Gender and Information Technology: Moving Beyond Access to Co-Create Global Partnership.
Author: Mary Kirk.

Reviewed by Gill Kirkup

The Open University, UK

PUBLICATION DETAILS

REVIEW

The scope of this book is hugely ambitious: 'an interdisciplinary, meta-analysis of the larger systemic issues related to women's underrepresentation as developers, users and beneficiaries of technology' (from the author's preface p xi) This analysis is structured around an argument that the problem of women's underrepresentation in all fields of science and technology, as well as the digital divides of class, race, geography and gender, are due to a hegemonic global 'suppressive dominator' culture that needs to be replaced with a 'partnership' culture ('partnership' is equated with 'feminist' in the book). The final third of the book offers suggestions about ways in which this partnership society (through media, education and new economic models) might be brought about. However, for this reader, Kirk's reach significantly exceeds her grasp. The book is a mixture of thoughtful and interesting material that clearly comes from original work done by the author and from reflections on her own practice as an educator, but this is interleaved with summaries of ideas and evidence from other disciplines that suggest gaps in the author's familiarity with the literature of these disciplines as well as an over-simplification of the ideas they contain.

The structure of the book is that of eleven chapters plus an extensive author's preface. The eleven chapters are organised into three sections. The first section contains three chapters which attempt to give a condensed course in gender, science, and technology for readers unfamiliar with the literature in this area. The second section contains four chapters on media, language, education and economics, in which Kirk uses evidence from a variety of sources to argue that all these activities operate in ways which are damaging to women and to other groups who are not part of the 'dominator' class/culture. The third section contains four chapters which argue that media, education and economics should adopt a new a new set of values and practices, which are described as a 'partnership model' of society based on work by Eisler (1987, 2002). The book is structured like a student course book. Each chapter begins with a list of the objectives of the chapter (a version of learning outcomes for the reader), each ends with 'questions for reflective dialogue', which look like excellent and very creative student activities that would work well in a classroom. The later chapters contain tables which map the content of chapters against themes from the 'partnership' model. There is an appendix with recommended reading organised around the themes that the author considers key to the book. A more detailed discussion of the contents of the sections will explain where the strengths and weaknesses of the book lie.

Section 1 begins with an introduction to feminist arguments which counter explanations for the 'naturalness' of gender inequality, as well as an introduction to Eisler's (1987, 2002) ideas of 'partnership' values as the foundation of an equitable (global) social world. The section then goes on to summarise feminist critiques of the nature of scientific practice and discourse as gendered and exploitative. This section of the book appears very dated, both in the references on which it relies as well as the debates it engages with. The author uses the adjective 'recent' to describe literature published in the 1990s. She discusses literature on images of women in computer magazines from the 1980s. Since the 1990s it has been impossible to engage with the feminist debates about dualism in gender and technoscience, or the issue of gendered ontology without engaging with the work of Donna Haraway (1985, 1997). Haraway's work and that of the many later authors who have build on it brought radical new insights to understanding gender and the socio-technical world. Kirk seems unaware of this work, or of the later theorists such as Barad (2003) who have introduced a new 'materialism' into the debate about post-humanism. Any review of up to date theories about gender and science and technology must include consideration of these key authors. The major idea introduced in this section of the book, and returned to in later sections, is what Kirk calls 'partnership' social values. These values seem strongly related to feminist work on the ethic of care (Noddings 2003; Held 2005). This work is well know in feminist scholarship and can trace its roots back the ideas of Gilligan (1982) on gendered moral development, and Chodorow (1979) on mothering. Kirk seems unaware of this body of work, and this is also evident in the reading

lists given at the end of the book. The absence of engagement with key feminist theorists reduces the usefulness of this section book, and the associated reading lists for students.

In the second section of the book Kirk is on firmer ground, however. She moves from making claims that certain issues like the pervasiveness of 'suppressive dominator' values are global, to discussing evidence from within a US context, but without acknowledging that this context may be 'local'. Chapter four contains a very interesting and original study of articles about and by women in *Wired* magazine between 1993 and 1999.This presents a picture of the early ambition of *Wired* editors to make space for 'up and coming' women in the new information and communication technology (ICT) world, both as writers and profiled in articles. Kirk's analysis of the content of the articles, as well interviews with writers, shows how this original ambition began to give way to more traditional gendered content, especially after the magazine was bought by a major publisher of glossy magazines. However that is now a historical study. I would expect to see any discussion of gender and information technology in mass media, and as forms of communication and interaction, to be engaging with what we have come to call Web 2.0 or social media. How does online content portray women working with ICT, and who are the authors of online content? There is no discussion of this anywhere in the book. In chapter eight Kirk gives us her alternative proposal for a new feminist version of *Wired*, but envisaged as a traditional mass media, one-to-many paper magazine. It would have been very nice to have seen Kirk apply her vision for the importance of co-created knowledge to a new interactive online 'magazine', instead of looking for solutions in traditional media.

In chapter five there is an emphasis on gaming as representative of 'computer culture'. Gaming is of course an important and profitable aspect of computer media, but now ranks as only one of a wide range of ways in which people engage with ICT or a computer based world for their leisure activities. The focus on gaming, like the focus on paper based mass media, give the book a dated feel.

By chapter seven it feels as if Kirk has dived into unfamiliar waters again; this time the rough seas of economic theory. Kirk rightly identifies the economics of globalised business as the major driver of ICT development, and she feels that she needs to engage with understanding this if she wants to suggest economic solutions. I sympathise, but dabbling in economic debate without a good grounding is a risky thing. Kirk relies heavily – almost exclusively - on Eisler for her analysis of economic issues, and Harding (1998) for her analysis of globalisation. She uses the terms 'capitalism' and 'socialism' as if they are self- explanatory, and always the same everywhere e.g. is capitalism in the US the same as capitalism in Sweden or China? Capitalism seems to be the villain in this part of the book – although socialism is presented as also manifesting 'dominator values' and therefore

failing. Kirk's model of capitalism is not one that would be generally accepted; she describes is as a system in which a businessman or worker is 'absolutely entitled to make money in any way you want; that is how capitalism works' (p 241). This is not a description that even right wing US neoconservatives are likely to agree with, and it certainly does not fit European capitalist systems with their mixed economies and extensive social infrastructures. There is a danger to oversimplifying economic (and other) arguments in this way. The negative aspects are exaggerated – problems are personified as villains, villains become monsters - and rhetorical, rather than practical, solutions are proposed.Indeed Kirk's solution to 'dominator' capitalism (and socialism) is for each of us to adopt a model of individual ethical behaviour as laid out in her final chapter: 'A Concluding Pledge'. It wasn't at all clear to me that this would overthrow capitalism or abolish gender, race or class inequalities.

Kirk is much more authoritative when she engages with education at the classroom level. She does this in chapter nine, where she elaborates what she calls 'partnership' education and what I would describe as excellent feminist pedagogy in practice. She reviews a number of US programmes for more gender inclusive curricula. Here her expertise shines though in her suggestions for ways to establish an inclusive science and technology classroom with a climate where students experiment with ideas and develop social confidence and intellectual skill. I was left wishing the book has been less ambitious, and that Kirk had attempted a smaller task, probably focussing on ICT education where she speaks with authority.

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