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A feminist political economic critique of the human development approach to new information and communication technologies

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Abstract

This article argues that although the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has broadened the scope of international development by including the human and social dimensions, the human development approach does not acknowledge the unbalanced power relations between global corporations and national governments of developing countries, between the global north and the global south and between the two genders. By analyzing the UNDP's human development approach to new information and communication technologies from a feminist political economic perspective, this article contends that the ultimate goal of human development may expand the choices for poor people but it may not imply a transformation of power relations.

Keywords

feminist political economy, human development, new information and communication technologies, telecommunications, UNDP

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The UN has been endeavoring to achieve peace, development and equality among the human race since the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the end of the Second World War. A few conferences – the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in UNESCO and the four world conferences on women – focused on how the mass media, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and gender development are related to peace, development and equality.

The backdrop to the aforementioned UN conferences is an accelerating integrated global economy resulting from both sweeping trade liberalization and the advancement of telecommunications and ICTs. Since the 1980s, state-owned telecommunications sectors in industrialized countries such as the UK, France and Japan were denationalized so as to increase international competition and to provide value-added services (such as high-speed Internet) for business customers. Developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America followed suit. Meanwhile, the World Bank has dramatically decreased its telecommunications lending to developing countries; it instead advocates that they open up their telecommunications sector for foreign investment (Lee, 2007; Urey, 1995). The World Bank, transnational corporations and some governments promote a neoliberal economic discourse by calling a state-owned telecommunications sector obsolete. Consequently, transnational telecommunications giants formed as a result of consolidation and merging (Schiller, 1999). However, the digital gap has hardly closed between developed and developing countries, or between the two genders. The UN is aware of the sea change. At the beginning of the millennium, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) organized the World Summit on the Information Society, which gathered national governments, private sectors and the civil society to engage in a dialog about the technology divide. Communication critics have questioned whether the summit has opened up any space for dialog (Hamelink, 2004) and whether the private sector had too much power in the summit (Berger, 2004; *Media and Gender Monitor*, 2005; Siochrú, 2004; Zhao, 2004).

Since 2004, I have been examining how different UN agencies conceptualized the relationship between women, gender, telecommunications and new ICTs. Previous writings examined UNESCO (Lee, 2004), the World Bank (Lee, 2007) and the World Summit on the Information Society (Lee, 2008, 2010). The findings have been less than encouraging. While UN agencies acknowledged that women are more likely to lag behind in the consumption of technology, the solution is to 'lift' women up by asking them to consume more technologies provided by the private sector. In the various UN fora, little attention has been paid to why women are left out in the invention and design of technology; why consumption is the solution; why the private sector should be the primary party to develop technology; and how women's poverty is related to the privatization of telecommunications.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) hence appears as an alternative to the hegemonic neoliberal economic discourse. In contrast to the World Bank, the UNDP is pro-poor and pro-women. The UNDP differentiates itself from the Bretton Woods institutions by focusing on human development. In the words of the organization human development is about an enlargement of choices and opportunities for developing countries and for poor people. It believes that economic development is a *prerequisite* but an *insufficient* condition for human development. The UNDP has made two notable contributions to the area of international development. First, it invented three indices that measure the degree of human development: the Human Development Index (HDI), Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). Second, it publishes the Human Development Report updating the status of human development.

From a feminist political economic perspective, this article examines whether the human development approach to ICTs can promote a fair production, distribution and consumption of goods and resources. A feminist political economist approach merges the political economy of communication (as advanced by Herbert Schiller [1980, 1981], Dan Schiller [1999, 2007] and Vincent Mosco [2004] among others) and materialist feminism (as advanced by Zillah Eisenstein [1979] and Nancy Hartsock [1983] among others). This approach argues that the production, distribution and consumption of goods and resources are gendered. That is, gender determines how resources are allocated. In addition, gender ideology governs the unequal relations between the two genders. To give an example, many new consumer technologies are first targeted at males. After that market is saturated, technologies are then targeted at females. Technology companies often assume women are less interested in new technology because women are intimidated by technology. The ideology that women are afraid of technology reinforces why women are not the target consumers (see Wajcman, 1991).

The feminist political economic approach has a few assumptions: first, gender is not the only factor that determines who receives what. Race, ethnicity, age, and geographical location all determine the allocation of resources. In turn, ideology justifies why specific groups ought to receive more resources. For example, for a poor family, usually it is the young men who would own cell phones because they are supposed to be the economically active family members, hence they need the tool for a living. This ideology assumes that the housework (and the work outside the home) that women perform is not as valuable as men's work outside the home. Second, the approach emphasizes that social relations need to be understood historically. Social relations, including gender relations, are the outcome of historical struggle. Third, under a neoliberal ideology, common and public goods such as basic telecommunications services have been transformed into commodities in the market. Commodification is a strategy to create and to accumulate wealth in the hands of the powerful few (Mosco, 2009).

By looking at the social relations assumed in the human development approach through a feminist political economic lens, this article asserts that the human development approach to new ICTs falls short on altering social and material relations. It may broaden the range of choices that poor people and developing countries have, but it does not transform the unbalanced power relations between developing countries and transnational corporations, between the global north and the global south and between the two genders.

UNDP indices and criticism

The UNDP published the first Human Development Report in 1990, in which it introduced the Human Development Index (HDI) designed by Nobel Laureate for Economics Amartya Sen and Pakistani economist and finance minister Mahbub ul Haq.

The HDI is designed to be an alternative to GNP in measuring the well-being of a country. It is argued that GNP does not reflect the well-being of a population, but the performance of an economy. The calculation of human development includes three variables: first, a long and healthy life (measured by life expectancy at birth); second, knowledge (measured by adult literacy rate and enrollment in primary, secondary and tertiary education); and third, a decent standard of living (measured by GDP per capita).[1] Countries are then ranked and classified into high, medium, or low human development.

Although the UNDP is aware that national income is not the sole yardstick to evaluate the well-being of a country, the 30 countries with the highest HDI are all industrialized countries. On the contrary, none of the countries with a medium or low HDI is an industrialized country. Human development may better encompass the well-being of a population, but HDI still implies a norm in development – that is, the richest countries are not only wealthy, but also have more ‘developed’ people. Developing countries are asked to catch up. The ranking does not reveal the relations between countries, that is at whose expense human development in HDI countries is made possible. Streeten (1995) has correctly pointed out that the HDI does not measure the freedom of choice because it mixes up achievement with freedom of choice.

In 1995, the UNDP introduced the GDI, which measures gender inequality in a country. The GDI takes into account gender disparities in terms of health, opportunities to knowledge and a decent living. The GEM was later introduced to measure women’s agency in economic and political participation, decision-making and resource control. Once gender is taken into the picture, the HDI ranking alters. This is especially the case for Middle Eastern countries. Both the GDI and GEM show that gender inequality is more pronounced in medium and low HDI countries than in high HDI countries.

Scholars question if the UNDP indices accurately measure the degree of human development. First, the calculation sees a healthy life, knowledge opportunities and a decent standard of living as three independent factors; in reality, they are interdependent (Tisdell et al., 2001). Second, the GDI and GEM fail to capture gender differences experienced by the urban/rural, the poor/the extremely poor and the educated/uneducated (Streeten, 1995). Third, neither the GDI nor the GEM reflects women’s control of earned income and their participation in the informal economy (Bardham and Klasen, 1999; Dijkstra and Hanmer, 2000). Fourth, access to public services is not taken into account (Dijkstra and Hanmer, 2000). Fifth, the GEM only measures women’s political participation at the national level, not at the local one (Bardham and Klasen, 1999; Tisdell et al., 2001). Overall, the indices do not reflect the complex relations that women have with men, and the rich have with the poor *in a country*.

Criticism appearing in the existing literature does not point out that the indices mask an unbalanced power relation between the high and the medium/low HDI countries. The HDI, GDI and GEM can undoubtedly be perfected so as to reflect a more accurate picture of human and gender development. Nonetheless, it is important to critically assess the political implications of the indices. One implication is that there is a *universal* evaluation of country performance. Industrialized countries are still seen as the ultimate stage of human development. Similar to Manuel Castells’ (1996) concept of the information society, and Daniel Bell’s (1973) post-industrial society, the human development concept also assumes there is an ultimate stage of development. Moreover, the indices cannot be used to infer the causes of lopsided human and gender development because development (and the very concept of development) have to be understood historically. Unfortunately, Human Development Reports often treat the indices as 'moments of truth', and use them to illuminate why some countries fare better than others. For instance, the four Asian economic tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea) are repeatedly cited as model examples to illustrate how 'developing countries' could lift themselves up by choosing the right policies. The focus is on choice, not on why developing countries were not given the choice in the first place.

First unequal power relation: Global ICT corporations and developing countries

The UNDP does not sufficiently point out the role that global ICT corporations play in the global economy. It accepts that economic globalization is an inevitable process. Although the UNDP is aware of the concentration of technological innovation in industrialized countries, it does not point out the power that transnational ICT companies have over developing countries. It often sees new ICTs as neutral tools that can be harnessed and controlled by developing countries.

Th UNDP's faith in new ICTs for human development is evident from the theme of the 2001 report, 'making new technologies work for human development'. In the report, ICTs are seen as autonomous, value-free tools that could make positive changes to a society and an economy. For example, the 2003 report proclaims that 'technology is a *motor* for human development' (p. 159). Further, the 2001 report and another publication, *Towards Halving Extreme Poverty by 2015: Activities to Commemorate the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty*, lay out how new ICTs can improve governance and stimulate the economy: from promoting public accountability, to improving the delivery of basic public services, to enhancing local political participation, to diversifying the economy. In short, ICTs are believed to be a cure to all the ills experienced in developing countries, while the developed countries define what the 'ills' are. Sussman (1997) points that that when technology is seen as an instrument, the political economic force behind the invention of technology is ignored.

The UNDP does not conceptualize new ICTs as commodities that are invented and produced to make profit. By viewing technology as neutral, the agency neglects that it is privately owned, profit-making technology companies (mostly based in developed countries) that invent and control technology. The UNDP suggests that it is 'people' (without precisely defining who they are) who create technology to reduce poverty. It is dubious if knowledge-poor, revenue-poor citizens from both developed and developing countries are able to participate in technological innovation in the information age. The research and development (R&D) investment in developing countries is meager when compared to that of developed countries. As a result, most patents are held by individuals and companies in developed countries. (The Human Development website tracks the R&D and patent statistics.)

The belief that technology is a neutral tool reinforces the belief that economic globalization is inevitable and irreversible. Both technology and economic globalization are seen as unstoppable, subliminal forces that set the world in flux (see Mosco, 2004). For instance, on its poverty reduction webpage (www.undp.org/poverty), the organization promises to make globalization work for the poor. There is no mention of why globalization has left out the poor and how globalization has taken advantage of the poor (cases in point are outsourcing, economic export processing zones and food production). In another UNDP publication, *ICT for Development in Arab Region*, Arab countries are said to *need* to survive the pace of globalization.

The UNDP's notion of globalization is an economic one, but it does not call it the 'global economy' and it does not suggest who engineers it. Instead, economic globalization is viewed metaphorically as a non-materialist web of connections. ICTs are seen as tools that connect the nodes of globalization. In the 2001 report, Manuel Castells-inspired language often appears: 'new ICTs facilitate exchanges'; 'globalization creates a network age'; 'ICTs create networks'; 'the network age is changing how technologies are created and diffused'. This seemingly sci-fi language implies that globe is now networked. At present, the global broadband and wireless networks only cover geographical areas with intense economic activities. The headquarters of Google has a map showing Internet activities worldwide. The more Internet activities there are, the brighter the lights on the map. The African continent is very dark on that map. Even in industrialized countries, the urban/rural divide is pronounced. While big US cities such as San Francisco and Philadelphia are covered by wireless network, rural areas are still waiting for basic cable services. The network is hardly blanketing the globe; rather, it is confined to urban areas where wealth is concentrated.

In its 2001 report, the UNDP stated that an adequate telecommunications infrastructure allows developing countries to participate in new global business communication. In fact, a telecommunications infrastructure is not optional, transnational corporations require an adequate telecommunications infrastructure to invest in foreign countries. The report emphasizes 'choice', so is reluctant to indicate that developing countries are demanded to develop a telecommunications infrastructure, and to guarantee a stable market in order to join regional and international trade blocs (Emadi-Coffin, 2002). For example, since the 1970s, the four Asian economic tigers have been rapidly advancing their telecommunications infrastructure in order to attract foreign investment (Boulton et al., 1999).

The UNDP's stance on the power relations between transnational corporations and developing countries is ambiguous; it contradicts itself in a single publication. On the one hand, it acknowledges that developing countries are disadvantaged in a high-tech environment. It understands that the ICT industry exercises power over national governments; and that the market is the primary force that drives technological innovation. Furthermore, the report mentions that the market constrains technological diffusion; that international mechanisms such as ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) discriminates against developing countries; and that developing countries bear greater risks in adopting technology that are not designed for them. More bizarrely, it suggests that the digital gap does not need to follow the income gap between countries.

On the other hand, the UNDP employs the 'blame it on the victim' strategy by pointing out the weaknesses of developing countries in preparing for the 'information age'. It points out the inadequacies of developing countries in joining the information age: low literacy rate; low income; weak administration support; high access cost to telecommunications; weak intellectual property rights protection; inadequate policy framework; and small market.

The remedy? To follow the lead of industrialized countries. Some suggestions are: to establish partnerships with universities and private industries for technological innovation; to follow the leaders of technologies to reduce risks (which contradicts its point that technology is not designed for developing countries); to offer incentives for research and development; to increase investment in technology; and to establish regional alliances. The choice that developing countries has is to follow the industrialized countries.

Second unequal power relation: The global north and the global south

The UNDP adopts a realist perspective to international relations; it assumes that nation-states are the most pivotal actors in the international arena. The UNDP indices reflect this realist perspective and are hence problematic in four ways: first, the indices do not take into account the malleability of national boundaries under globalization (Emadi-Coffin, 2002). Second, the indices do not reflect the relations between the global north and the global south. Third, countries are seen as independent entities between which rivalries and power struggles do not exist. Lastly, countries are compared in a decontextualized and an ahistorical manner.

Globalization scholars such as David Held (Held et al., 1999) suggested that international negotiations not only take place between nation-states, but also take place between transnational corporations, international organizations and international NGOs. For example, the European Union ordered Microsoft to sell an unbundled Windows platform in Europe and to provide code for software engineers to write compatible programs for the Windows operating system. This lawsuit evinces that the power struggle over the ownership, innovation and diffusion of new ICTs is not at a national level. The power struggle is at a global level, where an international organization that collectively represents European nation-states sued a US-based transnational corporation that is backed by the US government. To complicate the matter, the US rivals of Microsoft, Sun Microsystem, IBM and Red Hat, supported the EU. Another example is Google's negotiation with the Chinese government in terms of Internet censorship in the PRC. Google did not go through the US government for this negotiation. Yet another example is the non-profit organization One Laptop Per Child based in the US. The start-up fund came from a few high-tech companies based in the US. The founder of this non-profit organization establishes partnerships with the governments of developing countries, who buy laptops directly from the non-profit organization.

The concept of 'global cities' further brings into question the boundary of nation-states. There is a burgeoning interest in the scholarship of global cities (such as the Globalization and World Cities Research Network) and think-tank organizations (such as the Global City Indicators Facility). Sassen (1998, 2002) has effectively demonstrated that global cities are cultural, political economic strategic sites. According to her, the 'space economy of advanced information industries' has denationalized the boundaries. In other words, nation-states do not compete with each other in securing investment and advancing telecommunications, global cities do.

The 2001 Human Development Report stated that global high-tech hubs are locations where private enterprises build close partnerships with universities for technological innovation. Therefore, unsurprisingly, most of the hubs are located in high HDI countries such as the US (which has 13 out of 36 hubs), the UK (4 hubs), Germany (3 hubs), Japan (2 hubs) and some Asian countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Only a few are located in medium/low HDI countries, such as India, Malaysia and Brazil. To draw on Sassen's theories of the global cities, it can be argued that the hubs are less closely connected to their respective nations than to each other in terms of the flow of money, information, technology and personnel.

The second problem with the belief that nation-states are the most vital actors in the international scene is that it conceals the relations between the global north and the global south. This belief in effect obscures the fact that technology diffusion and consumption is as uneven in high HDI countries as in medium/low HDI countries. Critics of the UNDP indices have expressed concerns that the indices do not take into consideration social divides, such as race, ethnicity and geographical location. In terms of communication access, what the UNDP data show is the *average* number of telephone landlines, cell phone subscribers and Internet users in a population. The data do not differentiate personal/household use from business consumption. In the US, for instance, the social group that is the least likely to own a telephone landline is African American single mothers (Schement et al., 1997). At a global level, Manhattan has more telephone lines than have 40 African countries combined (Graham, 2002). On the contrary, the economically well-off and political elites in low HDI countries may share an equal chance to enjoy new ICTs with those in high HDI countries. Moreover, the global north consists of a privileged class with geographical mobility; this privileged class is less likely to be constrained by a nation-state boundary, let alone locality. For example, Indian software engineers secure high-paying jobs, whether they are in Silicon Valley, California or Bangalore, India. When IBM announced that 5000 US jobs would be cut and relocated in India, the Indian engineers living abroad decided to relocate with the company (Bulkeley, 2009).

The global south, which consists of less privileged populations from countries of any HDI, may share similar experiences of ICT deprivation (or in some cases, general communication technologies deprivation). Unemployment/underemployment, low literacy rate and generational poverty are some of the reasons to account for the global south's lack of access to ICTs. Private companies do not cater to populations who cannot afford technology as they make most of their profits from serving business clients, not the public (Schiller, 1999).

The UNDP data show that countries with a high HDI have the most telephone landlines, cellular telephone subscribers and Internet users *on average*. The correlation between communication access and human development may give an impression that new ICTs lead to human development. A likely reason to explain the correlation is that ICTs facilitate business transaction and stimulate economic growth, both boost the GDP, hence the HDI. Once again, the GDP does not reflect the well-being of a population. The question that should be asked is if the profits made in the ICT sector benefit foreign, private corporations more than the local population. Access alone does not reflect much of human development. Schiller (1999) gave an example that Internet access does not lead to public welfare – US Internet service providers (ISPs) are not required to contribute to the government's universal service fund, which supports telephone access in low-income families and in rural areas. Therefore, a more accurate way to measure the benefit that ICTs bring to the local population is to scrutinize whether the profits made in the ICTs sector are redistributed to public services such as healthcare and education.

The third problem with a country-by-country comparison is that it elicits the notion that countries develop independently of each other without being mindful of global competition. In fact, rivalries and power struggles exist between countries in developing ICTs. Fierce competition for foreign investment, international expansion and technological innovation characterized the development of international telecommunications and electronic industries in North America and Europe (Hills, 1981, 2002). National governments have played a significant role in designating key industries through policies, regulations, investment and R&D. At present, the US, Japan and the Scandinavian countries compete to dominate the global cell phone market and to monopolize the worldwide standard (Funk, 1998). Similarly, in order to attract foreign investment in new ICTs, developing countries have to compete against each other. Human Development Reports often cite the success of the four Asian tigers as if they were cohorts. In fact, the four tigers have to compete for foreign investment against each other by developing national strategies, such as developing niche areas, strengthening technical skills of the labor force, building infrastructure, offering tax breaks, ensuring political stability, guaranteeing a free market and so on (Boulton et al., 1999). If more developing countries enter into the competition for foreign investment in the ICT industry, there is a likelihood that a free market economy is the only option.

Lastly, the ranking of countries gives an inevitable impression that the UNDP compares countries in a universal and a decontextualized manner. While the 1996 Human Development Report has pointed out that both colonialization and political occupation hindered development, it is less explicit in alluding to the facts that high HDI countries are historically those that colonized medium/low HDI countries. Therefore, high HDI countries developed at the expense of medium/low HDI countries. To give an example, international telecommunications development in Hong Kong was a political and economic strategy of the colonial British government. As early as the 1900s, the colonial government advanced telecommunications development in this entrepôt for trading and for dominating international communication in Asia. Prior to the deregulation of the international telecommunications sector in Hong Kong, the British-owned Cable and Wireless company made 83 percent of its 1981 profits from Hong Kong international telecommunications (Coates, 1990). The Hong Kong case is historically unique and cannot be replicated in another country (including other former British colonies) that does not share a similar historical context.

To conclude, the HDI was designed to dispel the myth that economic development is the only kind of development. However, the UNDP's human development index shows that countries that have the highest HDI are also the richest and the most wired. Regardless of specific historical, economic and political contexts, every country is unfortunately evaluated by one yardstick. What is equally problematic is that the comparison does not illuminate the power relations between the global north and the global south. The indices create the smokescreen that everyone in high HDI countries enjoys access to ICTs. This smokescreen also obscures how the powerful elites in medium/low HDI countries also enjoy concentrated resources.

Third unequal power relation: Genders

The UNDP is a strong advocate of women's development and gender equality; it has forged a close partnership with the UN Development Fund for Women. The GDI and GEM indices demonstrate that in no country do women and men enjoy the same degree of living standards, the same opportunities to gain knowledge, the same access to healthcare and the same level of public participation. Nevertheless, the indices imply that gender development is a stage, not a process. The UNDP also does not see ICT development as a gendered process.

Because the discourse of development had grown out of the modernization of an agricultural society, it is not surprising that ICTs are seen as tools that help women to achieve equality and empowerment. In a way, ICTs are perceived to be the same as modern water systems and farming technology. Little attention is paid to the possibility that the production, distribution and consumption of ICTs are a transnational gendered process per se. As a consequence, the UNDP's projects that aim at women's poverty reduction through ICTs are largely symbolic and piecemeal; they will hardly transform gender relations in the global economy.

The UNDP recognizes women's difficulties in controlling and accessing ICTs. On its 'ICT for development' page on its website, it states that women are disadvantaged by new ICTs because it is a male-dominated industry in which women are underrepresented. It also recognizes that women's poverty impedes ICT access. However, the UNDP only has piecemeal, micro-level ICT projects to combat gender inequality, poverty and the digital gap. As documented in the ICTD Yellow Pages, the UNDP helped to implement a gender-disaggregated electronic voter registration and a vote tabulation facility in Bangladesh; it encouraged women in Lithuania to use new technology; and it promoted the use of ICTs to deliver health information to women in Macedonia.

The 1995 report points out that gender inequality is ubiquitous: women fare worse than men economically and politically in all countries. The power structure in every country constrains women's opportunities in education, the labor market, the legal system and the family. The UNDP is assured that gender equality can be accomplished in countries of any HDI; it believes that political commitment, not national income, influences gender equality. However, it is a plain fact that the richest countries occupy the top places in both the GDI and the GEM indices. Therefore, it is hard for the UNDP to argue against the notion that economic strength is related to gender equality. The feminist political economic approach highlights the historical materialist relations between the two genders. It is important that ideology constrains women's access to resources. In economically well-off countries, where resources are less scarce, women have more access to goods and services.

The UNDP's commitment to gender equality is indisputable. However, its view on gender equality, economic growth, poverty reduction and ICTs is as confusing as it is inconsistent. An external review, *Transforming the Mainstream: Gender in UNDP*, published in 2004, has expressed concern that the organization has not well articulated the relation between gender inequality and poverty. Echoing this assertion, it is argued here that by not seeing new ICTs as commodities in the global economy, the UNDP fails to see that concentrated wealth and technology accelerates an unequal distribution of new ICTs between genders.

The 1995 report acknowledges that both structural adjustment and technological changes contribute to women's poverty. It can be inferred that both a deregulated telecommunications sector and ICT development neglect women's interests while banking on women as resources. The UNDP seems to sanction women's resources being exploited. It is aware that structural adjustment and globalization push women to participate in the informal economy (such as running small-scale manufacturing at home), therefore it encourages developing countries to strengthen the informal economy wherein workers have limited access to technologies and have few technical skills. The endorsement of the informal economy legitimizes the myth that privatization is unavoidable and women just have to cope with it. For the UNDP, the remedy to women and men losing their jobs in the formal economy is to exploit females as both producers and reproducers in the informal economy –ironically, with the aid of ICTs that are provided by private, and mostly foreign-owned companies.

The UNDP's solution to poverty reduction through ICTs is gender-blind. The organization encourages private corporations to take up the responsibility of human development in the areas of technology transfer, foreign investment and job creation. It has established partnerships with global corporations such as Nokia, Cisco, Coca-cola and Red Hat for ICT development (Park, 2001). In the UNDP's view, international private businesses have the responsibility to promote local private sector development while rich countries have the responsibility to finance the core infrastructure of developing countries.

Last but not least, the UNDP proposes a carrot-and-stick tactic to lure developing countries to chase after competitive international development funds. It suggested that industrialized countries can reward or punish developing countries by evaluating a country's performance based on sound macroeconomic policies, open markets for foreign investment and provisions for basic education and health care. While the UNDP repetitively emphasizes the significance of gender equality in human development, gender is completely left out of the UNDP's macroeconomic policy advice to developing countries. Its overly sanguine view of the obligations that private international corporations have over developing countries converges with the ultimate goal of international corporations – that is, a continuous expansion of the global market that is free of road blocks erected by national governments. Meanwhile, transnational corporations can redress their selfish economic purpose by a more altruistic one, which is human development.

It is not purely accidental that the UNDP neglects to consider the gender dimension of privatization and denationalization. Modernization and industrialization are often seen as a gender-neutral process in international development. In the information age, the UNDP advises developing countries to facilitate economic development through building export processing zones (EPZs). It is well documented that EPZ factories that manufacture electronic components, above all, favor female labor because young, single women are perceived to be less likely to unionize, to be more disposable and more easily subject to control (Emadi-Coffin, 2002; Steans, 2002). It may be an overstatement that all workers in EPZs work in an exploitative environment, it is however undeniable that a majority of them migrate from rural areas to the EPZs and cities for jobs. Very often the purpose of migration is not personal fulfillment or development but the basic meeting of the economic needs of the *family*. To the nation-state, these female workers also fulfill the nation's needs for economic development (Ross, 2004). In a neoliberal economic discourse, these workers are egregiously hailed as self-autonomous individuals who choose to change their lives and take advantage of opportunities. They are also praised as agents who bring modernization to the family and to the state (see, for example, Chang, 2005).

Lastly, the UNDP sees women as a homogeneous group and it universalizes the notion of women. As previously mentioned, the UNDP often cites the success of the four Asian tigers. Take the example of Hong Kong: in 2003, it ranked No. 22 in the HDI and No. 22 in the GDI; this city-state is only second to Japan in Asia in the areas of both human and gender development. However, what the statistics do not show is that what enables Hong Kong women to partake of the formal economy is the presence of foreign domestic helpers imported from the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and other Southeast Asian countries. In order to speed up the economic development of the city, the government encourages both unmarried and married women to have full-time employment. However, economic opportunities do not foster a more equal gender role in the household, as is the case in the West. Traditional Chinese values such as Confucianism dictate wives' subordination to husbands and family-oriented values. In order to fill the void left by working women, the Hong Kong government established a foreign domestic helper program in the 1970s. Foreign domestic helpers are hired to take up certain reproductive roles for Hong Kong women, who in turn assume more roles of the producer. Domestic helpers earn a meager salary (US$430 per month as of 2005 in a city where the GDP per capita was $27,179 in 2003); they work under harsh conditions (six workdays a week, biennial holidays, homestay); and they are responsible for the economic needs of their families in Southeast Asia.[2] Obviously, they cannot use the Internet for empowerment while on the job even though there is access. In fact, ICTs such as cell phones given by their employers control the helpers because their employers can constantly check on the hired help. In this case, foreign domestic helpers are exploited as producers and reproducers for Hong Kong's economic development. Their labor in a foreign formal economy does not show up in the HDI, GDI and GEM of their home countries; nor do these indices reveal the inequalities that this specific group of diasporic, southern women face. This reintroduces an earlier claim that the UNDP indices do not show the unequal power relations between the global north and the global south.

Two pipers, same tune

The objective of this article is to critique the UNDP's human development approach to ICTs. Since the debut of the Human Development Report in 1990, the UNDP has been establishing a broader understanding of international development in the UN system. In contrast to the World Bank and the IMF, both of which equate international development to economic development, the UNDP centralizes human development in international development. It believes that economic development *alone* does not automatically lead to human development; human development will not thrive in a country with gender inequality and inequity, inadequate education and healthcare services, unsustainable environment and undemocratic governance. Moreover, while the World Bank and the IMF see developing human capital as a means to an end (i.e. economic development), the UNDP sees human development as both a means and an end.

The deceptively sharp contrast between the Bretton Woods institutions and the UNDP may inevitably lead to the impression that the UNDP holds an opposite view of development to that of the World Bank and the IMF. For example, the UNDP is seen as pro-poor, pro-developing countries and pro-women, while the World Bank is pro-rich and pro-developed countries. As demonstrated in this article, a careful scrutiny of UNDP program and its Human Development Reports shows that some of the UNDP's viewpoints on ICTs converge with those of the World Bank. For example, both organizations believe that it is imperative for small developing countries to attract foreign direct investment for ICT development. In addition, they both believe that women's participation in the formal and informal economies is significant for a country's development: the UNDP sees women's economic participation as a form of gender empowerment, while the World Bank sees it as a stimulus to the economy. Both organizations also accept economic globalization as natural and inevitable. The UNDP does not question if economic globalization is irreversible, which may explain why it does not challenge some fundamentals of the neoliberal economic agenda that the World Bank and the IMF endorse. In fact, as an agency that advocates for human-centered international development, the UNDP is sending a powerful message to developing countries, NGOs and the civil society that a viable route to human development is to provide more options for the poor, rather than to challenge an unbalanced power relation that keeps the poor short of options. In other words, the UNDP intends to expand the choices that the poor and developing countries could have without questioning *who* limits the choices in the first place and why this global arrangement is advantageous to those who have control of wealth and resources. This article asserts that the ultimate goal of human development may benefit the poor but it does not lead to a transformation of power relations.

A feminist political economic approach proves to be useful in examining the UNDP's program in ICTs because this approach does not limit the focus on ICTs and women. This approach encompasses the relations between transnational corporations and developing countries, between the global south and the global north and between the two genders.

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Notes

1. *Source:* composite Indices; Human Development Reports; at: hdr.undp.org/statistics/indices/#1.
2. *Source:* Hong Kong Labour Department, importation of labor; at: www.labour.gov.hk/eng/plan/iwFDH.htm.

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