Examining the impact of social technologies on empowerment and economic development

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ABSTRACT

Globally, many women continue to face economic and technological challenges. To complicate matters, more than half of the population has no access to the internet. These issues have drawn international attention leading to global efforts by U.S. tech giants to provide world-wide access to the internet. Do social technologies play into the equation of economic development and empowerment for women? This paper reports results from studies conducted in Taiwan and Turkey regarding the use of five different social technologies platforms. Facebook—the largest social network worldwide—also is the most widely used platform in Taiwan and Turkey according to this research. Differences appeared between the two countries among the usage of other social platforms studied including Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Google+. Implications of this data—and data from other countries under study by the authors—will provide answers to women's empowerment and economic development in both developing and developed countries.

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1. Introduction

Throughout the world, women face economic and technological challenges. Recently, international attention of women's equality—including technological and economic issues—have come to the forefront. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2015 (World Economic Forum, 2015), gender inequality exists for women in *every* country without exception. Women need powerful tools for empowerment which will lead to equality and economic stability.

This research investigates the use of social technologies as it relates to economic development and women's empowerment in both developed and developing countries by surveying women in the workplace regarding the purposes used and benefits realized from social technologies in two countries—Taiwan and Turkey.

Qureshi (2015), supports the need for this global research indicating that the effects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in improving people's lives should be studied at the individual, organizational, country, regional and world levels. Development at this level is about increasing people's choices so they may have the freedom to pursue the lives they value. In this, income is seen to be an instrument of this freedom to pursue their well-being.

Social technologies have impacted communications on a personal level and more recently as support platforms for businesses. Many studies have been conducted and much has been written on ICTs and specifically social technologies (Chitwood, 2014; Fairchild, 2014; Nord, 2013; eBiz, 2016; Nord, Koohang, and Paliszkiewicz, 2014; Qureshi, 2011; Statista, 2015; StatsMonkey, 2015; Ting, Ao, and Lin, 2014; Wu, Tian, Chen, and Chong, 2016), the internet (Bonson & Bednarova, 2015; Harris, 2016; Intel, 2014; Microsoft, 2015a,b; Rushton, 2014; Sareah, 2015; Simonite, 2015; Thapa, 2014), and economic development and women's empowerment (Flor, 2014; Hsu, 2009; Khan & Moin 2013; Qureshi, 2015; Cornwall & Anyidoho, 2010; Gholipour, Rahimian, Mirzamani, and Zehtabi, 2010; Landig, 2011; Levi, Factor, and Deutsch, 2013; Levin, 2011; Maden, 2015; Mosedale, 2014; Najjar, 2011; Nazneen, Darkway,

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and Sultan, 2014; NCJW, 2014; Presby, 2013; Sengupta, 2013; Shah, Aziz, and Ahmad, 2015; Sinha, 2012; UNWomen, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2015) separately. No previous studies, however, were identified which specifically examined women's empowerment and economic development through social technologies. Rapid growth, global reach, ease of use, and numerous social technologies platforms available cannot be ignored as potential empowerment tools.

Based on the literature, it is known that an economic participation and opportunity gender gap exists world-wide (World Economic Forum, 2015) and despite awareness, government policies, and court cases, this gap has shown very slow improvement and even setbacks over the years.

The question remaining is "What action will significantly reduce or eliminate this gap and provide empowerment for women leading to economic development?" This study addresses this question by determining whether the benefits realized through social technologies provide the answer.

The next section includes the theoretical background and literature review including 1) The two countries studied—Taiwan and Turkey; 2) The Internet and Social Technologies; and 3) Economic Development and Women's Empowerment followed by results of the study.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1. Taiwan

Taiwan—officially the Republic of China—is a sovereign state in East Asia. Today Taiwan maintains an advanced industrial economy as a result of rapid economic growth and industrialization in the late twentieth century. The 21st-largest economy in the world, its high-tech industry plays a key role in the global economy. Taiwan is ranked highly in terms of freedom of the press, health care, public education, economic freedom, and human development. (Taiwan, 2016)

A gender pay gap exists throughout the world, and Taiwan is no exception. An article in the Taipei Times (Gender, 2015), indicated that The Ministry of Labor set the current year's Equal Pay Day at Feb. 24, based on estimates that Taiwanese women needed to work that far into the year to earn the same amount as the average man did last year which translates into 15% less than the salaries of their male co-workers. Closing the gap has improved—although slow—from 20% in 2003–15% in 2015. There are many countries, including the U.S. which are contending with even greater gender wage gaps.

2.2. Turkey

Turkey—officially the Republic of Turkey—is a parliamentary republic in Eurasia, largely located in Western Asia, with the smaller portion of Eastern Thrace in Southeast Europe. Turkey is bordered by eight countries: Syria and Iraq to the south; Iran, Armenia, and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan to the east; Georgia to the northeast; Bulgaria to the northwest; and Greece to the west. The Black Sea is to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and the Aegean Sea to the west. The Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara, and the Dardanelles demarcate the boundary between Thrace and Anatolia; they also separate Europe and Asia. Turkey's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia makes it a country of significant geostrategic importance. (Turkey, 2016)

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2015), Turkey ranks 130th out of 145 countries listed with a score of 0.624 on the economic participation and opportunity index. This means that Turkish women face a 38% gender gap from males

working in the same fields. Landig (2011) believes that Turkey has not tapped into the potential of information technology to benefit its women.

Women find it challenging to balance home and work life while experiencing gender inequalities. Taiwan and Turkey are examples of how the problem exists globally, but in most cases the problem is much more severe in developing countries. What is the solution? Could social technologies—as a means of economic development and empowerment for women—help close the gender gap and provide economic stability for women?

2.3. Internet and social technologies

2.3.1. Global access to the internet

A survey of internet users around the world conducted by Microsoft Corp. shows an overwhelming majority believes personal technology is making the world a better place to live and has vastly improved how they shop, work, learn and generally get things done (Microsoft News Center, 2015). Blair (2014), indicates that access to the internet may be a key to addressing age-old inequalities on a significant scale.

> "The internet is an essential tool that provides a way for women to get access to the wider world—the world of networks, communities, health and education information, financial advice and business skills training. It's a platform for women to seek help where they need it, so helping to redress the gender imbalance and foster the empowerment of women. Yet, access alone doesn't equal digital empowerment; it is, rather, one of many conditions required to reduce gender inequalities online" (Intel, 2014).

Out of more than 7 billion people on earth, over 4 billion of them don't have access to the internet according to a recent report from the United Nations' Broadband Commission. Only one in every 10 individuals has regular access to the internet in lesser developed countries, and worse yet, access is often striated along gender divides. Given the enormous potential in terms of education, equity, and opportunity provided by the internet, the pace at which broadband has made its way around the world is viewed by many as problematic. (Chung, 2015)

Tech Giants such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Intel, and others have taken this seriously and are making significant efforts to bring the internet and social technologies to individuals not as fortunate as those who have found empowerment through these tools (Intel, 2014; Microsoft, 2015b; Rushton, 2014; Simonite, 2015).

Facebook and Google are collaborating on efforts to use balloons and drone aircraft to expand internet access to the four billion people that don't have it. Documents filed with the U.S. Federal Communications Commission show that both companies are pushing for international law to be modified to make it easier to use aircraft around 20 kilometers above the earth, in the stratosphere, to provide internet access. Google has been working for several years on balloons that float in the stratosphere and function as aerial cell towers to provide internet access in areas with poor infrastructure (Simonite, 2015).

Facebook has numerous initiatives in progress to get more people online including its internet.org project encouraging carriers to offer free access to certain sites and through its future solar powered drones. Facebook has also launched 'lite' versions of Facebook and supported low cost smartphones to select developing countries (Vincent, 2015).

Although a number of American companies have plans in place to help spread the wealth when it comes to internet, the U.N.'s Broadband Commission points out that empowering people via broadband needs much more than infrastructure alone, indicating that extending access must be accompanied by the development