In this age of instantaneous electronic communication, the term “digital divide” has become standard shorthand to describe the gap between those who have access to advanced communication technologies and those who don’t.

Often, the term is applied, in a general way, to describe how the rich have greater access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) than the poor. Other times, it refers to the disparity between people in rural and urban settings. International Women’s Day (IWD) on 8 March provides an opportunity to consider another form of digital divide — the one that separates men from women — and to look at some recent attempts to build bridges across it.

Women who live in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage in the digital world — facing multiple barriers related both to gender and location. Given their central role in the agricultural economy, for example, rural women often have too much work and too little time to become familiar with these new technologies. And with their special responsibilities for children and the elderly, women typically cannot migrate as easily as men to towns and cities where training in the new technologies is more available.

Cultural attitudes preventing women from visiting public access points frequented by men — in addition to generally lower levels of education and less political and economic power than their male counterparts — also limit women’s ability to enter the new world of ICTs. Add to this the lack of ICT materials in local languages, and the obstacles seem formidable indeed.

But there is hope. In 2005, for instance, judges for the small grants fund GenARDIS (short for Gender and Agricultural/Rural Development in the Information Society) combed through some 300 applications to a competition to fund projects aimed at breaking down those barriers separating rural women from the benefits of ICTs. GenARDIS — a collaborative venture of Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the European Union’s Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), and the Netherlands-based Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) — finally selected 10 winning entries from countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Each of the winners was awarded 5 000 Euros.
Cumulatively, the winning entries form a fascinating snapshot of how a variety of tools and tactics — for instance, providing access to cellular phones, getting women connected to the Internet, and creating educational video — serve both rural women’s day-to-day needs and the longer-term goal of advancing the position of women within society. Here are some examples.

**Raising women’s status in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

In fact, a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shows how the daily, practical issues women face and the wider goal of social emancipation are interwoven and inter-related.

Arche d’Alliance is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) spearheading a pilot project involving 70 women in the DRC’s Uvira region. At a surface level, the major aim of the project is to teach the women how to use the Internet to find and apply better farming methods and better ways to market their produce.

“This prize will have a real impact on our ability to help rural women make strides in the agriculture, (animal) breeding, fishing, and craft sectors,” says spokesperson Brigitte Kasongo Mawazo. But she quickly adds that realizing those practical goals is expected to lead to an improvement in the status of women within their communities, partly because of the project’s subsidiary impact of “teaching them their rights while eliminating illiteracy. Reinforcing our capacity this way enables us to become increasingly useful to other women, and our whole community.”

Indeed, women and children in Congo have suffered greatly as a prolonged period of war, which engulfed the country between 1996 and 2003, led to social breakdown and large-scale human rights abuses. Arche d’Alliance is hopeful that their new fluency with the Internet will raise the community standing of the women in the pilot project. For one, it gives them new skills that they will be able to teach to men — reversing the existing power dynamic. It also helps these women develop an enhanced economic acumen that hopefully can be parlayed into a voice in community decisions on economic development.

The pilot project in Uvira region is just one part of Arche d’Alliance’s wider, nation-wide drive to use ICTs to improve the status of women and to promote human rights and enlightened social and economic development policies. “The right to information,” states Kasongo Mawazo, summarizing the NGO’s approach, “gives rural women real power to advocate and to act for change.”

**Videos for human rights in Tonga**

Human rights issues are also being addressed directly in Tonga, where Coconut Productions is using its GenARDIS prize to create an ambitious video series. The videos aim to raise rural Tongan women’s awareness of gender issues and to advocate for Tonga’s adoption of the United Nations’ 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Tonga is the only Polynesian country that has not ratified CEDAW, and there are troubling signs that the position of women is worsening there. Tongan women who are desperate to escape their rural homes for perceived opportunities in Nuku’alofa, the capital, or overseas are increasingly falling into prostitution or becoming victims of trafficking. Meanwhile, many long-time small businesses owned and operated by women in rural areas are finding themselves unable to provide the new goods and match the lower prices of an influx of foreign competitors and are being forced to close their doors.
The economic desperation that fuels the exploitation of women is sustained, in part, by the lack of education of women living on Tonga’s outer islands, and also by their lack of access to information from the wider world. One of the issues that Coconut Productions is dealing with in its videos, therefore, is how access to information through modern ICTs could help women mobilize on important public issues such as health, education, economic development, and governance.

A global neighbourhood in Burkina Faso
One trait that’s common to a number of GenARDIS-award winning projects is an aim to have an impact well beyond the women who are participating directly in the projects.

In Burkina Faso, for example, a project that makes it possible for 30 rural women to use the Internet is designed to stimulate much broader communication within rural communities in that country. Association Manegdbzanga, which houses the project, envisions the new Internet access, first, as a way of allowing participants to communicate with other rural women around the world, so as to gather insight into how women elsewhere deal with challenges similar to their own. But during their daily work as farmers and gardeners, the participants are also in direct contact with neighbours — allowing them to communicate what they have learned through their electronic connections. In addition, Association Manegdbzanga publishes a nation-wide newspaper that can transmit more broadly the project participants’ new, Internet-derived knowledge.

Part of the benefit of this project, of course, is a personal one for the women involved. The association is providing women the funding and time to participate in a study course that allows them to learn, at their own pace, how to use ICTs. Despite the obstacles they face — such as low levels of education and literacy, and the steep demands of daily farm work — there is optimism that these women will succeed. “We think these constraints will be overcome by the dynamism of the women and their will to discover ICTs,” says project coordinator Eric Ilboudo.

Ultimately, the association sees this project more as a beginning than as an end in itself. Project operators hope the pilot will influence Burkina Faso’s government to introduce a small grants program to expand training for rural women in ICT use. They are also advocating government financing for software development in the Sudanic dialect, spoken by about 90 percent of the population.

An electronic well head in Lesotho
In a similar vein, a project in Lesotho to investigate the benefits of cell phone use by women in 25 rural families is unfolding as part of a larger design to stimulate a resurgence in the local agricultural economy.

The women in Lesotho’s Eyking area — who are isolated and lack access to traditional village communications methods — are cut off from crucial information that could help them farm more productively. That’s why Econet-Ezitel is providing them with cell phones. Now the women in the pilot project can check markets for the best prices for their products and keep in touch with local farming co-ops.

“Women in the villages have traditionally networked…by meeting at the village well when they get water,” explains David Dolly, of Lesotho’s Thulare-Eyking Agricultural Development Project. “Giving them cell phones and air time means we now have an electronic well head.”

If it turns out that the phone contact can help women improve their families’ productivity and earnings and raise their own status, the example would become an important one in Lesotho, which is mired in economic difficulties. Lesotho’s per capita income ranks about 150th in the world, with
some seven out of 10 Basotho (as the people of Lesotho are called) eking out a livelihood on declining subsistence farms.

The hope is that — if this pilot project is successful — other agricultural co-ops will emulate it, giving Lesotho’s farm productivity the boost it badly needs. While this impact is important in itself, project organizers hope for even more exciting ripple effects. If other rural groups — in the health and local government sectors, for example — follow the “well head” project’s example and build their organizations around their own networks of connected women, the concept could revitalize Lesotho as a whole.

**Farming services by cell phone**

Cell phones are also seen as a crucial tool for the advancement of rural women in Trinidad and Tobago, where a GenARDIS award-winning project is tracking how seven male farmers and seven female farmers use the technology. Women farmers comprise about 12 percent of the islands’ agricultural workforce, and there are indications that jobs available to women in the sector are less permanent than their male counterparts’. The case study aims to demonstrate how access to cell phones can increase the stability of women’s agricultural employment by strengthening their networks.

The cell phone study, again, is part of a grander plan that includes setting up and operating a database of Trinidad’s female small-scale farmers, a workable small credit operation for them, a clearinghouse for certain products women produce, and a women’s market information source.

With all the GenARDIS-supported projects, ICTs are only a means — albeit a very powerful means — to an end, rather than an end in themselves. Access to information is the tool that allows women to envision small advances in everyday life and more monumental strides over time.

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