

# innovation

FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
AND GENDER EQUALITY

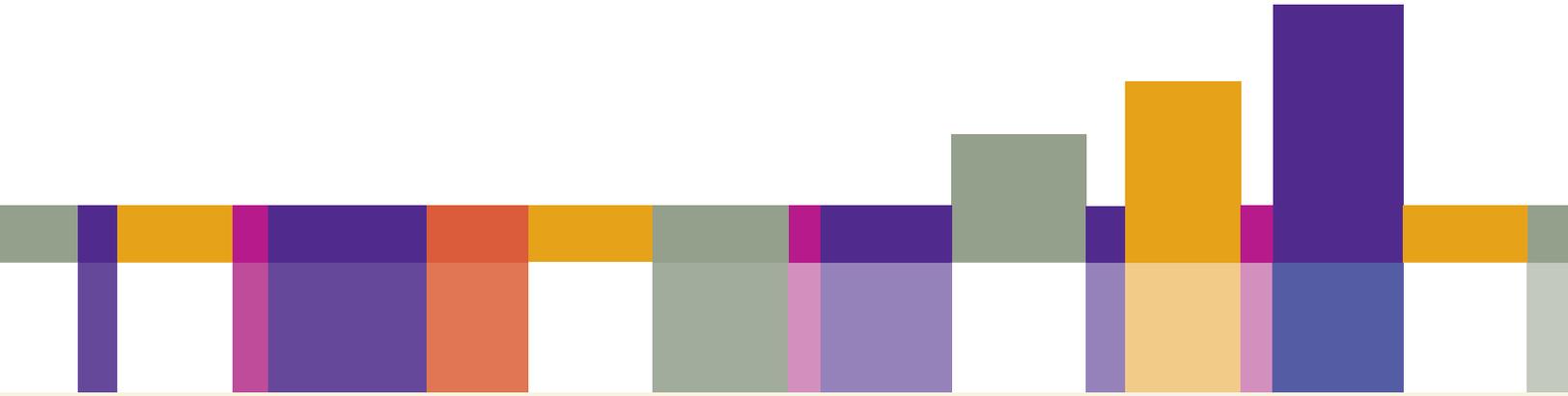


Anju Malhotra Jennifer Schulte Payal Patel Patti Petesch



# innovation\*

FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
AND GENDER EQUALITY



Anju Malhotra  
Jennifer Schulte  
Payal Patel  
Patti Petesch

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER  
FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN (ICRW)  
HAS WORKED FOR MORE THAN  
30 YEARS TO **EMPOWER WOMEN**,  
ADVANCE **GENDER EQUALITY**  
AND **FIGHT POVERTY** IN THE  
DEVELOPING WORLD. ICRW WORKS  
WITH PARTNERS IN THE PUBLIC  
AND PRIVATE SECTORS AND CIVIL  
SOCIETY TO CONDUCT EMPIRICAL  
RESEARCH, BUILD CAPACITY AND  
ADVOCATE FOR EVIDENCE-BASED,  
PRACTICAL WAYS TO CHANGE  
POLICIES AND PROGRAMS.

## acknowledgments

ICRW gratefully acknowledges the Rockefeller Foundation for their generous support of this research. The authors would like to thank their colleagues at ICRW, in particular, Geeta Rao Gupta and Jeannie Bunton for their insightful review of the research paper, and Sandy Won for her editorial support and revisions.

© 2009 International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Portions of this report may be reproduced without express permission of ICRW but with acknowledgment to ICRW.

PHOTO CREDITS:  
covers: ICRW/S. Pereira;  
page 7: ICRW/D. Mahla;  
page 8: ICRW/D. Mahla and ICRW/D. Snyder;  
page 9: Worldview Images and ICRW/D. Snyder

DESIGN: DO GOOD DESIGN

# innovation\*

## FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY

Anju Malhotra Jennifer Schulte Payal Patel Patti Petesch

### executive summary

From the eradication of foot binding to foot pedaled water pumps, from the Pill to property rights, innovation can transform women's lives. Virtuous circles of change can be sparked by women's use of a seemingly simple technology; a shift in social attitudes about what is possible for women; or increased access for women to economic opportunities, employment, savings and credit.

More than at any other time in history, the world is poised to leverage innovation to improve the lives of poor women and empower them to realize their potential. Innovation and women's empowerment are rarely discussed within the same context but each has essential value for human progress. Both innovation and gender equality underpin all of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and both require thinking and acting beyond existing, predefined parameters. Both endeavors require breaking the mold.

As the imperative to ensure women's participation and rights in social, economic and political progress gains urgency, innovation presents a particularly exciting pathway for seizing the present moment and achieving the goals of women's empowerment and gender equality—goals that have been so difficult to realize in the past.

At the most basic level, innovations can benefit women simply by improving their well-being in terms of health, nutrition, income, even life span. Beyond vital improvements in well-being, innovations can lead to women's empowerment, securing freedom and resources for women to make decisions, build confidence and act in their own interests. Deeper and truly transformative innovations reshape men's and women's roles on a longer-term basis. Examples abound where only yesterday women were immobile, but today move freely, where women were silent but today have a voice, where women were dependent but today are the engines of progress for their families, businesses and communities.

It is well known that innovation and shifting gender roles are each catalytic processes that drive change. But little is known about the connection between innovation and women's empowerment: How do innovations create long-term, positive shifts in gender relations?

This research is the first scholarly assessment of its kind to understand how innovations have improved women's well-being, empowered women and advanced gender equality. We examine eight catalytic innovations in three domains that intersect areas with the greatest need and most creative entry points for realizing women's empowerment: (1) technology use (2) social norm change and (3) economic resilience.

The innovations include:

#### **TECHNOLOGY USE**

- (1) The oral contraceptive pill in the United States
- (2) Grameen Village Phones in Bangladesh

#### **SOCIAL NORM CHANGE**

- (3) Anti-foot binding campaign in China
- (4) Legislative gender quotas in Argentina
- (5) Campaign to end female genital cutting in Senegal

#### **ECONOMIC RESILIENCE**

- (6) Labor-intensive, export-led economic policy in Taiwan
- (7) Microfinance-plus in India
- (8) Land titling in Peru

---

### core levers

1. Break boundaries for strategic partnerships
2. Engage women in design and diffusion
3. Cultivate champions
4. Create “buzz” to make it “stick”
5. Capitalize on opportune timing and context
6. Target efforts to reach poor women
7. Synergize top-down and bottom-up approaches

When innovations are examined with a gender lens, a powerful, untapped strategy emerges to transform women’s lives. We identify seven core levers essential for innovation to catalyze meaningful change for women in developing countries.

Our findings show that a broad range of innovations—mobilized by diverse sectors, in diverse settings and by diverse actors throughout the world—resulted in substantial benefits for hundreds, thousands and even millions of women. In many cases, these innovations transformed women’s lives. Successful innovations broke boundaries and engaged in broad-based partnerships. Moreover, not all of these innovations were targeted at empowering women at the outset. As innovations evolved, motivations for more productive and efficient outcomes comingled with motivations to realize women’s intrinsic human rights.

Dynamic and influential champions—powerful men as well as highly committed and strong women—play an important role in launching or facilitating innovations that empower women. Women’s movements provided critical support, initially influencing the agenda, and later shaping the direction of innovation processes.

The most dramatic successes were built on favorable conditions and optimal timing that capitalized on multiple trajectories of social and economic transformation already underway. Innovations under these circumstances were often catalytic in triggering broad-based shifts in women’s opportunities and options as well as societal attitudes about men and women, and in institutions such as family, workplace and political structures.

Moving forward, a range of promising innovations—from gearless scooters to fair trade, workplace skills training to foot pedaled water pumps, mobile phone banking to financial education—can bring us closer to realizing goals of women’s empowerment and gender equality, if they are developed and deployed with a strategic emphasis on how women and men can participate equitably in the process and benefit from the outcomes. Integrating the seven levers identified through this research will be the key in applying a gender lens to technological, economic or social innovations that aim to solve some of the most challenging problems in international development.

# innovation

FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
AND GENDER EQUALITY

## WHY INNOVATION? WHY WOMEN? WHY NOW?

Harnessing the power of innovation to transform the lives of women in the developing world is an idea whose time has come. Never before has the world experienced such dynamic change in technologies, economies and societies as it is today. Innovation through new ideas, products and practices increasingly is seen as a force for social change. At the same time, there is growing consensus that empowering the millions of women who live in poverty is essential both for their intrinsic human rights and broad benefits for global development and economic growth. An increasingly wide range of institutions from business, civil society and government have committed resources, rhetoric and political capital to promote women's empowerment. While this goal has been a challenge to realize in the past, the current convergence of commitment and shifting paradigms provides an unprecedented opportunity to forge new alliances and unleash innovation to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality goals, which have proved difficult to realize.

As new players enter the global development domain with different approaches, perspectives, solutions, products and services that may not hold women's empowerment as an explicit objective, gender transformative effects of innovation none the less emerge. For example, improvements in water, sanitation, energy and transportation infrastructure, or changes in access to information and communication, agricultural and medical technologies have precipitated shifts in gender relations. Virtuous circles of change can be sparked by women's use of a seemingly simple technology; a shift in social attitudes about what is possible for women; or increased access for women to employment opportunities, savings and credit.

Innovation and women's empowerment are rarely discussed within the same context but each has essential value for human progress. There is significant evidence that progress on poverty reduction and human development are related to advancements in both innovative capacities and gender equality. Both innovation and gender equality underpin all of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Both innovation and women's empowerment require thinking "outside the box" and acting beyond existing, predefined parameters and traditional interventions. Essentially, both endeavors require breaking the mold.

By cultivating innovation to empower women and foster greater gender equality, business, civil society, government,

academia and women themselves have the opportunity to create and harness new solutions that offer fresh perspectives to difficult problems.

## FROM INNOVATION TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

How can we harness innovation's power to empower women and promote greater gender equality? Our research attempts to answer this question by:

- Identifying a well-defined pathway that connects innovation to empowerment;
- Using the pathway to assess eight powerful innovations that changed women's lives in technology use, social norm change and economic resilience; and
- Identifying the core levers that are essential for innovation to empower women and transform gender relations.

### A PATHWAY

That gender relations and innovation are constantly changing in their own spheres is well known. Each change opens up new opportunities to shape innovation to benefit women. But little is known about the connections between innovation, women's empowerment and gender equality: Can innovations create long-term, positive shifts in gender relations? If so, how? Our research maps this connection and defines a pathway composed of five dynamic, interactive areas: (1) innovation (2) context and timing (3) innovation systems (4) diffusion and (5) women's empowerment and gender equality (Figure 1).

We assess innovation, innovation systems and diffusion from a gender perspective, taking into account a range of terms and objectives from business, government, civil society and academia, among others.

### 1. INNOVATION

Recent developments in innovation thinking increasingly emphasize the opportunities that innovations can bring about to address development issues and spur wider social change. These concepts of innovation focus on advancing social and economic progress, as well as addressing the needs of the underserved and engaging them directly in innovation processes. Our definition of innovation aligns largely with the emerging concept of "social innovation," emphasizing not only progress and social change, but also social justice as an important element. Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller (2008) define social innovation as "a novel

solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient and sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.” Our definition of social innovation balances the need for value accruing directly to women for their greater well-being and empowerment, with an understanding that smart investments in women as development actors also can support the flow of benefits to households, communities and wider development processes.

## 2. CONTEXT AND TIMING

Context and timing fundamentally shape the facilitating factors—as well as the barriers—to when and how innovations are best poised to empower women. Contextual factors cover multiple political, economic, social, technological and environmental spectrums. They include a broad range of conditions shaping a society, such as legislative policies, social movements, war and conflict, macroeconomic trends, trade agreements, gender norms, financial systems, educational attainment, infrastructure, shocks and crises (from financial upheaval to natural disasters). A supportive setting and environment as well as opportune timing can mean the difference between success and failure of an innovation.

## 3. INNOVATION SYSTEMS

Innovation systems are defined by the relationships between all of the actors, ideas and processes needed for innovations to be created, adopted and diffused. Newer definitions of innovation systems acknowledge that bringing diverse actors together challenges the boundaries of knowledge, disciplines and sectors in ways that can champion innovative practices. There are two key aspects of innovation systems that are essential for assessing the impact of innovation on women’s empowerment and gender relations: (1) the actors in the innovation system, and (2) the role of women in creating, adapting and diffusing the innovation.

## 4. DIFFUSION

Diffusion focuses on how and why innovations take off and spread. Three aspects of the diffusion process are key to whether an innovation reaches and benefits women.

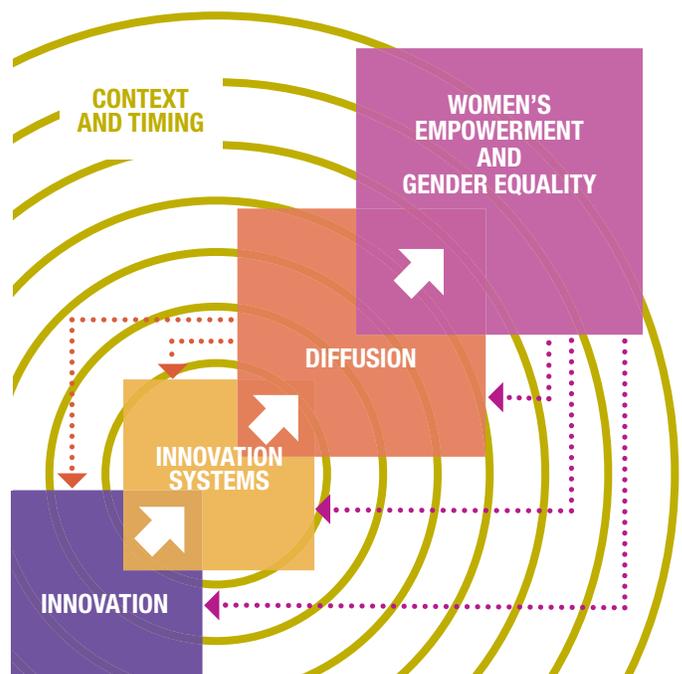
First, how compelling is an innovation for women’s needs and interests? The innovation’s appeal and value often is manifested in what Gladwell (2002) calls the “stickiness” factor. Second, how quickly and widely an innovation spreads is often defined by the steepness of an “S-shaped” curve, in which adoption initially spreads slowly and then rapidly takes off when a “tipping point” is reached (Gladwell 2002, Rogers 1995). Third, successful diffusion is shaped by how easily adoption flows from pioneers—early adopters who generally hold power and other advantages—to a broader base of poorer, more disadvantaged women. The typical diffusion pattern illustrates why women, who tend to have less money, power, education and influence compared to men, are often late to adopt innovations or are excluded from the diffusion process all together. The media, laws or regulations, social or economic networks, social movements, and organizational changes become critical channels to facilitate the transfer of innovations from the early adopters to less advantaged later adopters.

## 5. WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY

Women’s empowerment is defined as “women’s ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them” (Kabeer 1999). As we articulate it, empowerment is midway in the change processes that benefit women at individual, household, community and broader levels. At the most basic level, innovations can benefit women simply by improving their well-being in terms of health, nutrition, income, life span, etc. (Figure 2). Beyond vital improvements in well-being, changes can result in women’s empowerment, where women gain agency and resources to make decisions, build confidence

figure 1: INNOVATION TO EMPOWERMENT: A PATHWAY

Innovation systems and innovation are the starting points, the diffusion process is intermediary, and women’s empowerment and greater gender equality are the key outcomes. The social, economic and political contexts frame the pathway, influence the process, and define each of the other four areas and the interaction between them. The interconnections between these five areas are non-linear, dynamic and interactive. Women have been vital actors in all phases of innovation that has been empowering and fostered greater gender equality.



and act in their own interests. Deeper and truly transformative changes reshape societal norms, attitudes and institutional practices. Greater gender equality in markets, political institutions, family systems and social roles provide an ongoing foundation for sustaining women's well-being and empowerment.

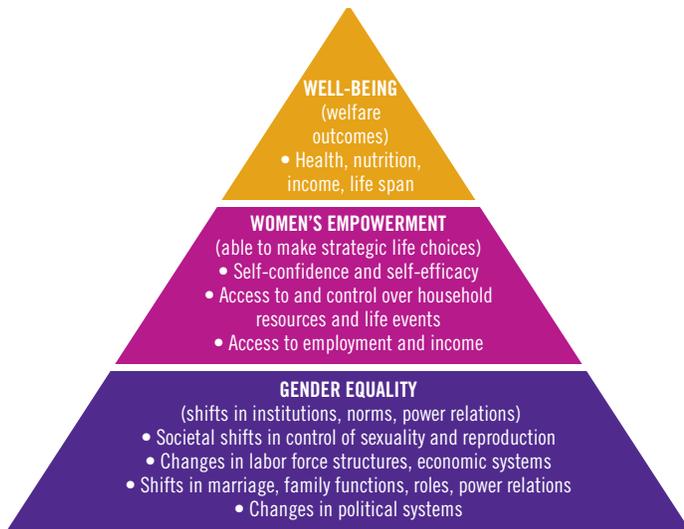


figure 2: FROM WELL-BEING TO EMPOWERMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY

## WHERE INNOVATION AND EMPOWERMENT CONVERGE

Innovative, expansive efforts are needed to address the fundamental challenges to achieving women's empowerment and gender equality in developing countries. Understanding how innovation connects to women's empowerment provides powerful guidance for action. Five key questions, derived from the pathway, guided our examination of when and how innovations have changed women's lives:

1. **INNOVATION:** What is the nature of innovations that create a positive impact on women and gender relations in societies?
2. **CONTEXT AND TIMING:** How conducive are the timing and social, economic and political conditions for the success of the innovation?
3. **INNOVATION SYSTEMS:** Who are the actors in effective innovation systems shaping such innovations?
4. **DIFFUSION:** What are the features of successful diffusion and adoption processes for such innovations?
5. **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY:** How catalytic and powerful are such innovations in advancing women's well-being, empowerment and gender equality?

By establishing the link between innovation and women's empowerment, our research is the first scholarly assessment of eight powerful innovations<sup>1</sup> in three distinct domains of innovation that intersect with the greatest need and most creative entry points for realizing progress in women's empowerment: (1) technology use (2) social norm change and (3) economic resilience. When women flourish in any of these areas—and especially when they thrive in all three—there is a demonstrable shift in gender relations. Historically, these three domains have been fundamental, persistent and universal barriers to gender equality in almost every known culture. At the same time, the world is experiencing technological change, social change and economic opportunity at a pace never before experienced in human history.

### TECHNOLOGY USE

Innovations in technology have the potential to address a wide spectrum of areas where women are disadvantaged: knowledge and information, reproductive health, infrastructure, livelihoods, mobility and communications, among others. Technologies—such as the Internet, cell phones, alternative energies, water filtration and sanitation, reproductive technologies, agricultural innovations—can empower women on multiple levels and spheres: individual, household, economic, social and political.

We analyzed two different innovations in the technology use stream:

1. Oral contraceptive pill in the United States (see page 7)
2. Grameen Village Phone in Bangladesh (see page 7)

Both innovations resulted in a positive impact on women and experienced successful diffusion processes, going to scale very rapidly. A technology such as the Pill, directly aimed at women, had a clearly perceived benefit and effectively enhanced a woman's control over strategic, fundamental life interests—reproduction and sexuality—for large numbers of women. In the context of broad social, economic and political change in the United States, the Pill's rapid diffusion in turn produced catalytic, multi-faceted, rapid transformations in women's well-being, empowerment and gender equality at all levels. In contrast, the Grameen Village Phone progressed in the absence of multiple trajectories of change in Bangladesh. Despite this disadvantage, Village Phone created moderate shifts in women's well-being and empowerment by building

<sup>1</sup> Although there are many innovations in these domains that can be thought to have had a positive impact on women's lives and gender equality in developing countries, the exploration of this connection is relatively uncharted research territory. In selecting cases for examination, our biggest challenge was the lack of effective documentation on the vast majority of innovations likely to qualify as cases. Despite these limitations, we have been able to bind evidence from a broad range of sources for the eight innovations examined.

on key opportunities. The Village Phone capitalized on the establishment of cell phone networks and a microfinance lending platform to improve livelihoods and empowerment for women in a patriarchal environment with limited infrastructure and market opportunities.

## SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

Innovations to change social norms can be catalytic because women's empowerment requires the transformation of inequitable gender attitudes, behaviors and harmful practices, such as child marriage, female genital cutting as well as restrictions on women's mobility and their rights to education, health, work and civic participation.

The three social norm change innovations we analyzed undertook radical, effective approaches to change trenchant social norms:

3. Anti-foot binding campaign in China (see page 8)
4. Legislative gender quotas in Argentina (see page 8)
5. Campaign to end female genital cutting in Senegal (see page 8)

Our findings show that innovations can dramatically reshape gender norms that constrain women when serious, national level commitment is mobilized at an opportune time, and in a conducive social, economic and political environment. The anti-foot binding campaign in China, and gender quotas in Argentina exemplify this scenario. In comparison, equally creative and committed efforts at the community level without strong national momentum or favorable contextual conditions have more limited impact. The campaign against female genital cutting in Senegal exemplifies this latter scenario.

Further, the experiences in China and Argentina also indicate that civic activism combined with top-down reinforcement mechanisms ensured quicker, more effective results than did civic activism alone. In both cases, civil society used national interests to strategically mobilize the state to adopt their highly ambitious agenda for gender norm change. When political will was established, the government apparatus effectively championed, executed, enforced and diffused the innovation. The legislative gender quotas and anti-foot binding innovations also produced quicker, higher impacts for women's empowerment at more levels of change than the anti-female genital cutting innovation because women's increased public participation was a national imperative that evolved from a number of other forces underway in China and Argentina. In contrast the anti-female genital cutting campaign in Senegal operates in the absence of equally powerful local imperatives.

All three innovations strategically anticipated high levels of resistance inherent to efforts aimed at changing gender norms. In each case, the innovation and diffusion processes were effectively shaped to overcome the social backlash against norm change. Mobilizing the support of influential males in the innovation system was a powerful, commonly employed strategy that enabled more dramatic results in women's empowerment.

## ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

Innovations that advance women's economic resilience support women in overcoming livelihood barriers and produce a more equitable flow of financial and non-financial opportunities and benefits. These innovations include products and services such as microfinance, including credit, savings and insurance; legal and social strategies to increase women's access to productive assets; and viable employment opportunities.

Our analysis of innovations in the economic resilience stream lead us to assess the relative impact of state-led versus grassroots-based innovations in empowering women:

6. Labor-intensive, export-led economic policy in Taiwan (see page 9)
7. Microfinance-plus in India (see page 9)
8. Land titling in Peru (see page 9)

We find that state-led innovations for women's economic resilience can rapidly reach large numbers of self- and wage-employed women and show incremental improvements in women's well-being and empowerment at individual and household levels. However, state-led efforts tend to affect broad dimensions of women's empowerment only in conjunction with social and economic investments along multiple dimensions. Impacts on wider, systemic levels of empowerment and structural gender equality take 30 years or more and require multiple investments and effective interaction with women's and other social movements.

Grassroots, holistic, gender equitable institution building is an alternative innovation path for improved well-being and empowerment of women on multiple dimensions at the individual and household levels. However, in this case, the pace of both innovation diffusion and empowerment tends to be incremental. Moreover, structural gender equality remains more elusive through grassroots-based strategies, and requires women's and other social movement activism combined with bridging ties to government, private sector, civil society and other actors.

**UNITED STATES:**

**ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL**  
(1960s-1980s)

The oral contraceptive pill was the first highly effective, easy-to-use, reliable birth control option entirely within a woman's control. As a reproductive technology that met a growing demand among American women to reduce family size in the post baby-boom era, the Pill rapidly became a catalyst in radically transforming women's lives and gender relations. Within 10 to 15 years, more than 10 million women in the United States and several million more around the world used the Pill, which enabled them to make decisions over fundamental life interests such as reproduction and sexuality.

Most importantly, the Pill was developed and diffused during a time of significant social, economic and political changes in the United States. It had a profound ripple effect in facilitating new ideas about women's roles in American society. By allowing women to plan their reproductive lives, it opened up opportunities in education, employment and politics; changed sexual relations; and led to shifting power relations in the family and workplace.

Women and men championed the development of the Pill. Activist Margaret Sanger mobilized a female philanthropist to provide funding and a male researcher to develop the technology. A broad range of sectors from the pharmaceutical industry, the medical community, nonprofit groups such as Planned Parenthood, the Food and Drug Administration, the Social Security Administration, marketing experts, and of course, women themselves facilitated the successful adoption and diffusion of the Pill.

Sources: Marks 2001; PBS 2001; Scrimshaw 1981; Watkins 1998.

**BANGLADESH:**

**GRAMEEN VILLAGE PHONES**  
(late 1990s-2000s)

The Grameen Village Phone program used information and communications technologies to improve the livelihoods of poor women entrepreneurs financed by microcredit. Rural women clients of Grameen Bank were provided with financing and training to become operators of mobile phone booths, became key players in a profitable, strategic venture to increase telephone access in rural villages. Most women phone operators successfully increased their revenues and improved their household well-being. Many women also raised their profiles in their communities by becoming visible and influential economic agents and marketers of technology.

The innovation capitalized on the rise of the telecommunications industry and the microfinance movement in South Asia. It built a successful social-private sector partnership that benefited women, despite the lack of a supportive social, economic and political context. The major actors in shaping the innovation were Bangladeshi male social entrepreneurs like Iqbal Qadir, who founded Grameen Phone with Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, as well as women participants in the program. Their social and economic networks also facilitated diffusion, reaching over 200,000 women within 10 years.

Sources: Aminuzzaman 2001; Bayes 2001; Khan 2007; Moni and Uddin 2004; Richardson, Ramirez and Haq 2000.



**CHINA:****ANTI-FOOT BINDING CAMPAIGN**  
(late 1880s-1930s)

The campaign against women's foot binding created and mobilized "societies" against foot binding and adopted a pledge system among member societies, who vowed not to bind their daughters' feet nor allow their sons to marry women with bound feet. The campaign successfully eradicated foot binding, a centuries old, entrenched social norm in China, within a 20 to 40 year period. The elimination of foot binding not only improved women's health and well-being by preventing physical mutilation, but also dramatically improved their physical mobility and facilitated their access to economic and educational opportunities. Parental attitudes towards daughters and families' expectations of women also shifted.

Western missionaries and expatriates initially pushed abandonment of the practice, which spread to Chinese parents, mainly fathers who decided whether or not to bind their daughters' feet, in the lower class as well as the intellectual and educated classes. Eventually, unbound feet became a government mandate supported by leaders and officials. Strategies to end the practice relied heavily on the creation and expansion of social networks and social persuasion, public outreach and spread of information, as well as state coercion in some cases. These mobilization efforts and their success occurred during the late 19th and early 20th century, a period when China was experiencing broad economic, political and social changes.

Sources: Greenlaugh 1977; Ko 2005; Mackie 1996; Meiyi 2004.

**ARGENTINA:****LEGISLATIVE GENDER QUOTAS**

(1990s-2000s)

Argentina adopted a national mandate to enforce gender quotas in legislative elections, requiring a minimum percentage (30 percent) of female candidates on party lists. This electoral affirmative action policy rapidly increased the number of women in elected positions as well as other political decision-making posts. Within a decade, the notion of women in political leadership significantly changed from being unheard of to being a widely accepted and expected practice.

A small number of female political party members and congresswomen initiated the push for gender quotas, which was taken up by the women's movement in Argentina. Then-Argentine President Carlos Menem was a key male champion in facilitating the adoption of the legislative mandate. Support from the women's movement ensured that the landmark law included a strong enforcement mechanism that rejected party candidacy lists which were not in compliance with the quota. Gender quotas in Argentina were introduced during a period of increased democratization and civil society mobilization—especially by the women's movement—and eventually became a model for other Latin American countries.

Sources: Araujo and Garcia 2006; Archenti and Johnson 2006; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Htun and Jones 2002; Lubertino 2003; Peschard 2002.

**SENEGAL:****CAMPAIGN TO END FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING**

(1990s-2000s)

The campaign to abandon female genital cutting (FGC) aims to change the long-entrenched social norm of FGC as an essential rite of passage for girls across villages in Senegal and other West African countries. This ongoing, community education and mobilization campaign is led by Tostan, a civil society organization, and community members. The campaign distributes information on the dangers of FGC through extensive kinship and social networks accompanied by public declarations or pledges by communities to universally abandon the practice in their villages.

The approach has been successful in improving women's bodily integrity and increasing their knowledge, skills and social participation. It also seems to have shifted social norms away from FGC as an essential prerequisite to marriage for women in increasingly large numbers of communities in Senegal. Women's roles in the family and community are also changing.

The innovation was initiated by Molly Melching, an American expatriate who founded Tostan, which mobilized communities and local leaders as key stakeholders. The campaign was initiated during a period of strong international support for women's and girls' reproductive health and rights. However, economic and political conditions in many West African countries during this period have been challenging and turbulent, and until recently, governments had not been actively involved in the innovation or its diffusion.

Sources: Diop, Moreau and Benga 2008; Diop et al. 2004; Kasdon 2005; Tostan 1999.

**TAIWAN:**

**LABOR-INTENSIVE, EXPORT-LED ECONOMIC POLICY**

(1960s-1980s)

Taiwan's labor-intensive, export-led economic policy was innovative not only in defining a model of economic development that was government-led, private-sector-dependent and reliant on export of manufacturing goods, but also in explicitly relying on its female labor force for the model's success in fueling economic growth. Within about 15 years, women's participation in the manufacturing sector rose from 20 percent to 40 percent. Notably, this policy innovation was not aimed at directly benefiting women, but rather at preserving Taiwan's national interest for economic growth and asserting its distinction from China.

Taiwan's innovation in development policy became the catalyst for large-scale changes in women's roles, options and opportunities in society. Economic growth fueled higher living standards and life expectancy, while women's economic participation in manufacturing, facilitated by government investment in factories across urban and rural areas and in home-based "living room factories," also led to social, and ultimately economic and political empowerment processes. Millions of young Taiwanese women redefined their life trajectories beyond traditional cultural constraints that their mothers faced. These young women experienced marriage, motherhood, work life and political participation in new, more gender-equitable conditions.

A close-knit partnership between government technocrats, policymakers, and national and international entrepreneurs was key to the innovation's development. Women were critical to its diffusion and evolution over time, mobilizing their economic role to gain influence and rights in multiple spheres.

Sources: Brinton 2001; Chen 2000; Cheng and Hsiung 1994; Clark and Clark 2008; Gallin 1990; Haggard and Pang 1994; Hermalin et al. 1994.

**INDIA:**

**MICROFINANCE-PLUS**

(1970s-2000s)

The Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA) a trade union in India for women workers in the informal sector, and its microfinance arm, SEWA Bank, combined multiple sources of financial investment, safety nets and support for poor working women. Microfinance-plus aimed directly at empowering women in the state of Gujarat, India, by taking a comprehensive approach to strengthening their livelihoods; ensuring their financial security; and addressing their rights, health and social concerns. Since its inception, SEWA microfinance-plus services have reached more than half a million women in India, providing them with access to information and rights as workers, increasing their income, and contributing to their individual- and household-level well-being. It has also provided women with a greater sense of self confidence and the ability to negotiate their concerns at home and in the community.

SEWA yielded many of these achievements even amidst limited growth in the Indian economy during the 1970s and 1980s when national investments in infrastructure development; gender-equitable legal reform; law enforcement; and changes in financial, labor and trade markets were limited and variable. The innovation's design and evolution owe much to its female founding champion, Ela Bhatt, but also to successful partnerships between the women's movement, government, private sector and international agencies. SEWA's women members have also played a central role in shaping and diffusing the innovation of microfinance-plus.

Source: Chen 2005; Chen and Snodgrass 2001; Schuler, Hashemi and Pandit 1995.



**PERU:**

**LAND TITLING**

(1990s)

The Peru land titling policy was a national effort aimed at securing property rights and access to credit markets for poor people. The innovation lay in the reformulation of the policy to include a mandatory requirement of joint land titling for married couples. Within about five years, titles had been issued for more than 1 million plots of land, and women represented more than 50 percent of the beneficiaries, although the program was not originally aimed to benefit women. Overall, women who gained land titles also experienced some degree of improved employment prospects and access to government-provisioned credit.

The program was launched in the context of neoliberal development strategies emerging in the 1990s in Latin America. It was shaped primarily by the Peruvian government, the economist Hernando de Soto, the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, but its eventual execution required further partnership with the State Commission to Formalize Informal Property, a newly established public agency, and women's groups and networks who were successful in ensuring greater targeting of women beneficiaries within the program. It is possible that the program would have had an even more substantial positive impact on women if it had been accompanied by other complementary, national-level interventions to improve infrastructure and economic opportunities for women.

Sources: Cantuarias and Delgado 2004; Deere and Leon 2001; Field 2003a; Field 2003b; Field and Torero 2006; Panaritis 2001.



## CAPITALIZING ON INNOVATION FOR EMPOWERMENT

The process from innovation to women's empowerment and gender equality is dynamic and complex. That said, there are common approaches, or levers, that can be engaged and brought into the process to provide catalytic change. Based on the analysis of past innovations, our research identifies seven core levers that are instrumental for innovation to catalyze women's empowerment and ultimately gender equality.

### CORE LEVERS

#### 1. BREAK BOUNDARIES FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Broad-based partnerships that break boundaries are a critical ingredient in driving successful innovations for women's empowerment. Different players—government, private sector, civil society—lead innovations, and no single sector has the unique pathway to success. Partnerships leverage broader reach and resources to yield wider larger-scale results. The Pill, the anti-foot binding campaign, and Taiwan's economic policy forged such strategic alliances between the government, private sector corporations and/or civil society actors, producing transformative impacts on the well-being and empowerment of millions of women.

#### 2. ENGAGE WOMEN IN DESIGN AND DIFFUSION

Innovations that involve women in the design and diffusion processes are better poised to ensure that they address women's needs and produce positive and potentially significant impacts on women's empowerment. Women played an important role in every innovation examined. The Pill, gender quotas, microfinance-plus and the campaign against female genital cutting most effectively integrated women as key actors in shaping the innovations, producing moderate to high impacts on women's well-being and empowerment.

An innovation does not need to be aimed explicitly at empowering women from the outset in order to have positive, even dramatic impacts on women's lives. This is particularly true when women join forces with national and international women's movements to participate in facilitating the subsequent adoption of the innovation. As evidenced in Taiwan's economic policy and Peru's land titling, women's participation during the diffusion stage often provides a critical push and direction to modify the

innovation in ways that will meaningfully benefit women. Hence, women acting individually and collectively can influence the agenda of successful innovations from the beginning, and/or shape the direction of progress after the diffusion of the innovation has begun.

#### 3. CULTIVATE CHAMPIONS

Dynamic, influential champions play an important role in launching or facilitating innovations that empower women. Women champions influence the agenda and direction of successful innovations from the outset. Well-connected women with access to important resources have created and launched innovations that benefited women—the Pill, the campaign to end female genital cutting and microfinance-plus. They also have shaped the direction of progress once the innovation was initiated.

Male champions mobilize cooperation, commitment and resources. Support from powerful male authority figures or other high status men is often essential for breaking down resistance to challenging the status quo and altering social norms. In several cases—anti-foot binding campaign, gender quotas, efforts against female genital cutting and mobile village pay phones—male leaders in government, business and communities provide critical support to overcome resistance to changing gender norms, leading and generating momentum for the diffusion of innovations.

#### 4. CREATE “BUZZ” TO MAKE IT “STICK”

Innovations have not accidentally transformed women's lives. Rather, an innovation must have an inherent value or “stickiness” that compels women to adopt it. The Pill, for example, embodies this characteristic because of its ability to provide women with sole discretion over its use for the purposes of making decisions on childbearing. To catch fire and spread, effective innovations deliberately pursue strategies that mobilize communication outlets such as media, influential adopters and social networks to demonstrate the power of an innovation and spread messages about it to potential users and stakeholders, contributing to impact on a mass scale. The anti-foot binding campaign, efforts against female genital mutilation and the Pill strategically pursued and benefited from creative diffusion mechanisms, combining communications efforts with effective use of social networks and deployment of socially, politically and economically influential actors. As a result, these innovations were successful in achieving mass scale diffusion of ideas, technologies or approaches, beyond the first bend in the “S-shaped” diffusion curve.

## 5. CAPITALIZE ON OPPORTUNE TIMING AND CONTEXT

The most dramatically successful innovations build on optimal timing and capitalize on multiple trajectories of social, economic and political transformation already underway in a society. When innovations leverage favorable societal conditions, they often trigger big and broad-based shifts in women's lives. The right innovations in a dynamic society, such as the Pill and Taiwan's economic policy, create not only new options and opportunities for women, they reshape women's position in the family, the workplace, and in the social and political arenas.

In contrast, village mobile pay phones in Bangladesh, microfinance-plus in India, and the anti-FGC campaign in Senegal demonstrate that even creative, well-executed innovations with effective diffusion mechanisms face challenges in reaching their potential when the context is not conducive to change. In these situations, women achieve moderate levels of empowerment, but the lack of national-level infrastructure and investments provides few outlets and opportunities for demonstrated benefits to be catalyzed into broader change.

## 6. TARGET EFFORTS TO REACH POOR WOMEN

Efforts to empower women through innovation need to consider strategic diffusion options to reach poor women. In many cases facilitating agents, such as the government, civil society organizations, women's networks and influential leaders (both men and women) play an important role in accelerating the process of innovation adoption by poor women who possess fewer social and economic resources to access, use and benefit from innovations equitably.

As is the case for most diffusion processes, early adopters tended to be women with some form of advantage either in the system or process (i.e. married women for the Pill in the U.S.; urban women for land titling in Peru and anti-foot binding in China; peri-urban women in the Grameen Village Phone). The innovations eventually spread to women facing barriers or disadvantages of some type, in many cases due to the efforts of facilitating agents such as the government (U.S. Social Security Administration for the Pill), civil society organizations (the Pill, anti-foot binding campaign) and women's networks (land titling), in diffusing the innovation beyond initial adopters. Even the most creative and advantageous innovations are not likely to reach poor women expeditiously—or at all—without planned, strategic diffusion processes. A few innovations (microfinance-plus and anti-female genital cutting) also explicitly pursued

deliberate approaches to target poorer women from the outset. These trends suggest that innovations need to consider early on how strategic diffusion efforts can reach and benefit the greatest number of disadvantaged women.

## 7. SYNERGIZE TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES

Political will and dedicated government commitment provide critical support to and impetus for innovations for women's empowerment and gender equality, as seen in the Argentina gender quotas and Peru land titling cases. At the same time, grassroots mobilization at the community level, such as that which took place in the anti-FGC campaign and the Indian microfinance-plus case, can also play a key role in designing innovations and generating momentum for their adoption and diffusion.

The most successful innovations produce quicker, more powerful changes in women's lives by combining both international or national top-down investments with bottom-up efforts. For example, the Pill, the anti-foot binding campaign, and economic policy in Taiwan (further along its diffusion trajectory) were driven by an effective synergy between state-led intervention or policy support, and ground-up civil society mobilization. In turn, they produced the most dramatic positive impacts on women over time.

## MOVING FORWARD: SEIZING THE MOMENT

More than any time in history, the world is poised to leverage innovation to improve the lives of poor women and empower them to realize their potential. Seizing this pivotal moment can help realize meaningful change for a vast majority of women in the developing world.

When innovations are examined with a gender lens to determine implications on women's well-being, empowerment and gender equality, a powerful, untapped strategy emerges to transform women's lives and gender relations. Our findings show that a broad range of innovations in technology use, social norm change and economic resilience—mobilized by diverse sectors, in diverse settings and by diverse actors throughout the world—resulted in substantial benefits for hundreds, thousands and even millions of women. In many cases, these innovations transformed their lives.

It's important to note that gender equality or human rights rationales have not necessarily been the starting point for innovations that have had positive impacts. In our research,

we found human rights and equality concerns were often combined with motivations for improved productivity and efficiency either at the outset or somewhere along the path of innovation creation and diffusion.

Moreover, the time horizon for change can range from two to 30 years. Improving a woman’s well-being and welfare could be achieved in as little as two to five years while empowerment goals often became recognizable in a 10 to 15 year time frame. The most catalytic innovations succeeded in fundamentally shifting gender relations in 15 to 30 years.

Moving forward, a range of promising innovations—from gearless scooters to fair trade, workplace skills training to foot pedaled water pumps, mobile phone banking to financial education—can bring us closer to realizing goals of women’s empowerment and gender equality if they are developed and deployed with a strategic emphasis on how women and men can participate equitably in the process and benefit from the outcomes. Integrating the seven levers identified through this research will be the key in applying a gender lens to technological, economic, or social innovations that aim to solve some of the most challenging problems in international development.

## promise of emerging innovations

Some emerging innovations hold promise for women’s empowerment and gender equality because they already incorporate some of the seven core levers. These innovations may achieve other goals, but they are only likely to generate large scale change for women by mobilizing the remaining levers.

### TECHNOLOGY USE

#### INNOVATION

The foot pedaled water pump draws up water from underground sources and enables poor farmers, including women, in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa to irrigate small plots of land to generate higher income and improve welfare.

#### WHY IS IT PROMISING?

- Driven by multi-sectoral partnerships (international nongovernmental organizations International Development Enterprises and KickStart; local private sector actors) that have created sustainable manufacturing and supply chains for the pumps
- Some involvement of women in the design of the water pumps

#### WHAT DOES IT STILL NEED TO BECOME A POWERFUL INNOVATION FOR WOMEN?

- Engage with influential local champions, including women, to promote diffusion
- Partner with government and/or private sector to more strategically reach poor women (e.g., credit provision)
- Create “stickiness” and “buzz”

### SOCIAL NORM CHANGE

#### INNOVATION

Life skills education and community mobilization to eradicate child marriage in parts of South Asia and Africa. The program combines a skills-building curriculum for adolescent girls with outreach to parents and community leaders to prevent early marriage among girls.

#### WHY IS IT PROMISING?

- Builds on trajectory of social, economic, and political change in countries like India
- Builds on strong international support for girls’ education
- Strengthens partnerships between civil society organizations, national governmental efforts and international development actors

#### WHAT DOES IT STILL NEED TO BECOME A POWERFUL INNOVATION?

- Employ stronger diffusion mechanisms such as school systems, communication strategies, social networks
- Develop well-known, powerful champions
- Harness the power of the private sector
- Create “stickiness” and “buzz”

### ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

#### INNOVATION

Workplace personal and professional skill building pioneered by Gap Inc. in Asia as a way of strengthening the confidence, skills and opportunities of women working in the apparel industry.

#### WHY IS IT PROMISING?

- Fosters partnership between the private sector and civil society organizations to strengthen business sustainability and women’s empowerment
- Provides strong diffusion channels through the factory setting and cross-vendor interactions
- Builds on trajectory of economic and social change in Asian countries like India and China

#### WHAT DOES IT STILL NEED TO BECOME A POWERFUL INNOVATION?

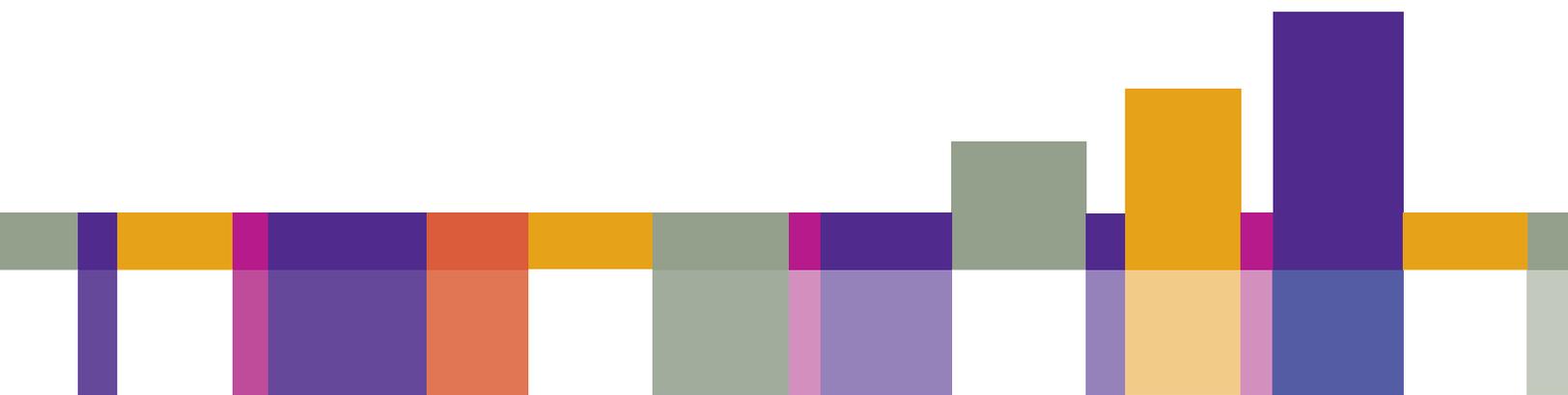
- Create “stickiness” and “buzz”
- Expand partnerships to women’s organizations, government, etc.
- Harness the emerging power of champions

## REFERENCES

- Aminuzzaman, S. M. (2002). Cellular phones in rural Bangladesh: A study of the Village Pay Phone of Grameen Bank. In A. Goldstein and D. O'Connor (Eds.), *Electronic Commerce for Development* (pp. 161-178): OECD Publishing.
- Araujo, C., and Garcia, A. I. (2006). The experience and the impact of quotas in Latin America. In D. Dahlerup (Ed.), *Women, Quotas and Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Archenti, N., and Johnson, N. (2006). Engendering the legislative agenda with and without the quota: A comparative study of Argentina and Uruguay. *Sociologia, Problemas e Praticas*(52), 133-153.
- Bayes, A. (2001). Infrastructure and rural development: insights from a Grameen Bank village phone initiative in Bangladesh. *Agricultural Economics*, 25(2-3), 261-272.
- Brinton, M. C. (Ed.). (2001). *Women's working lives in East Asia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Cantuarias, F. and M. Delgado. (2004). Peru's urban land titling program. Paper prepared for Scaling up Poverty Reduction: A Global Learning Process and Conference, World Bank, Shanghai, May 25-27, 2004.
- Chen, F. (2000). *Working women and state policies in Taiwan: A study in political economy*. New York: Palgrave.
- Chen, M. (2005). *Towards Economic Freedom—the impact of SEWA*. Ahmedabad: SEWA Academy.
- Chen, M., and Snodgrass, D. (2001). *Managing resources, activities, and urban risk in India: The Impact of SEWA Bank*. Washington, D.C.: Assessing the impact of microenterprise services.
- Cheng, L., and Hsiung, P. (1994). Women, export-oriented growth, and the state: The Case of Taiwan. In J. D. Aberbach, D. Dollar and K. L. Sokoloff (Eds.), *The Role of the State in Taiwan's Development* (pp. 321-353). Armonk, NY: An East Gate Book.
- Clark, C., and Clark, J. (2008). Institutions and gender empowerment in Taiwan. In K. C. Roy, H. Blomqvist and C. Clark (Eds.), *Institutions and gender empowerment in the global economy* (pp. 131-150). Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific.
- Dahlerup, D., and Freidenvall, L. (2005). Quotas as a 'fast track' to equal representation for women: Why Scandinavia is no longer the model. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 7(1), 26-48.
- Deere, C. D., and Leon, M. (2001). Who owns the land? Gender and land-titling programmes in Latin America. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 1(3), 440-467.
- Diop, N., Moreau, A., and Benga, H. (2008). Evaluation of the long-term impact of the TOSTAN programme on the abandonment of FGM/C and early marriage: Results from a qualitative study in Senegal. Population Council.
- Diop, N. J., et al. (2004). The TOSTAN program evaluation of a community based education program in Senegal. Population Council.
- Field, E. (2003a). *Entitled to work: Urban tenure security and labor supply in Peru*. Princeton University Research Program in Development Studies Working Paper #220.
- Field, E. (2003b). Fertility responses to urban land titling programs: The Roles of ownership security and the distribution of household assets. Manuscript, Harvard University, October 2003.
- Field, E., and Torero, M. (2006). Do property titles increase credit access among the urban poor? Evidence from a nationwide titling program. Harvard University Department of Economics, mimeo, March.
- Franceschet, S., and Piscopo, J. (2008). Gender quotas and women's substantive representation: Lessons from Argentina. *Politics and Gender*, 4, 393-425.

- Gallin, R. (1990). Women in the export industry in Taiwan: The muting of class consciousness. In Ward, K. (Ed.), *Women Workers and Global Restructuring* (pp. 179-192). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The Tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Haggard, S., and Pang, C. (1994). The Transition to export-led growth in Taiwan. In J. D. Aberbach, D. Dollar and K. L. Sokoloff (Eds.), *The Role of the state in Taiwan's development* (pp. 47-89). Armonk, NY: An East Gate Book.
- Hermalin, A. et al. (1994). The social and economic transformation of Taiwan. In A. Thornton and R.H. Lin (Eds.), *Social Change and the Family in Taiwan* (pp. 49-87). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Htun, M. N., and Jones, M. P. (2002). Engendering the right to participate in decision-making: Electoral quotas and women's leadership in Latin America. In N. Craske and M. Molyneux (Eds.), *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America* (pp. 32-55). Basingstoke, NY: Palgrave Publishers.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency and Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30, 435-464.
- Kasdon, L. (2005). A tradition no longer: Rethinking female circumcision in Africa. *World and I*, Nov./Dec.
- Khan, A.S. "Village phone facing obsolescence in Bangladesh," *Lirneasia*, August 18, 2007. <http://lirneasia.net/2007/08/village-phone-facing-obsolescence-in-bangladesh/>
- Lubertino, M. J. (2003). Pioneering quotas: The Argentine experience and beyond. Paper presented at the International IDEA Workshop: The Implementation of Quotas—Latin American Experience, Lima, Peru.
- Marks, L. (2001). *Sexual chemistry: A History of the contraceptive pill*. Hartford, CT: Yale University Press.
- Moni, M. H., and Uddin, M. A. (2004). Cellular phones for women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. *Asian Journal for Women's Studies*, 10(1), 70-89.
- Panaritis, E. (2001). Do property rights matter? An urban case study from Peru. *Global Outlook International Urban Research Monitor*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Peschard, J. (2002). El sistema de cuotas en América Latina: Panorama general. In *Mujeres en el Parlamento: Más allá de los números* (pp. 173-186). Stockholm, Sweden: International IDEA.
- Phills, J. A. J., Deiglmeier, K. and Miller, D.T. (2008). Rediscovering Social Innovation. *Social Innovation Review*. Stanford Graduate School of Business. Fall 2008.
- Public Broadcast Service (PBS). (2001). *The Pill*. [www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peoplevents/p\\_mccormick.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peoplevents/p_mccormick.html).
- Richardson, D., Ramirez, R., and Haq, M. (2000). Grameen Telecom's Village Phone Programme in rural Bangladesh: A Multi-media case study. Ontario: TeleCommons Development Group.
- Rogers, E. (1995). *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York: Free Press.
- Scrimshaw, S. (1981). Women and the Pill: From panacea to catalyst. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 13(6), 254-262.
- Schuler, S., Hashemi, S., and H. Pandit. (1995). *Beyond Credit: SEWA's Approach to Women's Empowerment and Influence on Women's Reproductive Lives in Urban India*. Arlington, Virginia: John Snow Inc. Research and Training Institute.
- Tostan. (1999). Breaking through in Senegal: Ending female genital cutting.
- Watkins, E. S. (1998). *On the Pill: A Social history of oral contraceptives, 1950-1970*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.





**HEADQUARTERS**

1120 20th St. N.W.  
Suite 500 North  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
[www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org)  
Phone: (202) 797-0007  
Fax: (202) 797-0020  
E-mail: [info@icrw.org](mailto:info@icrw.org)

**ASIA REGIONAL OFFICE**

C – 139 Defence Colony  
New Delhi – 110024 India  
[www.icrw.org/asia](http://www.icrw.org/asia)  
Phone: 91-11-2465-4216  
Fax: 91-11-2463-5142  
E-mail: [info.india@icrw.org](mailto:info.india@icrw.org)