

Gender & ICT

Creating a
Difference



AWARDS 2005

THE GICT AWARDS 2005 WINNER



The Pallitathya Help-Line

HELPING WOMEN HELP THEMSELVES

The Pallitathya Help-Line (Call Center for the Poor and Underprivileged) was established by the D.Net- Development Research Network organisation in 2003. It was based on D.Net's assessment findings which showed that lack of timely and relevant information was a major bottleneck to rural development, and a leading factor in the exploitation of the underprivileged, particularly women.

Nowhere was this assessment more accurate than in rural Bangladesh, where women were heavily deprived of access to relevant information and were kept dependent on age-old superstitions and traditional belief systems. Women also had very little opportunity to escape the confines of their homes to pursue careers and earn their own income.

In response to this situation, D.Net's Pallitathya Help-Line set out to achieve the following goals:



"How may I help you?" A quick response from a Help-Desk operator using a database-driven software application and the internet (opposite page). A day's work of a mobile operator (at left).

- develop information service delivery in a cost-effective, easily scalable and affordable manner,
- provide information services that has minimal to absence of gender bias,
- empower members of rural communities with access to information,
- challenge age-old perception of gender roles in Bangladesh society,
- challenge the notion of women as a relatively unimportant client group for information services, and
- achieve a critical mass of information service users to reach financial sustainability in partnership with the private sector.

To do this, the Help-Line deployed women in the community as "Mobile Operator Ladies" who move from door-to door to enable other women – mostly housewives – to ask questions related to livelihood, agriculture, health, and legal rights via a mobile phone.

"The mobile ladies were each trained for four days at D.Net's head office to introduce the idea of a Help-Line, and to assess how the user's questions should be addressed," explained Dr. Ananya Raihan. "They were provided with an umbrella and a bag marked with the Help-Line logo, while small signboards were put up at different locations in the villages. During the weekly bazaar days, the local facilitators distributed Pallitathya leaflets for promotion," he added.

Initially, the mobile ladies were received with suspicion and distrust. To counter this, they urged potential users to try the services for free. "When the users started to get results from the Help-Line, word quickly spread through the villages and the mobile ladies were welcomed to homes," related Dr. Raihan.

"When the women users discussed their concerns or problems, the mobile ladies determined whether the question may be answered instantly or were suited for other modes of reply – either through mobile phone after three days, or reply through letter. If she thought that the question is better answered through the letter-to-letter option, she suggested this to users. Ultimately, it was the users' choice which option she preferred."

D.Net took advantage of the availability and popularity of mobile phones in 80% of Bangladesh's villages to bring the Help-Line service literally at the community's doorsteps. By offering affordable rates, differential pricing strategies, heavily subsidised call offers and even "free time" on designated days, the project enabled a wide range of users to avail of the service. It proved particularly useful to those who were relatively immobile due to social constraints or work-related constraints.

More importantly, the Help-Line provided users with anonymity to overcome their initial hesitance in raising questions and seeking solutions to their

individual concerns. For instance, anonymity helped overcome long-held beliefs that women's health problems should be kept secret and seen as a source of shame for both the woman and her family.

Inquiries coursed by users through the Help-Line were addressed by women Help-Desk operators with the use of a database-driven software application and the internet. Help desk operators either responded directly to inquiries using the information database or the internet or a combination of both, or direct questions to resource persons from government, health groups, human rights organisations and other non-governmental organisations.

Dr Raihan stressed that "the Help Desk operators were also trained to reply to the questions and record the information about the users. One important training tool was arranging for them to visit the villages and discuss their livelihood problems to simulate the process face-to-face. There was an initial learning curve for the operators, but gradually, they acquired the skills to quickly decide on the mode of answer and find the answer in the database."

Representatives from these groups have partnered with D.Net to provide a steady stream of responses to frequently asked questions and continuously expand the information database. This multi-sector partnership in support of livelihood, health and legal information for underprivileged communities is the first of its kind in Bangladesh. It has also resulted in a network of local and regional service and goods providers which can act upon the information needs of target communities, resulting in a dynamic "electronic directory." Current information demands from the communities, coupled with the latest available data are used by private, public, civil society services and goods providers to collaborate on strategic projects addressing the needs of the target rural communities.

What truly makes the Pallitathya Help-Line project stand out is its deliberate incorporation of the economic empowerment of women in its concept and design.

As mobile operator ladies, women from the rural communities were consciously given a crucial role as "infomediaries," increasing their self-worth, their potential to earn, and their knowledge about various issues. Employing women as help desk operators also enhanced their knowledge of issues, considerably improved their communication skills, and provided them with their own income independent from males in the family.

Apart from employing women, the information provided by the Help-Line directly addressed women's needs which were mostly related to economic empowerment. Women who availed of the Help-Line service professed a higher self-assessment and realisation of their potential and worth in society, realised increased incomes, and increased authority over spending decisions.

By providing the relevant information and guiding women what to do with the information, the Pallitathya Help-Line Center has greatly and effectively contributed to the social and economic empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh.

THE RUNNERS-UP



Seelampur Community Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Center

BUILDING LIVES and BUSINESSES through ICTS

In Seelampur, India, where extreme poverty is the norm among the community's Muslim minority, several findings stood out in a survey conducted in 2002: urban poverty that was worse than rural poverty, a very low status accorded to women, scant knowledge and information, and lack of intervention in the area by any organisation.

Thus, the Seelampur Community Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Center was established in 2003 with one vision: to



Women's traditional skills in embroidery (*opposite page*) are augmented by their newly-acquired skills for computer graphics (*at left*), resulting in creating modern, innovative designs which are more marketable.

"put information and communication technologies in the hands of the poor" by maximising the innovative use of ICTs to empower people – particularly women – in addressing urban poverty. For this reason, the winning project was named Putting ICTs in the Hands of the Poor.

The ICT Center is a unique tripartite alliance among Datamation Foundation Charitable Trust, the UNESCO, and the Babul-Uloom-Madrasa, an orthodox Muslim religious school in India. Community-based ICT centres are not new, but what makes the Seelampur ICT Center unique is its location within the Babul-Uloom-Madrasa. Traditionally, Indian women were forbidden to enter a madrasa – far too long an exclusive territory for religious learning and training for males.

The establishment of the ICT Center within the madrasa as a venue for Muslim women to learn ICTs was made possible by the strong advocacy of Maulana Zafruddin Ahmed, a prominent "ulema" or religious leader in the community. With the support of other religious leaders, a "Mentor Mother" conducted extensive recruitment and mobilisation within the community to encourage women to enroll in the ICT Center. These efforts represent the first crucial steps in encouraging gender equality within a Muslim community. It also shows ICT's potential to dramatically effect change in fundamentalist beliefs.

Using a combination of various ICT tools ranging from computers for internet access and online connectivity via e-mail, to telephones, to digital cameras and scanners, the ICT Center has focused on three main activities to accomplish its goal: encouraging livelihood skills among women through vocational CDs, providing computer skills training, and developing linkages for marketing women's traditional arts and crafts products.

Women of Seelampur learn from over 50 interactive multimedia empowerment and skills development computer disks (CDs) modules on vocational skills, small businesses, and human and legal rights. Skills and vocational modules range from tailoring, embroidery, candle making and liquid soap making, to management of courier and tiffin centres, basic literacy, confidence-building and personality development. Building

on their newfound skills, the Datamation Foundation helps the women form "self-sustaining self-help groups" once they have completed the modules.

Through the help of UNESCO, the ICT Center also established eNRICH (<http://enrich.nic.in>), a local community browser where women get basic computer training and are able to express and record their concerns on health, education, livelihood, and other matters related to the community's needs. The data gathered from these recordings feed into an Ethnographic Action Research which identifies, among others, the appropriate modules for vocational activities, skills development, and rights training. It also provides current and continuous feedback into the status and concerns of Muslim women in the community.

The ICT Center also established support mechanisms in the form of capacity-building, marketing and financial networking for the women to engage in income-generating opportunities. For example, the women's traditional skills in arts and crafts are augmented by their newly-acquired skills for computer graphics, resulting in creating modern, innovative designs which are ultimately more marketable. Through the Datamation Foundation, women are able to directly market these products and designs, and participate in various product exhibits and events within the community and nearby areas. Only recently, a website www.seelampurmart.org was set up to market Seelampur arts, crafts and services to a wider, global audience.

Empowerment for the Muslim women of Seelampur now comes in both social and economic forms. Foremost among the social benefits is pride of place in having the ICT Center as their own venue to constructively interact, identify common issues and solutions, and gain strength from each other. Here is where they talk about a transformation in their lives – from their former timid, homebound and uninformed existence, the women are now self-confident, mobile, well-informed and able to express their concerns and needs. For the first time, the women are able to see themselves differently and aspire for self-improvement beyond the confines of their homes and their community.

The economic benefits complement the women's social transformation and translate their aspirations to action. In acquiring vocational skills and computer skills, the women also acquired the means to pursue livelihood projects, and employment related to computer work. In the process, they also discovered their inherent abilities to lead, manage, organise, make decisions, and generate their own independent income.

Together, social and economic empowerment for the women of Seelampur are manifested in the greater appreciation of education for women, the acknowledgment of women's valuable contributions to the family income, and the visibly higher status now accorded by the community to self-confident women who are able to live productive lives.



eHomemakers network of Malaysia

FROM HOMEMAKERS to HOME BUSINESS OWNERS

A few years ago, it was a widespread belief in Malaysia that women with families only have two choices: either to find employment to make a living while leaving their family at home, or to stay at home and become full time homemakers.

Today, thanks to the advocacy efforts of the eHomemakers network, Malaysian women can consider a third option: to balance both work and family life within the home through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The eHomemakers network of Malaysia was founded as the “Mothers for Mothers” project in 1998, at the height of the Asian economic crisis. It was initiated by a single mother with a volunteer group of homemakers who faced similar challenges in maintaining their own home-based businesses.

According to Usha Krishnan, web editor of eHomemakers, “Women who have devoted many years of their lives as mothers find that they have to deal with self-esteem issues when they start their home businesses. What exactly am I capable of? Will I succeed? What will my family say? These are some of the common questions that create initial self-doubt.”

At the same time, there is also the perception that home-based business owners are not taken “seriously,” since they do not work from a multi-storeyed office complex. “They constantly have to prove that the quality of their products and services are at par with those of traditional businesses,” she explained.

Other challenges involved acquiring the management skills to run a home business, as well as developing personal skills necessary to sustain it.

“In practice, home-based work requires excellent time management skills, ability to multi-task, self-discipline and many other qualities. New home workers falsely assume that working from home will solve all problems related to childcare, structured office schedules, and finance,” she said. Even when working at home, balancing work and home life is still a given.

Armed only with their meager pooled contributions and sheer determination, Mothers for Mothers organised seven “Working @ Home” conferences for other women in Kuala Lumpur and Penang to promote “homepreneurship” or the working at home concept.

Within the first few years, membership grew to include more socially and financially disadvantaged members like single mothers, grandmothers, the disabled,



Proceeds from sale of quilts made by the eHomemakers Quilting Group help disadvantaged members of the network (opposite page).

Basket-weaving lessons promote skills development and entrepreneurship (at left).

women with chronic illnesses, women taking care of elderly/disabled family members, and low income and unemployed women. A static information-oriented website called <http://www.mom4mom.com> was built to meet the growing need for information from homemakers and to provide a free online venue for networking among the women. It was also at this time that the group began its advocacy efforts with the Malaysian government to recognise working at home as a viable alternative economic option for women.

As the group's efforts gained more widespread support and recognition, Mothers for Mothers evolved into the eHomemakers network in 2002 – Malaysia's first and only group of home workers, teleworkers, and home business owners who utilise ICTs. The core team of eHomemakers operates in a 100% virtual office. All of them work at home, managing the portal and cyber activities, as well as organising ground activities for members.

A one-year government grant helped evolve the mom4mom.com website into the eHomemakers website www.ehomemakers.net, now a dynamic trilingual portal where members are able to network with each other, advertise their products and services for free, teletrade, barter exchange, and find teleworking assignments, while working within their homes.

The website is tailored to contain simple layman's terms, vital information on business plans, registration requirements and how-tos for potential homepreneurs. Frequently visited sections such as Homebiz Management, Home-based Profiles, and IT Tips and Issues enable women to efficiently work at home, pursue entrepreneurial ventures, and sustain home businesses.

"For wider exposure, members can also pay a nominal fee to have their home-based businesses advertised in our quarterly earth newsletter, *Home + Work*, as well as our monthly e-newsletter," she said. Over 400 home-based businesses are currently advertised online ranging from administrative work to accounting, translation, cooking, to landscaping.

A Forum Board facilitates networking and exchange of ideas and actual experiences, while experts in business development and entrepreneurship help respond to frequently asked questions. Home workers and those who aspire to work at home also seek advice, warn others of online scams, and participate in discussions centred on raising children, gender roles, and common family concerns.

The Forum Board also acts as a venue for healing, particularly for single mothers, cancer patients, the disabled, and those with relationship problems seeking a cathartic outlet for their personal crises. Malaysian society frowns upon open discussions related to marital infidelity and abuses, but the Forum Board offers anonymity that enables victims to express emotions, doubts, guilt, and feelings of helplessness without being judged or condemned for their actions. Open discussions also allow for sharing and camaraderie, particularly among those who were former victims themselves and were able to move on with their lives.

Apart from the website, eHomemakers expanded its efforts to pursue other initiatives: ICT training, work at home resources, gender-based ICT research, advocacy, and Salaam Wanita, a special project for homebound disadvantaged women in the Klang Valley and Ipoh area.

Salaam Wanita promotes skills development and entrepreneurship, motivation, and ICT training to operate a common marketing platform for the different ICT tools to communicate with each other – internet technology to mobile phones and vice versa, and SMS to facsimile machines. The women beneficiaries were provided with second-hand mobile phones for their livelihood projects, while a marketing website www.justmarketing.com was developed to advertise their products and services. Enquiries for Salaam Wanita's products and services are made through the website and orders are transmitted to the members through the integrated ICT tools application.

eHomemakers has also published a book entitled *Working@Home* in four languages, and is currently working on a guidebook on setting up home offices, in partnership with the Malaysian government.

Researches conducted by eHomemakers on gender-based ICT issues were conducted through focus group discussions, home visits, and questionnaires among members. Results were sent to relevant government ministries to support advocacy work.

Perhaps the biggest milestone in eHomemakers advocacy work was the Malaysian government's recent declaration of support for the home office concept. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is currently developing a working paper that identifies the types of home businesses in the country, taking into account other factors such as business registration, number of workers, and insurance issues, among others.

Over the past eight years, eHomemakers' efforts have overcome tremendous prejudice against women at home who were previously seen as "failures" or "useless" in contributing to the family income. Women now feel more confident in venturing into home-based businesses and speaking up about women's issues and concerns related to economic empowerment. At the same time, homepreneurship allows women to spend time with their families while earning a separate income for themselves. It has also raised their status within the home, as they gain confidence and acquire negotiation skills in dealing with husbands and in-laws.

Working at home using ICTs may not be the final and best solution for women's economic empowerment in Malaysia, but as eHomemakers expands its visibility through increasing government, media and corporate partnerships, homepreneurship has become a viable third alternative for women in search of personal and financial independence.

Creating a Difference: Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment through ICTs



This year's Gender and ICT Awards distinguishes itself from the previous year with its focus on ICT initiatives that promote women's economic empowerment as it relates to development. Specifically, economic empowerment is measured through the level of achievement in the following:

- overcoming marginalisation, oppressive social norms, and inadequate support and responsibility from government in terms of access and rights to resources, and making sound decisions;
- offering women choices and opportunities;
- encouraging women to fulfill their potentials; and
- giving voice and capability to counter their powerlessness.

Despite years of projects and practices, development and empowerment for majority of the world's women remain elusive, as poverty continues to be a growing global phenomenon.

The UN Statement of Commitment of the Administrative Committee on Coordination for Action to Eradicate Poverty defines poverty as:

“...a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society... It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal and fragile environments without access to clean water and sanitation.”

Poverty is multidimensional. It relates to aspects that are economic (income, work, ownership of assets, credit, etc.), human (health, education), political (power, rights, vote), and socio-cultural (status, dignity, social exclusion) which have an impact on the individual's protection (against insecurity, risks and vulnerability) and overall well-being and integrity.



In the Philippines, GICT Awards finalist SCALA (Sharing Computer Access Locally and Abroad) project trainers and students collaborate on a curriculum for out-of-school youth and the community (*opposite page*).

To address poverty, basic issues of access to and affordability of education and health are key areas for attention. However, with the advent of globalisation and modern technology, merely providing basic health care and primary education is no longer enough. Poverty has multiple dimensions which can be rooted to the lack of choices and the lack of power to make choices. Imbalances on who wields power are in turn rooted in gender inequality that stem from cross-sectional issues of race, religion, status, culture, and geographical location, among others. Without addressing the different ways by which men and women are socialised and subverted, poverty is bound to stay and manifest in vicious cycles.

Economic development that addresses poverty can no longer be measured merely in terms of financial income. Over the years, other non-income measurements have been identified to determine economic development levels. These include the quality of life index as measured through literacy rate, infant mortality and life expectancy. Another is the human development index which combines longevity with living standards and educational attainment. A third measurement focuses on the provision of basic needs such as adequate nutrition, primary education, health, sanitation, water supply, and housing – services which the poorest segments of the population should have access to. Finally, there are two gender-related measurements which have been specially developed: 1) the gender-related development index which also measures life expectancy at birth, access to education and per capita product – but more importantly, focuses on the differences between men and women along these areas as a way to measure the economic status of the female population in each country; and 2) the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) which measures gender inequality in economic and political spheres of activity. The GEM captures gender inequality in three key areas:

- Political participation and decision-making power, as measured by women's and men's percentage shares of parliamentary seats;
- Economic participation and decision-making power, as measured by two indicators: women's and men's percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officials and managers and women's and men's percentage shares of professional and technical positions, and
- Power over economic resources, as measured by women's and men's estimated earned income (PPP US\$). A higher value indicates a higher level of gender empowerment.

If we intend to address poverty in its broader definition of a denial of choices and opportunities which results in disempowerment and further impoverishment, we need to pay closer attention to and design economic/development plans based on indicators that measure lack of empowerment and the extent of realisation of basic human rights.

Looking at poverty and development through a “gender lens” requires us to analyse the situation from the point of view of how it affects women and men differently. A situation of poverty in a community does not mean that all individuals in a community suffer the impact of poverty and its vicious cycle in the same manner and degree. Women, more than men, bear the brunt of poverty.

Seeing Poverty through a “Gender Lens”

The “gender lens” is like a pair of spectacles that allows us to see both the forest and the trees. This means we do understand not only the big picture but also the intricacies of how the big picture came about, specifically probing into hierarchical, unequal and unjust relationships between women and men. This requires a consciousness that continuously challenges socially accepted roles of women and men which directly or indirectly relegate secondary or minor roles to women.

For example, figures show that in most countries, women actually do twice as much unpaid work as men – amounting to 10–35% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – and work longer hours than men. On average, women bear 53% of both paid and unpaid work in developing countries, and 51% in industrialised countries. Roughly 66% of women's work is expended on unpaid activities. For men, the reverse is true where unpaid labor makes up only 25%. The significant contribution of women's paid and unpaid work to global production continues to remain invisible today in indicators that we use in economic development planning. Mahbub Ul Haq describes this reluctance to measure women's unpaid work as an “unwitting conspiracy”.

“There is an unwitting conspiracy on a global scale to undervalue women's work and contribution to society. In virtually, every country in the world, women work longer hours than men yet share less of the economic rewards. If women's work was actually reflected in national statistics, it would shatter the myth that men are the main breadwinners of the world.”



This is one of the reasons why poor women are often seen as “housewives” rather than as breadwinners. Through the “gender lens”, it becomes quite easy to “shatter the myth that men are the main breadwinners of the world”, as it allows us to fully acknowledge the value of women’s unpaid work and women’s work hours.

Applying “Gender Lens” in Using ICTs for Economic Empowerment

Five key erroneous assumptions first expounded by Ingrid Burkett in 2000 remain very much relevant today, because they prevent us from better understanding the inequalities of today’s global information society:

These five key erroneous assumptions are:

- Give the poor a computer and they will move from being information poor to information rich.
- Information inequality is a North/South issue.
- Access to more information enriches people’s lives.
- The “information society” will be more democratic and participatory.
- Given enough information, we can solve all the world’s problems.

Access as experienced by the poor, particularly women, goes beyond providing a computer. Access includes putting into place the necessary physical infrastructure such as electricity, phone lines, computer hardware and software and servers. It also means establishing social infrastructure such as computer literacy, local content, training; and exercising political will (including putting in place the legal framework) and economic ability. Given the problems of access, especially for the poorest and most marginalised communities, the relevance and practical outcomes of ICTs are harder to demonstrate. Since it is necessary to show more direct practical outcomes, ICT-related programs or initiatives can end up initially serving only the practical gender needs of women, which in turn are more likely to reinforce socio-cultural expectations of women and their traditional roles in society. If we are to alleviate poverty using the “gender lens”, the issue of access must include addressing the roots of poverty that lie in the social, political and economic dimensions of access and the gender disparities within each of these aspects.

Access to information alone does not enrich people’s lives. How people make sense of it, evaluate it, reach their own understanding of it and transform it into knowledge, and then use it, certainly can. In the developing

world, ongoing projects have shown that the poor know the kind of information they need in order to better their lives.

How ICTs are used mirrors the power structure in the real world. The production of information and who controls it is about power, and we need to understand these power relationships by closely examining the origins of information to its purposes and consequences if we are truly committed to eradicating inequalities in the “information society”. Since the organisation, presentation and origins are all inscribed with cultural, social and political messages, this means that both the medium and the message are socially constructed and hence, cannot be gender neutral, could be gender blind, and can very much be gender biased. It is important that local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and local content developed by women, is made available as widely as possible as these have much more value to development and poverty reduction.

Information alone is not knowledge. Information becomes knowledge when the local context is added, linking information to the user’s environment and particular situation. Very often this link has to be made by the user herself. A wealth of information that tries to measure and address poverty already exists. But what is needed to resolve real problems is not additional information, but rather, political will, recognition of personal and social responsibilities and ultimately, action on the part of governments, private sector and civil society that prioritise social and gender justice. In a non-partisan enabling environment, ICTs can and are making a difference.

Creating a Difference in Women’s Lives

UNESCO recently conducted a research project that assessed the use of ICTs for poverty reduction. The project sought to inspire exploration and discussion, and facilitate the exchange of ideas, experience and skills among poor women. The women described poverty as “an ill that can only be eradicated by education”, “lack of adequate resources, including correct and timely information”, “a proper place to live”, “less than three meals a day”, and “having too many children without owning property”. Interestingly, poor women have also described situations of gender inequality as poverty.

“We think, if we have money we don’t have any problem, but more than that, living without freedom under a drunkard husband is poverty.”



“Limited opportunities for women to explore their talents is poverty.”

“Living without a husband in a young age and depending on sister and brothers for everything, denial of participating in public functions and any good event, always having fear in the mind, how to talk, how to laugh... and not having courage to overcome all these can be called poverty.”

From the eyes of children, poverty is equivalent to widowhood, illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, old age, “not knowing English”, “lack of relatives”, “lack of water”, “lack of rain”, “a drunkard father...” These perceptions mirror some of the women’s understanding of poverty in the form of gender inequalities and power imbalances between the two sexes.

For most if not all of them, the family is seldom the venue for equal or equitable distribution of resources. Women and girls find themselves at the lowest receiving end of goods and resources, if they are to receive anything at all. The unjust distribution of resources has been linked to the patterns of a poor man’s expenditure and his tendency to withhold income from the family. However, many policies are centred on the family as the basic unit of society in general – with traditional tendencies towards comparing size vs. total household income, without giving due attention to gender disparities in the allocation of household resources.

Access to ICTs represents real or symbolic access to modernity, the future, education and knowledge. From this perspective, ICT centres can become spaces from where the poor project and develop a sense of change, opportunity and possibilities. However, ICT centres do not always become conducive spaces, and definitely not for all poor people. Most of the hopes and aspirations of the poor are projected on their children rather than on themselves, for some, if not many, see themselves eternally trapped in poverty.

It is a sad reality that the poorest and most marginalised will never see the practical application of ICTs in their lives, but it is possible that ICTs will affect the lives of their children. Many telecentres in Africa and India have failed because they focused more on the provision of the technology rather than turn these centres into conducive spaces that support local networking and local knowledge systems. While it is the children of the poor who usually see these spaces as an opportunity to further develop

their autonomy and confidence, when ICT centres are designed with a “gender lens”, poor women begin to catch sight of the same vision.

Finance and technology are not only usually seen as male domains, but both money and technology represent power, and whoever wields either of these, tend to receive respect. Money and technology in the hands of poor women and in general will help address gender inequalities.

The winning projects in this year’s Gender and ICT awards exemplify initiatives which go beyond the practical applications of ICTs and the immediate provision of independent income to women but also go straight to the heart of addressing gender inequalities.

The Pallitathya Help-Line project stands out for its deliberate incorporation of the economic empowerment of women in its concept and design. Its women “infomediaries” have professed a higher self-assessment and realisation of their potential and worth in society, realised increased incomes, increased authority over spending decisions, and increased awareness and understanding of information relevant to decision-making.

Empowerment for the Muslim women of Seelampur addresses both social and economic aspects. The most visible social change is pride of place in having the ICT Center as their own venue to constructively interact, identify common issues and solutions, and gain strength from each other. Here is where they talk about a transformation in their lives – from their former timid, homebound and uninformed existence, the women are now self-confident, mobile, well-informed and able to express their concerns and needs. For the first time, they are able to see themselves differently and aspire for self-improvement beyond the confines of their homes and their community.

eHomemakers’ efforts have overcome tremendous prejudice against homebound women who were previously seen as “failures” or “useless.” Its women beneficiaries have acquired valued negotiation skills and are now more confident in venturing into home-based businesses and speaking up about women’s issues and concerns related to economic empowerment. Working at home using ICTs may not be the final and best solution for all women’s economic empowerment, but eHomemakers’ homepreneurship has become a viable third alternative for women in search of personal and financial independence.

The 2005 Gender and Information and Communication Technologies (GICT) Awards focuses on information and communication technology initiatives that promote women's economic empowerment and development in the Asia-Pacific. Economic empowerment is the ability to overcome marginalisation and oppressive social norms; provides choices and opportunities for women, encourages women to fulfill their potential, and enable women to acquire the voice and capability to counter their lack of socio-economic-political power in the community. Emphasising this focus are three major criteria: using ICTs to promote women's economic empowerment and gender equality; upscaling of initiatives and community-centred technologies; and promoting cooperation and social networking.



SPONSORS The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment using ICTs. www.apc.org/

The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) is a global network of women who support women networking for social change and women's empowerment through the use of ICTs. It is a programme of the APC. www.apcwomen.org/

The Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) is the leading international multi-stakeholder network committed to harnessing the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) for sustainable and equitable development. Ranging from grassroots practitioners to policy-makers, GKP members and partners are innovators in the practical use of ICT for development. www.globalknowledge.org/

The Gender and ICT Awards is supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) www.sdc.admin.ch/ and the Department for International Development (DfID), United Kingdom. www.dfid.gov.uk/

For more information about the GICT Awards, please write to: genderawards@apcwomen.org or visit www.genderawards.net