

Feminist criticism of Digital Coloniality in the African context

There is no doubt about the penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Africa and the impact of their uses, in particular gendered, has been the subject of mixed analyses. This contribution analyzes the exact link between these impacts and the continental gender inequalities using a critical feminist grid.

In order to carry out this study we chose to use results from a research study held in Senegal and South Africa on the existence of the political impacts of women's or feminist organizations' uses of Internet on two forms of domination: male and Global West/South (Palmieri 2016). Interviews were conducted in December 2008 and January 2009 in Cape Town, South Africa and Dakar, Senegal, with 31 people representing 24 women's or feminist organizations, and gender research institutions with access to the Internet, whether or not having websites, organizations focusing on digital creation or the use of Web2.0, and one national institution, no longer working on gender.

The discussions were based on three main themes (with specific questions included). The first concerned the personal situation of the respondents (place of residence, age, social environment, access to Internet...); the second was on their interpretation of the national context (political situation, relations with the "Global West", women's situation...) with a subset specifically targeting their relation with information and their uses of ICTs; the third focused on the design, organization and evaluation of their website or their planned website.

Using ICTs and meeting diverse obstacles

Respondents in South Africa and Senegal testify to many and multiple obstacles in their use of ICTs. Fatimata Seye Sylla, President of *Bokk Jang*, an NGO dedicated to educating young

people through ICTs, and an ICT expert for international organizations in Senegal, considers that women do not have the time “because they do everything”. Bernedette Muthien, director of *Engender*, a South African NGO specializing in research on “intersectionality¹, genderism and sexuality”, links the lack of time with the time-consuming management of the increasingly violent environment in her country.

The financial resources problem in Senegal is very pragmatic. To participate in any meeting, members of women’s organizations must be paid (for transport costs and even for food). They also need to be informed because they have to go to dedicated places like cybercentres. Organizations must resolve to pay or risk failure. This situation implies a specific communication budget (including digital), which is the first to be sacrificed in the case of financial crisis.

In South Africa, Rowayda Halim, a member of many women’s organizations, including the *Nisaa Institute for Women’s Development*, is direct: the main obstacles are traditional and religious practices. Synnølv Skorge, Director of the *Saartjie Baartman Center for Women and Children*, a center for beaten women in Cape Town, adds: “patriarchy” and “solidarity that women must show towards their family (husbands, brothers, fathers, children...)” take precedence. Mama, president of the *New Women’s Movement*, discusses the reluctance of men to express their fears of losing control over their wives, even though the potential mobilization concerns their wives’ protection.

In Senegal, Fatou Sarr Sow, director of the *Gender Laboratory of the Black African Fundamental Institute* (IFAN) at the University of Dakar, agrees. The main obstacles are “social burdens”, “values, social beliefs” and “cultural or religious considerations”. This environment would have an influence on the fact that “women do not understand certain issues”, that they “are not very sure of themselves”, which prevents them from going

through with their legal or protest actions. Women tolerate their social “place” as inferior people, a place “dictated” by the Qur'an and fed by the “guilty” discourse of radios. Madjiguéne Cissé, president of the *Women's Network for Sustainable Development in Africa* (REFDAF), supports this statement using the example of the social housing program that her organization implements and for which the main beneficiaries, women, consider that “It’s up to the man to look for a house, it’s not my responsibility”

Among our interlocutors in the two countries, several emphasize the idea that there are “different categories of women”, especially those living in rural or urban areas, those living at home, and others. Generation gaps, lack of education, even illiteracy, poor health, poverty, political divergences or lack of political goals can also make a difference. Women in cities have more access to information than rural ones, and are consequently more able to act. There is an avalanche of difficulties in accessing “computers, skills, electricity, wireless network”. According to Mercia Andrews, Director of the *Trust for Community Outreach and Education* (TCOE), an NGO that specializes in peasant rights, the Internet echoes in South Africa “all these technical things that the government has tried to implement like telecommunications centers [...], but which did not work”.

Many interlocutors go so far as to use the term “digital divide”. They notice the absence of appropriate policies towards “marginalized women”, for them to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet, allowing them to “catch up”. Helga Jansen, writer on the South African television and on the newspaper *Amandla*, speaks of a “work tool” that is unsuited to the majority of women: the network’s “instantaneity” (via *Google*, chats, blogs) – which provides access to information and ways to react to it immediately – would not be accessible to the majority which is dedicated to daily survival; this in turn impedes the expression of “feelings”, or “self-expression.” Liesl Theron, director of *Gender Dynamix*, an

LGBT rights NGO, says that the Internet does not concern women who live in “huts and have to share toilets with fifty other families” and only seek access to water and food.

Mama, one of the few people personally concerned by poverty, thinks on the contrary that the “immediacy” induced by ICT is very interesting to “cross” points of view, and especially to face emergencies; it guarantees personal security, moreover for women, who are no longer obliged to go out (which creates a danger) to call for help on their mobile phone, for example, or, in case a rapist has entered their home, who can inform the police, and all in silence (without speaking), a situation which increases their security.

From his side, Olivier Sagna, an ICT expert in Africa, confirms that “ICTs are seen as a luxury” and is not part of priorities such as access to water, school, health... while a study carried out in 1996, under the Acacia program in Senegal², demonstrated that “the biggest problems that organizations met were related to communication.”

Two cross-institutionalizations

In both countries, the obstacles related to the uses of ICTs by women’s or feminist organizations are numerous, financial, social, human, militant. The result is that these organizations dissociate mobilization and information. Tensions that cross local cultural and social relations overwhelm the relevance of the information flow. The Internet is particularly understood as reserved for those who can afford it³. Any possible change in the field remains contingent, conditioned by the preliminary resolution of all other problems: wealth gaps, illiteracy, violence, gender, class, and race inequalities (Dines and Humez 2002).

We therefore wish to make the link between these field observations and the results of the reference texts’ institutional analysis we have made on what is called the Information Society (IS)⁴. This work was limited to the corpus of studies carried out by the Gender and

ICT movement and official texts related to the Beijing Conference of 1995 and the various World Summits of the Information Society (WSIS) held since 2003. It confirms that national and international policies in favor of gender equality do not translate into everyday life, and more particularly in Africa (Palmieri 2015, 114). With the emergence of the Information Society coinciding with the Beijing Conference in 1995⁵, ICT policies have introduced the adoption of the generic concept of “digital gender divide”; this concept automatically combines the two terms *ICT* and *gender*. This combination covers in itself the components of two institutionalizations: that of ICTs, and that of gender, which is parallel to it (*ibid.* 115). Policy-Makers (from Western states and private companies), who decide ICT policies, organize the ICTs’ institutionalization. They do not consult the people for whom these policies are written: women, without differentiation of class or race. By willing to respond to women’s needs, these policies support the power role of those who write them, and approve the vertical processes of content generation, infrastructure control and decision-making. By not being structurally egalitarian, by reinforcing dependencies, this institutionalization, although making frequent reference to the term gender, excludes it from its practices (*ibid.* 117).

Then, looking at the ways activists of the Gender and ICT movement act, we have come to the conclusion that in Africa, gender policies have guided and continue to guide the actions of institutions towards women’s access to technological infrastructure, and not towards their significant contribution to the dissemination of their self made content (Palmieri 2012a). Emancipation is more technical than editorial, more functional than political. The use of ICTs by African women and their organizations is not gender-neutral and the emphasis on gender inequalities is linked to ICT. The joint institutionalizations of ICT and gender has contributed to the invisibility of the subject of women’s organizations struggles,

and thus to the subalternity of African women (Palmieri 2012b). African women's points of view, their knowledge, could not be highlighted.

A renewed coloniality

Having completed this institutional analysis, a thorough documentary research and a sustained reflection on postcolonial studies, as applied to the African continent, allowed us to correctly characterize these institutionalizations and subalternisation. On reading Anibal Quijano, it was possible to associate two words with the Information Society: *coloniality of power*. As it characterizes the set of social relations produced by the expansion of capitalism in subaltern peripheries (Quijano 1994), the terminology “coloniality of power” can be applied to the Information Society, because IS accelerates and enlarges this expansion by developing computers, software and telecommunications (Palmieri 2014). Indeed, this society participates in the increasing of coloniality, and we assist in its renewal (*ibid.*). We can draw up the idea of a *myth of catching-up* imposed by the Global West/center to the periphery⁶, throughout ICTs. The role of this myth is to place the peripheral states and populations in a position of subordination, inferiority, lag, according to a norm, the one of *being connected* and well connected, that is designed on the principle of scientific and informational criteria and occidental technical and economic standards.

Beyond this myth of catching-up, we have seen that the international organizations' gender message has converged for more than two decades towards “we must educate and support African women to fight poverty”. This is achieved through the integration of poor women into the global labor market, and hence through ICTs, including teleworking and online training (Palmieri 2015). This approach means that it is considered necessary that poor African women integrate imported, homogeneous knowledge, formulated by these

institutions' senior executives. This homogenization is in fact occidental. The Information Society then supports the occidentalization of thoughts that makes targeted women subalterns: these women are not considered as actors of development, carrying knowledge of their own (Spivak 1988).

More generally, coloniality is now read between the lines of ICT policies that are more concerned with connectivity issues than with those of control or content⁷. Thus ICTs are the vectors of an Occidentalized knowledge philosophy, which liberalizes itself more every day. We can then speak of coloniality of knowledge. At the same time, ICTs carry out an accelerated rhythm that changes the women's organizations agenda. The immediate management of the emergency, added to the organized confusion between computing and knowledge, paradoxically shrinks their spaces of action, that become more and more local, while the globalization of spaces of thought continues to develop. The crossroads of these paradoxes increase the complexity of coloniality, which is now digital.

Conclusion

Coloniality – let us define it as the heritage of globalization, capitalism, occidentalization, and earlier colonialism (Cahen 2008) –, structures African societies. It builds “modernity”, and with it the extensive introduction of ICTs. What is commonly called the Information Society is neither the result of a spontaneous generation of sharp technological research, nor the result of the neoliberalism and of the economic models' modernization, nor a sudden desire of humanity to communicate more and to share its knowledge. It is the product of the whole, all in pre-existing contexts of inequalities of class, gender, and race. In particular, the Information Society accelerates in Africa a hierarchization of knowledge and its representations. As such, IS is a system: it is as much the product of globalization and of

the social divisions that structure it, as it is at the origin of the production of new social inequalities, of hierarchical social relations and strengthened relations of domination.

By combining coloniality and gender in order to analyze them in the African context, we have evolved from the classical criticism viewpoints of IS, which indeed reveal unequal economic impacts and which demystify “social inclusion” by using ICTs, especially for women, to highlight the political and epistemic consequences. We have opened new theoretical and methodological tracks that now need to be further investigated.

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¹ In 1989, Kimberle Crenshaw proposed the concept of intersectionality to identify a relational perspective that illuminates how discourse and oppression systems are interrelated and interconnected around class, race, sexuality, and gender categories (Crenshaw 1991, 1241-1299).

² For more information, see the International Development Research Center (IDRC) website. Accessed June 14, 2017. <http://www.idrc.ca/FR/AboutUs/Pages/default.aspx>.

³ We were later able to observe that the exponential penetration of *Twitter* or of social media that privilege image, which South Africa has been experiencing since the beginning of 2010. It can enable, as has been observed and analysed (Favero 2013, 259-277), dominant forms of speech to be overcome but it has not yet reached the organizations questioned in our study.

⁴ Originally, the term "Information Society" was created to designate a society based on the use of ICTs, which includes the Internet, mobile telephony and information technology. The term was mostly used by international organizations and the United Nations in particular, which organized the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) editions in Geneva in December 2003 and in Tunis in November 2005.

⁵ In the Beijing Platform for Action adopted on 15 September 1995 at the World Conference, it is stated that "computing and television by satellite and cable" offer "new opportunities" to "Women's participation in communications and the media, and the dissemination of information on women". Representatives of 186 countries ratified the text.

⁶ According to the theory of dependence, the societies of the Third World (or the periphery) structurally depend on Western capitalist powers (the center). In his "World-systems" theory, Immanuel Wallerstein differentiates the center from the periphery by defining an unbalanced social and economic construction, mobilizing structures acting at different levels (nations, companies, families, classes, identity groups, etc.). It is not fixed in time or space. This unequal exchange imposed by the center ensures the self-reproduction of the periphery's dependence (Wallerstein 1995).

⁷ The 2005 Enda Tiers-Monde's study on the gender digital divide in West Africa shows that the "seriously worrying" aspects of gender inequalities in ICTs are control and content aspects (Enda 2005, 64). According to this study, the digital gender divide can be measured according to a synthetic indicator, called "4C", which is structured around four main components: control, relevance of contents, capacities, connectivity. The control component demonstrates "gender disparity in terms of participation in political, economic and civic decision-making, the degree of readiness for gender mainstreaming in ICT policies, and the sensitivity of ICT policies to issues of gender". The content component demonstrates "the gender dimensions of the use of ICT tools, products and services, gender sensitivity in ICT products, and the relevance of gender content" (Enda 2005, 36).