whether conventional schooling promotes women's empowerment or subordination 'within the existing patriarchal system'. (Longwe, 1998 p.25) She argues that women's empowerment '...is the process by which women collectively come to recognise and address the gender issues which stand in the way of their advancement'. (Longwe, 1998 p.20) She has developed a framework to gauge the five "levels of equality" in women's empowerment, which move from a welfare approach, to access, conscientization, mobilisation, to control of resources. It is possible to monitor this '...ascending level of equality' to determine whether '...progression or regression is taking place. (Longwe, S.H, 2002). It is at the final stage that self-empowerment has

been achieved, with ‘...disadvantage caused by the way in which power relations shape choices, opportunities and wellbeing’ (Luttrell & Quiroz, p.6) having been overcome. This is in keeping with Kabeer’s argument that ‘empowerment entails change.’ (Kabeer 2005, p.13), both ‘...within and outside the household’. (Kabeer 2005, p.16). Yet, while both Longwe and Kabeer have examined education and women’s empowerment separately, Longwe has not applied her ‘empowerment framework’ to FODL not has Kabeer analysed ICTs women’s learning through an empowerment lens.

If education is to be a vehicle for women’s empowerment in developing countries and FODL the means of delivery used to facilitate such personal transformations in women’s lives, the GAD theories and approaches adopted to promote women’s social, economic and political development have to be applied with the same rigor to education and learning. A GAD lens needs to be applied to the application of ICTs to promote gender equality via online learning to address ‘...the central issue of women’s access and control over technology’. (Bushan, 2008, p.131) When women are designated as the poorest of the poor in these countries, the challenges of how they can access computers, their lack of confidence in using the technology and their unfamiliarity with isolated online learning (Gunn,2003.p.23) have to be prioritised and viewed from a GAD empowerment perspective.

Issues of empowerment and the barriers female learners encountered were addressed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), in a study which examined how women regarded themselves as ICT users and whether it ‘... submerged in different roles they perform as women’. (Bushan, 2008, p.132) While this study applied a feminist analysis to women’s gendered ODL experiences, finding that women did not have the same self-confidence as their male counterparts, it did not adopt a GAD perspective to understand how their learning met their development needs. With more domestic obligations and less computer access and ownership, women could only attend to their own learning needs after their duties had been met. (Bushan, 2008, p.136) A Commonwealth study undertaken in a number of developing countries a decade ago concluded that ‘...lack of computer skills’ presented a ‘severe barrier for women in accessing the new ICTs for ODL’ (Green & Trevor-Deutsch 2002 p.12) This could be largely attributable to stereotypical gender roles which define skill sets as gendered, with the ‘typing’ skills associated with females being accorded far less acknowledgement than the technical computing skills ‘defined as masculine’. (Derbyshire, 2003, p.9) As expressed by the technofeminists, such conditioning is in itself a barrier to women achieving in an area requiring expertise in a technology in whose design they have not been involved and whose relevance they question, thereby challenging women’s confidence, self-esteem and furthering their disempowerment..

The expansion of FODL in Africa presents special challenges given that the continent ‘...makes up 19% of the world’s population yet is home to only an estimated 1% of all Internet users’. (Beaudoin 2009, p.114) According to a recent report, the key access barriers are ‘... limited bandwidth (17%), followed by the lack of financial re-sources, inadequate human resource capacity and limited electricity...’ (Isaacs & Hollow 2012 p.20) The gendered impact of this was

recognised by the Commonwealth of Learning which raised concern about the effect this would have on women distance learners (Derbyshire, 2003, p.39). While women were 'well represented' in open and of distance learning, this was delivered via '...print media, radio and face to face meetings.'(Derbyshire, 2003, p24), a situation it was feared would change with new ICT delivery.

In Ghana, for example, women have been more successful in formal learning by distance. This has been largely attributable to the Government's promotion of its distance education policy to address a 'wide gender gap' in tertiary education where the '... male-female ratio has hovered around 70-30'. (Kwapong, 2009, p.2) and female on-campus '...enrolment has ranged from 27% to 35% since 2000'. (Kwapong, 2009, p.4) These tertiary figures are representative of most of the sub-Saharan African countries where gender parity in primary education is becoming more common, but huge female dropout rates in high school have precluded many girls proceeding to formal tertiary studies. Yet, as in Ghana, distance learning is showing a great deal of very promise for female access,<sup>3</sup> (Kwapong, 2009, p.4) with such high female participation rates are largely attributable to the type of vocational courses offered and the fact that they are not ICT-based but relying on printed resources and f2f interactions with tutors. (Kwapong 2009, p.5). With FODL becoming more reliant on computer-based internet learning, '...cost, location and regulations. ...'(Isaacs & Hollow 2012 p.37) will undoubtedly be inhibitive factors, particularly for women.

With a specific mandate to address the gendered impact of ICTs in Africa, GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment) was established in '2004 in 12 countries' with a commitment '...to equality and a social justice collective agenda of research about African women's sense of agency and empowerment with Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)' . (Buskens & Webb 2009 p. ix) This recent development emerged due to the realisation that the current direction of '...the information society's development' was far removed from women's lived experiences, especially the 'poorest of the poor' who experience not only deprivation but also gender- based discrimination. (Buskens & Webb 2009 p.4) This reality has to be taken into account if ICTs are to be a tool for women's empowerment and not another source of marginalisation, given that '...the use of ICTs to enhance one's life presupposes a measure of control over one's space and time' (Buskens & Webb 2009 p.5), conditions that many women in developed, let alone developing countries, do not enjoy. So while 'access and affordability' are definitely key for women using ICTs to learn online, often for women because of their gender roles, '...it is more a question of experiencing the right and having the space for self-determination', (Buskens & Webb 2009 p.4) and being sufficiently empowered to undertake self-directed learning by distance.

### **Empowering Women through ICTs: Lifelong Learning (L3) for Farmers**

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<sup>3</sup> Winneba University having 53% females and 46.5% males for the 2006/7 school year, the University of Cape Coast 49.7% females and 50.2% males in Dip. Ed. distance education courses.

Despite the many factors inhibiting women's learning by distance utilising contemporary ICTs, there are a number of success stories that illustrate a women's development empowerment model. Such an example has been produced by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) which facilitates developing Commonwealth countries to increase access to learning using distance education and appropriate technologies. (<http://www.col.org/about/whatis/Pages/default.aspx>)<sup>4</sup> A stated in its 2009-12 Strategic Plan, COL's aim is also to '...promote greater gender equality through the effective use of open distance and technology-mediated learning'. It is the only international organisation mandated solely to focus on ODL for development and to do so in a way that women and men are equal beneficiaries.

One learning model developed by COL which has used ICTs as a vehicle for women's self-directed learning and empowerment in a development context is their program for Indian women farmers in Tamil Nadu. Since this pilot program has only been operational for the past four years there has been no gendered analysis undertaken as yet from an educational, development or ICT perspective.<sup>5</sup> The story of this remarkable learning transformation was told by their representative, Mrs Peria Jakkamal, to Commonwealth Education Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2009. From Chinnapottipuram Village she spoke on behalf of '...5000 members of women self-help groups (SHGs)...whose 'occupation pattern revolves around agriculture, dairy and goat rearing'. The gender roles of women were very prescribed by societal norms and values with the vast majority illiterate, having had no access to basic education. ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc). 2009)

This model captures much of what feminist analysis of education and development has been proposing, since it originated with *Vidyal*, a grass roots women's network of self-help groups focusing on women's livelihoods and economic empowerment. It has provided an inclusive, participatory, bottom-up approach, so that whenever '...we voiced out views and gave suggestions they appreciated us'. This was a huge incentive for these women and strengthened their self-esteem to proceed with access to bank credit and adult literacy programmes, learning to read and write in Tamil. ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc). 2009) It was a self-empowering process vital for the important preparation for the community of learning in which these women were to participate.

With their self-esteem boosted they were able to be proactive and approach COL about its Lifelong Learning (L3) initiatives. As a learning facilitator, COL's approach was both inclusive and self-

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<sup>4</sup> When it was established in 1988 at the beginning of the ODL era, the vision was that COL '...should be in the vanguard of using ODL and information and communication technology (ICT) developments' to assist Commonwealth member states '...optimise their potential and develop their human capital through extending quality education access to remote regions, and to people with limited or no face-to-face learning options'. (<http://www.col.org/about/whatis/Pages/default.aspx>).

<sup>5</sup> I was one of the first to examine this project from a gender perspective two years ago in a presentation at 6<sup>th</sup> Pan Commonwealth Forum on ODL at Kochi, India. What motivated me to do so was the remarkable account of this learning program presented by one of its participants, Mrs Peria Jakkamal to Commonwealth Education Ministers in Kuala Lumpur the previous year.

directed, bringing the women in as equal partners in the L3 process, encouraging directing them to be responsible for their 'learning process vis-à-vis group enterprises' ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc).2009). This was to be an adult learning exercise with '... no trainer-trainee relationship' with '...the focus more on self-directed learning using various information and communication technologies'. With positive incentive to draw upon the homeplace as the source of knowledge and learning, using '...the analogy of managing our kitchen in the houses' to '...develop market, financial and business proposals'. ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc). 2009), empowered these women learners to call on what was familiar, enabled them to realise that without '...an understanding of the finance, market and business, one cannot become an entrepreneur.' Their decision to employ ICTs in the form of mobile phones to enhance their learning and as '...a valuable tool in managing our enterprise' enabled the group to opt for the technology that was appropriate for '...learning, exchanging information and managing emergencies' and one that could be incorporated into their '... business, credit and repayment plan'. ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc). 2009) These women had become not passive recipients but active partners in '...Knowledge Management' through 'Self-Directed Learning'. (Thamizole, 2011.p.6)

This exemplifies in many ways an excellent learning prototype having been generated by the relevant demands of their lives and where '...indigenous knowledge' was used and they were directly involved in '...designing the learning process'. This is a learner-centred program with mobile telephony enabling these formerly illiterate village women to '...receive simple learning messages every day', augmented by using DVDs prepared by *Vidayal*. In her appraisal of the program to Ministers, Jakkamal was able to summarise in fact what are some of the most commendable approaches for ICT-facilitated learning programs developed for women in a development context. That she considered herself as a partner not 'a mere student' in the learning enterprise which '...had a direct relevance to my livelihood' and could be undertaken without interrupting her daily routine addressed many of the barriers encountered by women learning at a distance. It was an enabling process over which the women had control by purchasing their own ITC equipment and 'deciding the learning materials' while at the same time according to the Longwe model reached the empowerment stage of control over resources by '...investing in new livelihood activities utilising the credit of the banks'. ([www.col.org/.../L3Farmers\\_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc](http://www.col.org/.../L3Farmers_MrsPeriaJakkamal.doc). 2009)

While this program was undertaken by the women, it was a balanced gender process that involved all in the community, women and men. In its first internal evaluation for COL undertaken in 2011, a consultant concluded that '...most of the respondents' families supported the learning objective of the woman' which in such a predominantly patriarchal culture was quite an achievement. By sharing '...the content ...with her husband and with other members of the family', '...the entire family (was enabled) to learn new things and expand the knowledge base on goat rearing'. (Thamizole, 2011, p.22) Not only did this enable the barrier of family control over women learning at home to be avoided, the methodology also ensured that the group learning needs determined materials' preparation '... within the broad principles of ODL' with

up to five voice or SMS messages delivered daily along with f2f training on mobile phone usage. (Thamizole, 2011, p.23). In keeping with the concept of women's preference for connected learning raised by Monteith in the Stirling study considered earlier, the learning style this program promotes '...is one which places emphasis on relationships, empathy, careful listening...where cooperation and collaboration is stressed rather than competition'. (Monteith 2002, p.25)

The technology used was both appropriate for the user and the type of learning and adhering to one of the key tenets of FODL, '... learner-centred', and '...selected based on an assessment of the learner needs, taking into account the desired knowledge and skills'. (Green & Trevor-Deutsch 2002 p.17) Most importantly its outcomes empowered a formerly marginalized group of poor, illiterate women farmers (Thamizole, 2011.p.40) and was in keeping with Indian development feminist, Kabeer's assessment of empowerment which '...refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability...'(Kabeer,1999,p.435.)

This model program which will be taken to Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific has according to Green's criteria 'the mandatory ingredient (of) relevancy'. (Green, 2003.p.37) In examining how ICTS can best serve women, as in the case of the Tamil Nadu village women, it is essential that such program actualise how ICTs '...can help them do their work better or faster, keep themselves and their family fed, healthy and safe, and expand their horizons'. As is the case with *Vidayal*, those organisations with '...a valid and respected role with women' should adopt a leading role '...in ICT implementation, training and capacity building', applying ICTs 'in gender-appropriate ways' (Green, 2003.p.37).

### **Mobile (M) - Learning: The Way Ahead?**

The Tamil Nadu case study serves to answer the many concerns raised by gender analysis as to how FODL, ICTs and development programs can be developed and implemented in such a way that the learning process enables women's self-empowerment. It thereby begs the question of whether *m-learning* may be the ICT assisted platform that poses the least barriers and enables women to achieve equitable access to FODL. While mobile phone use in the developing world is exploding, yet the fact that 21% fewer women than men own a mobile phone in low to middle-income countries puts women at risk of being left behind. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the gap is estimated to be 23%; in the Middle East, 24% and in South Asia it rises to 37%. . (<http://designchallenge.mwomen.org/en/mobile-gender-gap>)The result is a mobile phone gender gap estimated to be 300 million women in the developing world without access to this potentially life-enhancing tool. (<http://designchallenge.mwomen.org/en/mobile-gender-gap>)

The importance of mobile telephony as a technology for women's empowerment is, nevertheless, becoming more widely accepted. The Cherie Blair Foundation was established in the United Kingdom with the sole purpose of closing the gender gap in mobile phone usage and ownership bringing '... the

benefit of mobile phones to an additional 300 million women. (GSMA 2010) It has promoted partnerships between UNESCO and the Punjabi company Mobilink and a local nongovernmental organisation (NGO), to teach 15-24 year old females to read and write using mobile phones. These phones were subsidized by the company and enabled the learners to receive in Urdu ‘...six messages a day on a variety of topics including religion, health and nutrition’, which they read and wrote ‘...responding to their teachers via SMS’. (GSMA 2010) Conservative resistance in a Muslim community to young women having their own mobile phones had to be addressed, but as with the L3 women farmers’ program in Tamil Nadu, this was overcome with the realisation of broad community benefits. (GSMA 2010)

## **Conclusion**

Both the COL and UNESCO projects meet the strategies recommended by the World Bank to overcome the barriers to the access and usage of ICTs by women. Not only was ‘a gender perspective’ and ‘adequate and sustainable technology transfer’ ensured, the ICTs were in both cases ‘...appropriate to women’s needs’. (*InfoDev* 2010, p.9). In a way that proves challenging for other ICTs, these learning delivery platforms met their requirements, and enabled the user to ‘...develop a sense of ownership’ thereby addressing some of the concerns raised by technofeminists and gender development specialists about the potential for ICTs to alienate women and not enhance their empowerment. They are in keeping with von Prummer’s assessment that Open Learning Environments (OLEs) ‘...must be designed as women-friendly, non-discriminatory places, and students’ personal environments and life situations must be taken into account’. (Von Prummer 2008 p.189)

While market forces are definitely behind the rapid acceleration in mobile phone usage of the past decade, mobile/cell phones are now assuming a key role for ICT instruction and learning at a distance, particularly for communities of women hitherto denied access to basic education. Von Prummer cautions that ‘...women will be disproportionately disbarred from entering and enjoying the virtual learning environment’ if ‘...existing male-dominated, androcentric academic and political decision-making processes’ (Von Prummer 2008 p.190) are not countered by integrating issues of gender equality. Perhaps by moving away from such a traditional learning environment dominated for centuries by academically conservative, exclusive, masculine educational ideologies to the non-formal community learning environment where women own the means and content of self-directed learning, may provide an answer.

As the educational arena moves from the world of digital adopters to digital natives, the rapid acceleration of learning platforms and the blurring of the real and virtual worlds is going to necessitate an integrated analytical approach to how gender equality can be enhanced by FODL. This could well come about if the different strands of feminist and gender theories were not at variance but blended, so that the discourse on women/gender and FODL and that of technofemism could merge with GAD analysis to produce a holistic analysis framework. This could serve both to inform FODL as a tool for women’s development and evaluate its impact on their empowerment.

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