

Chong Sheau Ching: Advocating for Change



Chong Sheau Ching
(IDRC Photo)

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If there's anyone who knows the role education can play in aiding international development, it's Chong Sheau Ching. She is passionate about its part in empowering people – especially women – through knowledge, because learning changed her life.

In her late teens, she could not attend university due to the Government of Malaysia's restrictive education policies. Her parents later gave her their lifesavings, and with the money, Chong Sheau Ching left Malaysia for Canada, where she completed Bachelors of Science degrees in agriculture and home economics at the University of Saskatchewan.

She went on to complete a Master's degree in international administration from the Brattleboro, Vermont's School for International Training. She says her time at university was a life-altering experience.

“Without the education, I wouldn't have the capability to deal with the world on another level,” she says. “Education is very important to change a girl's life. If a mother can earn money herself, then she will try to give her daughters an education.”

After finishing her studies, Sheau Ching worked for organizations like the World Health Organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations Population Fund. Her work during this time consisted of project management and information and communication technologies (ICTs) planning.

Then, her life changed again. In the mid-1990s, Sheau Ching left her UN job to return home to Malaysia, and became a single mother working from home as a consultant. She quickly learned that not only was being a single mother working from home difficult, but single mothers faced

social stigma.

Building an e-community

To confront this problem, she founded Mothers for Mothers, a network for Malaysian mothers working at home. Sheau Ching later merged her past ICTs work with the network, which evolved into eHomemakers, an “e-community.” The majority of Southeast Asian homeworkers are women.

Although Malaysia has one of the highest standards of living in Southeast Asia, unlike Thailand and Indonesia, it does not recognize homeworkers. There are no unions for those working from home, and eHomemakers remains the only organized community of homeworkers in the country.

In nine years of operation, Sheau Ching says many disadvantaged and marginalized women have contacted eHomemakers for help.

“Of course, these were women with very little education, or who were chronically ill,” she says. “Those who nobody wants to help came along and asked for help.”

Partnerships for change

Sheau Ching started looking for a donor to provide funding for the organization. A friend introduced her to the work of the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) Regional Office for Southeast and East Asia in Singapore. In turn, they connected her with the Canadian International Development Agency’s Southeast Asian Gender Equity Program (SEAGEP). SEAGEP sent her to a conference in Bangkok, Thailand where she learned about the impact of the Asian economic crisis on Southeast Asian homeworkers. She realized a core element was missing from the informal sector: using information to empower women.

Through her exposure to SEAGEP’s work and her experiences as a single mother working from home, Sheau Ching realized the importance of connecting homeworkers with ICTs. In 2005, she led an IDRC-funded research project, Homeworkers and ICTs in Southeast Asia, in which she and a team of dedicated research colleagues studied homeworkers in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. In particular, they examined ICT and gender issues within the Southeast Asian context.

The project took a broad approach, looking at home based work using a variety of ICT tools, ranging from computers to hand-held phones in the home, which help women enter what Sheau Ching calls “a new arena of livelihood.” Her intent was to not only gather information about how women working from home used ICTs in running their businesses, but also to highlight the role technology can play in helping women learn. That learning encourages self-confidence and leads to greater self-esteem.

“Overall, we found that the women who use ICTs are usually better off,” she says. “Those who don’t feel extremely isolated.”

Outspoken advocate

While Sheau Ching remains a staunch advocate of ICT use by women, she’s not afraid to point out what she sees as the limitations of some types of ICTs in their ability to cater to the needs of different peoples around the world: “Computers are developed by North American geeks in a basement, not by Indonesian women sitting on a floor.”

Many colleagues and partners appreciate Sheau Ching’s outspoken nature. Chaitali Sinha, a research officer with IDRC’s Pan Asia Networking program, first met Sheau Ching in Laos in March 2003. She says she was instantly struck by her “warm” demeanour and her ability to speak her mind.

“She was very genuine, and there’s no pretence about her. Her direct behaviour exemplifies her clear passion for the issue,” Sinha says. “It’s great to have somebody on the ground who has experienced what she’s advocating for.”

Push and pull

Sheau Ching links her ICT advocacy with the fair trade movement and women’s empowerment, because she says she sees development and world issues as intrinsically related. She describes her work as part of a process through which she hopes to make the world more equitable for the generations to come.

“If you don’t do something when you can, whether it’s spreading knowledge or spreading ideas, it will affect your own children and grandchildren and country and will touch everything,” she says.

Sinha agrees with Sheau Ching’s philosophy, and says one of the best ways to reach out to others is through the use of ICTs.

“Simply put, it just puts so much power into the hands of the people,” Sinha says. “It’s one of those things that can really divide people and at the same time, has the power to reach so many.”

While the IDRC-funded research aspect of her work might be completed, Sheau Ching says her work is far from over. She will continue to promote the use of ICTs in assisting homeworkers, no matter what hurdles she might face.

“My work will look at how to get help, and how to get information and how to move forward, and how to overcome some of the gender barriers,” she says.

Kate Harper is an Ottawa-based writer.