OPPORTUNITIES OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR PALESTINIAN WOMEN : MEDIA AND DISTANCE EDUCATION*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the sociocultural opportunities provided by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for Palestinian women are dwelled on. The utilization of the ICT in education has led to the development of online distance education as a new learning environment. The aim of the paper is to elaborate and discuss the status of new communication technologies in the quest of Palestinian women via reviewing literature and evaluating statistics for the case of distance education.

Keywords:*Information and communication technologies, mass communication, media, distance education, women in Palestine*

BİLGİ VE İLETİŞİM TEKNOLOJİLERİNİN FİLİSTİNLİ KADINLARA SUNDUĞU OLANAKLAR: MEDYA VE UZAKTAN ÖĞRETİM

ÖZ

Bu çalışmada, Bilgi ve İletişim Teknolojilerinin Filistinli kadınlara sunduğu sosyokültürel olanaklar üzerinde durulmaktadır. Bilgi İletişim Teknolojilerinin eğitim alanında kullanılması Internet üzerinden uzaktan öğretimi, yeni bir öğrenme ortamı olarak geliştirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, yeni iletişim teknolojilerinin Filistinli kadınların mücadelesindeki yerini, alanyazını ve istatistikleri uzaktan öğretim örneği için inceleyerek değerlendirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bilgi ve iletişim teknolojileri, kitle iletişimi, medya, uzaktan öğretim, Filistin'de kadın*

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization is not a new phenomenon in the sense of increasing interaction between different countries, but it has apparently accelerated in the 20th century. Since the 1970s, the volume and speed of economic, financial, technical and cultural interchanges between countries have increased dramatically (Doyal, 2005). The concept "globalization" is addressed to explain these changes. The concept has dual faces: bringing momentum for both integration and fragmentation (Clark, 1997). As Gaddis puts forth, forces of integration work with the motivation to satisfy material needs, on the other hand forces of fragmentation emanate from intangible needs. Besides the economic and political elements of globalization, technological improvements and spread of ideas have facilitated the sociocultural effects. Data gathering, storing and their dissemination via computers, has accelerated globalization and acted as catalyst for further development of the communication technologies (Timisi, 2003). These technological developments have also led to societal changes like democratization, freedom of communication and participation. Identities, public opinions are in interaction with the new media and the audiences themselves have become the producers of knowledge and disseminate them as messages. The technologies have increased the magnitude of information and made them more accessible.

Mass communication media provide information about societies. They are an efficient channel of interaction. In this way, they can affect power relations in societies and thus reformulate power bases. This is why the media is considered an effective mean for changing prejudices in gender relations as well and pave the way for more egalitarian societies. The rise of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the 21st century has accelerated the emergence and spread of new ideas and new social identities. The mass communication media strengthened by the ICT provide the background for contesting the hegemony of authoritarian social and political figures (Skalli, 2006), like the women contesting men in patriarchal societies of developing countries. As Skalli quotes from Annabelle Sreberny, "women and the media are increasingly taken as key index of the democratization and development of the Middle Eastern societies" (2006). Women have been deeply affecting the democratization efforts and communication technologies have been the enabling tool. From leaflets to blogs and forums, women utilize old and new communication means, in order to produce and disseminate knowledge. Due to the international communication channels owing to the ICT, women can even establish international groups and alliances which provide environments conducive to more interaction.

The multi dimensions and speed that the digital technologies grant to new communication means have made McLuhan's global village possible. Though this is criticized to be a virtual reality and "digital divide" as a concept has been developed to explain the limited access of the underprivileged groups in the society to the technologies such as computers and the Internet, the ICT at least help create an awareness about these gaps. Global differences in the ICT infrastructure and economic issues like cost of connectivity, access to technologies lead to unequal access of digital and network resources which is known as the "digital divide". According to Campbell, digital divide occurs in two ways: within a country and between countries (2001). An example for the former can be the divide that exists between young and old, male and female, the more and the less educated. The international digital divide refers to the inter-country comparisons. Most of the scholar work on globalization and the effects of the ICT is criticized to be gender blind. Alampay argues that ICTs are never gender neutral (2006). Recently this neglect has begun to be overcome with the development of academic literature on "gender anddevelopment" issues. But it is underlined that more studies are needed to analyze the different

impacts of global changes on men and women, especially exploring how women's lives and social roles are restructured. ICT are instruments for immediate exchange of information and ideas that give support to the development of communities. But the problem is that the digital divide may prevent the access to the information. This is why national governments and international organizations like the United Nations (UN), try to prevent women's marginalization from today's knowledge-based world. Palestinian women are no exception. Their participation to all areas of Palestinian life is important for social development. ICT-led solutions can support increasing women's educational opportunities.

In this paper, the sociocultural opportunities provided by the ICT for Palestinian women are dwelled on. The utilization of the ICT in education has led to the development of online distance education as a new learning environment. The aim of the paper is to elaborate and discuss the place of the new communication technologies in the quest of Palestinian women for better status in social life. The methodology is literature review and interpretation of statistics reported by Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and Al-Quds Open University.

2. SOCIAL ROLE of WOMEN in PALESTINE

The educational system is an important agent for secondary socialization, following the socialization in the family. It is important since schools are the arena where gender identities are drawn. Over the past 100 years in Palestine, the number of schools and number of girls attending to schools have increased in the West Bank. However Rubenbery criticizes this information especially for village females in the West Bank, arguing that education has not brought fundamental changes in their socially prescribed roles. For example, the West Bank public education system is criticized for neglecting critical and innovative thinking vis-a-vis the patriarchal Palestinian society (2001). A learning outcome such as the motto "women are born to raise children" is detrimental to socio-economic development of Palestine, bearing in mind that the development of a society flourishes from the empowerment of women. This situation also alarms that the traditional means of education are inadequate and that there is need for new environments to reach women via using new learning methodologies and technologies.

The underprivileged status of women that education can not recover also emanates from the conservative nature of the society. Badran (1994) argues that Islamic identity remains locked in a patriarchal mold because conservative people lack the critical approach to patriarchy. They neglect the argument that gender roles are socially constructed rather than by natural or divine forces. Men also tend to use the religious discourse to fight for their privileges as men. Rubenbery points that the basis of gender inequality especially in the West Bank is due to patriarchal control and repression of female sexuality (2001). What she asserts is interesting in the sense that this resistance to losing control and privileges enjoyed by males is related with the lack of other aspects of traditional and highly valued male honor codes; such as independence, assertiveness, autonomy, generosity, economic and political power. The circumstances in the occupied territories support and complete the vicious circle of inequality coded in socialization of women and is detrimental to their status.

2.1. Intifada and Changing Role of Women

Gender-related reforms in the Middle East have been more elite driven in the past and were mainly opposed by the groups that were left out. Social reforms became a symbol of resistance to modernization, namely "westernization". However globalization and especially its technological pillar after the tremendous development of the ICT, has been effective for breaking such resistance and

making gender issues more popular in the Middle East in general. On the other hand, intifada[1] in the Palestinian territories has prepared the right climate for women to be more receptive to changes brought by the communication technologies. They could reach communication media and express themselves to the rest of the world and receive the feedback via media again, promising to open the door to social reforms.

Israeli occupation since 1967 has deteriorated living conditions for the Palestinians and caused changes in the Palestinian family structure. The male migration to foreign countries for employment has become a reality of daily life. Growing unemployment and poverty have limited the choices for both men and women. Besides, Palestinian women began to bear the responsibility of supporting their household as breadwinners. An important point is that the changes have taken place at tremendous speed due to the political and military circumstances of the Palestinian territories. Ironically, they were faced with the latest technologies to help them break the barriers around them, at an age when the computers and the Internet were at their reach. So the communication media did not only mean journals and radios, making Palestinian women more advantageous when compared to women in the other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, the latter had more limited options at the beginning of their journey to awareness (World Bank Report, 2004).

The Palestinian uprising (intifada) began in Gaza on December 9, 1987 (Cleveland, 1994). In a few days, West Bank joined the uprising. Thousands of demonstrators were confronting the Israeli armed forces with stones and gasoline bombs. After intifada drew the attention of the international media to the occupied territories, foreign journalists and television crews needed help of local Palestinians for security reasons. What is more, western media teams began to hire local cameramen for visits to Palestinian towns, refugee camps which they considered risky to enter. A way to overcome another barrier, social restrictions to interviews was to hire university educated female guides, who could speak foreign languages (Somiry-Batrawi, 2004). These circumstances provided some opportunities via which Palestinians, especially women, could start their careers in the media sector. Furthermore, after the foundation of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) in August 1992, as a coalition of non-governmental organizations, gender issues could be brought to agenda through the media. In this way, both the decision makers and the general public opinion could have access to gender related issues and problems. The participation of women in the Palestinian Nationalist Movement especially after the first intifada, had already increased the interest in gender issues in both political and academic circles. This is how women began to take important roles during the foundation of women's unions and committees, being more active in the social life.

As the Declaration of Principles (DOP) was signed in Oslo, in August 1993 and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) was formed, the first annex to the agreement stated the possibility of licensing a radio and television station, as the first Palestinian-run broadcasting operations on Palestinian territory. By 2001, Somiry-Batrawi states there were 31 private television stations in the West Bank. Many women were employed as presenters, reporters, camerawomen, sound technicians and even administrators at these stations. During the second intifada that started on September 28, 2000; more Palestinian women were employed for the broadcasts (2004). In this connection, Palestinian women were not only a new target audience for media like newspapers, magazines, television & radio programs, documentaries and the Internet but they began to make career in the sector.

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1 Palestinian uprising that began in Gaza on December 9, 1987. It was a spontaneous rebellion due to the anger of discontented young people of the occupied territories (Cleveland, 1994).

Badran argues that the audio-visual programs with contents about women became the reason why media companies needed women specialists in fields like education, culture, gender issues and human rights. She calls this need for specialization, as effect of "the cult of domesticity" which means that journalists or media people needed to know more about issues of women's expertise. So women that had specialized in these areas, could pass on their experience to housebound middle-class women. Though such an approach may be criticized to ignore new and more active social, political and economic roles of Palestinian women, it can be evaluated as a starting point for unemployed women to guide them support their household income.

3. ICT and PALESTINIAN WOMEN

It is ironic that, on the one hand the difficulties emanating from the Israeli occupation strengthen the traditional patriarchal family and limit women's choices (due to mainly security reasons), on the other hand the difficulty of living conditions empower women by increasing their daily responsibilities. Only under this burden, women become more aware of their identities and changing gender roles. Despite the economic challenges in Palestine, and the digital divide expected to be huge, the statistics for ICT use and especially computer literacy seem promising for women. School and university closures and the economic difficulties have increased the female students' drop out rates. As education plays pivotal role in women's advance, drop out rates are expected to have negative repercussions on the social status of the Palestinian women. The use of ICT for educational purposes can be a remedy for this difficulty. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) drives attention to feminization of poverty which Palestinian women can be victims of, due to their reduced income, social exclusion, undeveloped capabilities and limited access to productive assets (http://www.unifem.org). In this conjunction, there are supportive developments related with the expansive use of the ICT.

According to the 2006 figures of Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the population in Palestinian territory is composed of 1,970,327 men and 1,917,965 women, indicating that 49.3% of the population is women. The female age structure indicates that 28.3% of women are between ages 5-14 and 26.6% is between 15-29. Women between ages 30-59 compose 23% and the overall picture is a young female population. The gross enrollment ratios in higher education for 2005-2006 are 33.3% for males and 39% for females.

Table 1. The percentage distribution of persons (10 years and over) according to their computer use (2006)

	Female (%)	**Male (%)**
Can use in a good manner	17.6	24.0
Can use in an acceptable manner	**28.8**	31.3
Can not use	53.6	44.7

As regards the ICT use, the percentage distribution of persons (10 years and over) according to their computer use indicates a high percentage of women (28.8%) that can use PCs in an acceptable manner. Palestinian Statistics Office remarks that Palestine's ICT community has been increasing and the access to personal computers and the Internet has gained momentum. In this paper, ICT figures are interpreted with an eye to the use of the Internet for educational purposes. This is why the use of computers is taken as pivotal in evaluating the ICT use.

Table 2. The percentage distribution of persons using PCs according to their place of use (2006)

	F (%)	M (%)
Home	52.4	51.7
Work	6.1	9.9
School/University	**29.6**	14.5
Internet Cafes	1.1	11.7
Friend's Home	5.0	8.7
Sport/Cultural Club	0.9	0.5
Other	4.9	3.0

The percentage distribution of persons using PCs according to their place of use (2006), points to the high percentage of use by women (29.6%), at school/university. The higher ratio of women's enrollment at educational institutions supports the data. Despite and ironically due to their lower representation at work places women are more interested in education.

Table 3. The percentage distribution of PC using persons (10 years and over), according to their main purpose of use (2006)

	F (%)	M (%)
Entertainment	34.3	43.8
Windows Applications	2.3	2.5
Learning and Studying	**50.7**	19.6
Work	6.0	11.0
Internet	6.4	12.7
Other	0.3	0.4

The percentage distribution of PC using persons (10 years and over), according to their main purpose of use (2006) has a remarkable item, which is high percentage of women (50.7%) using computers for learning and studying purposes. This is remarkable since data support the argument that women are more receptive to using technology for learning.

Table 4. Women's percentage distribution according to the use of the Internet (2006)

	F (%)	M (%)
Work	8.6	9.7
Bank & financial services	-	0.9
Dealing with governmental organizations	**0.5**	-
Electronic commerce	0.6	0.1
Acquisition	12.3	16.5
e-Mailing	7.7	9.9
Education	**31.2**	12.8
Entertainment	9.9	20.0
Scientific issues	**11.1**	7.2
Updating programs & Internet issues	0.2	1.4
Women & family issues	3.6	0.8

Another significant finding related with Palestinian women's use of computers is their percentage distribution over the use of the Internet. According to Table 4, women in Palestine use the Internet mainly for education purposes and scientific issues (31.2%). Besides, though it is at a low percentage women use the Internet for dealing with the governmental organizations. Studying women seem to have more affiliations with governmental and non-governmental organizations. Women are also in connection with international groups (networks) like the International Solidarity Movement (Sharoni, 2006). For these groups, the ICT have become virtual meeting venues (like blog communities) for women from different parts of the world. Sharoni exemplifies this with the "compassionate resistance" born in March 2003, whereby women with different nationalities protested oppression.

3.1. Open and Distance Learning for Women in Palestine

The statistical figures related with the use of computers and the Internet, drive our attention to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and especially e-Learning which has become a very popular educational philosophy by the 1990s, all over the globe. Apart from the general interest to the use of the ICT for education, owing to the ease of reaching large audiences; the economic and political circumstances of the Palestinian territories have prepared the ground for such an interest. First of all, e- Learning does not require the students to gather in classes. Off–campus education offers solutions for people that cannot for different reasons meet face-to-face with their instructors. However learners can get assistance from their instructors and counselors via scheduled face-to-face and/or web-based meetings (synchronous/asynchronous).

ODL is defined as a planned model that brings students and tutors together by utilizing different technologies, communication and instruction methods. ODL can offer time and spatial flexibilities for studying and learning (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). This means that the ICT can remove the physical barrier, 'distance' as an impediment to education, whereby audio-visual, interactive communication means can promote high quality learning. In these learning environments individual differences and skills matter. Instructional technologies provide cost-effective, affordable opportunities in the framework of both formal school education and lifelong adult education.

In this paper the Al-Quds Open University is given as an example of this philosophy and technology in Palestine. It should be emphasized here that the regional and global international organizations like the World Bank, UNESCO offer educational programs via distance education methods (utilizing printed materials, audio-visual educational materials) and web-based tools. Besides the growing number of open universities and their associations, traditional higher education institutions, including the well-known and popular ones, dwell on ICT supported courses and open (accessible) courses. For example open educational resources have become the latest trend in life long learning.

ODL can be a solution to free women out of their enclosed worlds all around globe. Though e- Learning can be criticized on the ground of digital divide, the statistics of the PCBS give the idea that the development of the ICT has important repercussions for the Palestinians. Their access to digital means can not be underestimated. Still, more traditional means of distance education can be utilized for unprivileged people faced with the digital divide; such as the Palestinians living in the camps and the rural areas. The traditional means for distance education are the printed materials and audio-visual materials, in the format of radio and TV broadcasts. For example the Al-Quds University Media Center has prepared many educational TV programs for women as their target audience. The contents of the women's programs were literacy, healthcare, social attitudes, environment and consumer awareness (Somiry-Batrawi, 2004).

Al-Quds Open University (QOU) is the first Arab University to adopt the ODL in Palestine since 1991 (Abuzir, 2006). It has over 50.000 students (2006-2007 academic year). The overall number of higher education students are 83.408. The university utilizes the multimedia instructional environments for offering ODL services to its students. The latest technologies are the radio-TV, video, CD and the Internet. Other than undergraduate programs the University has lifelong learning programs giving certificates to workers, farmers, housewives etc. So the University implements the basic principles and mentality of the ODL.

Table 5. Distribution of Students by Age, Job, Status and Gender (2006/2007)[2]

AGE	EMPLOYER						EMPLOYEE		OTHERS		UNEMPLOYED	
	AGRICULTURE		INDUSTRY		TRADE							
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
- 21	27	33	2	23	10	47	41	25	2950	3117	9392	5335
21-25	27	90	7	66	26	106	94	54	5090	5289	6252	3696
26-30	9	49	8	65	14	94	116	43	2006	2352	1685	936
31-35	9	29	2	39	6	69	136	63	1178	1124	987	449
36-40	11	30	4	39	8	74	152	114	576	752	450	315
41-45	1	8	0	7	1	31	84	59	166	306	11	120
45-	1	4	0	4	1	8	41	25	80	132	75	75

The percentage distribution of students by age and job denotes that Palestinian women do not generally own their own businesses in private sectors like agriculture, industry and trade but mostly work as employees. Besides, most of the young Palestinian women are unemployed, they are more vulnerable in the face of this general problem of the Palestinian society. On the one hand this is why they are more open to education especially to ODL; but on the other hand this demand does not empower them yet in business life in terms of entrepreneurship and employment. The statistical under representation of women in industry and trade especially support this argument.

Table 6. Distribution of Students by Academic Programs, City, Gender (2006/2007)

	CAMP		TOWN		CITY	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Technology and Applied Sciences	26	41	205	239	256	374
Agriculture	1	3	4	17	9	39
Social and Family Development	68	135	292	120	389	570
Administrative Economic Sciences	65	146	467	883	739	1403
Education	449	204	2161	704	2315	1036

The highest percentage of enrollment to the ODL system is from cities but there are female participants from towns and camps as well, overwhelmingly studying at the Education Program. Though technology is still an urban phenomenon, the enrollment percentages from camps and towns reflect the interest to education.

2 The figures belong to the first semester student statistics of the 2006-2007 academic year at Al-Quds Open University.

The general percentage distribution of students by gender is 44.28 % male and 55.72 % female students. The percentage distribution of students by academic programs and gender give the figures 38.9 % for female and 15.8 % for male students enrolled at the Education Program. For the Palestinian society to become more egalitarian, employment conditions should be improved as well. United Nations Development Report (UNDP, 2003) has identified that the Arabs support gender equality in education but not in employment. But it is apparent that the improved human capabilities should also be utilized for the development of societies (Skalli, 2006).

Despite the promising figures reflecting interest for higher education, the participation percentage of women in the labor force is very low. The 2006 figure is 12.7% for women and 66.8% for men (PCBS).

Gender issues are very important for the Middle East since gender inequality is among factors that undermine the development potential of the region. Another problem reported by World Bank is that women workers tend to leave the labor force when they marry and have children, more than women in other developing regions of the world (2004). The MENA countries have signed the Millenium Declaration and among the UN Millenium Development Goals, the third one is to "promote gender equality and empowering women". The status of women is critical and has to be improved because the ratio of women's participation in the labor force in the MENA countries remains the lowest in the world. In today's competitive global economy, besides the importance of human rights and gender equality, no nation has such luxury to undermine capabilities of its women.

Right to education and opportunities for lifelong learning are vital for the economic and social future of the Palestinian youth and especially women, who are unprivileged in the patriarchal Palestinian society. The continuous social and political unrest exacerbate their living circumstances. The competitiveness of the global economies necessitate well-vested professionals in all sectors and skilled women are an important power base. From this perspective, ODL is especially important for developing countries. e-Learning, which is the latest technology in the ODL, has the greatest potential to reach larger audiences and promote interactivity via multimedia environments. At this point, digital divide is the barrier that has to be overcome. The statistics of the Palestinian society and students at the QOU support the argument that the future is in ICT based lifelong learning environments even for developing societies despite the digital divide and no matter what their driving forces are. Examples like the Palestinian society indicate that ODL has penetrated from north to south.

4. CONCLUSION: NEW HORIZONS?

"Many people (mostly but not exclusively whites) think of unfamiliar far-away places as unsafe and, of course, when it comes to the Middle East, the mainstream media have contributed much to the image that the entire region is a large battlefield and its people are hostile" (Sharoni, 2006). Despite the western image that the Arabs in Middle East are radical and violent, there are liberal scholars who explain that there are people struggling for democratic political processes in the ME. These democrats try to make the political and social climate conducive to a "civil society" with voluntary associations, parties, clubs, trade unions above the level of individual, family or clan in their countries (Lockman, 2004).

Western social scientists have long argued that the lack of civil societies has led to authoritarian regimes in the region. The relation of such an argument with this paper is why women need to be educated and empowered for playing their expected roles in the civil societies of the ME. Palestinian women, like women of all developing societies, need to be heard more.

The creative use of the ICT can challenge the old role models and help redefining them. Besides, ICT mean new educational environments and opportunities; this is why, the authors of this paper see the ICT as offering new horizons to Palestinian women, in their quest for education and followed by employment.

1987 intifada has affected Palestinian women in two ways; the social climate has paved the way for feminist consciousness on the one hand, but political conflicts have continued to be barrier to gender equality on the other. Though to a limited extent, women could participate in political life and for example negotiator Prof. Hanan Ashwari has been a role model for Palestinian women. The media generally drive attention to problems of women in camps/towns and the young population in the cities are neglected. Besides, for the media to be more supportive to democratization of the society, a meaningful argument is that there must be more women in all branches of media sector as employees.

The increasing number of educated women will make a difference for Palestine and Middle East in general. There may be differences between needs of women in cities and those living in camps/towns. In rural areas, women are mostly uneducated. However ODL can offer solutions to both groups via different means, whether be printed materials supported by TV/radio programs and face-to-face counseling or online learning environments supported by online counseling. Many women are not aware of their rights and responsibilities, due to lack of access to information. The Israeli occupation in Palestine has ironically led women to take a greater role in the social life, despite patriarchy and the gender apartheid experienced in the Middle East in general. However this heavier role unfortunately does not seem to empower women. Not only for Palestinian or MENA women but voices of women must be heard by decision makers in all developing countries. The change in gender balance of researchers, journalists is a positive factor, for increasing number of gender studies among studies on globalization and development in general. Both academicians and decision-makers must put "empowering women" on their agenda for developing their societies in a sustainable manner.

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