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Wominnovation

Some innovations help women more than others

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TWO recent innovations have garnered a lot of attention for the way they empower women. One is microcredit, a system of lending to very poor people, the majority of whom are female microentrepreneurs who are thus helped to climb out of poverty. The other is the mobile phone, which among other things has led to the emergence of an army of “telephone ladies” in countries such as Bangladesh, who earn a decent living by buying a phone and renting it out to other villagers.



That said, some innovations have been harmful to women, especially in the developing world. As the [cover story](http://www.economist.com/printedition/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=15606229) (http://www.economist.com/printedition/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=15606229) of the latest issue of *The Economist* points out, at least 100m female lives have been lost in recent decades due to “gendercide” in countries such as China, where the number of live male births recorded enormously exceeds the number of live female births. One factor in this has been new technology that allows parents to determine their embryo's sex early in a pregnancy—and thus to abort females in countries where male offspring are valued more highly. Other innovations also bring more benefits to men than women. For example, women are estimated to be only 25% of internet users in Africa, 22% in Asia, 38% in Latin America and just 6% in the Middle East.

“How can we harness innovation's power to empower women and promote greater gender equality?” asks a [new study](http://www.icrw.org/docs/2009/Innovation-for-Womens-Empowerment.pdf) (<http://www.icrw.org/docs/2009/Innovation-for-Womens-Empowerment.pdf>) by the [International Centre for Research on Women](http://www.icrw.org/) (<http://www.icrw.org/>). Its authors try to answer this question first by examining eight inventions that they say have helped women dramatically, including village mobile phones and microcredit.

Another example is the birth-control pill: there is a strong case to be made that it has brought more benefits for women than any other invention, although the report does not attempt such a ranking. The automatic washing-machine might give it a close run in countries where it is commonplace, by freeing women from an activity that used to take many hours a week. Instead of studying that, the report instead considers a number of “social innovations”, ranging from land titling in Peru to the

successful anti-foot-binding campaign in China, that the authors say have had a massive beneficial impact.

What makes for a successful pro-women innovation? The report says it is usually the confluence of several positive factors. As with all innovation, a good idea is not enough in itself: it also needs a favourable context, including political, economic and social conditions that make the time right for its adoption, and an innovation system that excels at finding and testing good ideas and quickly scaling them up. But the invention must also have an inherent value that compels women to embrace it—such as the power the Pill gave women over the decision to become pregnant.

The scooter—an innovation that is far from new—is now liberating Asian women

Whereas some of the innovations, including the Pill, were explicitly designed for women, others have been designed for men and women alike, but have disproportionately benefited women. Microcredit is one example, in part because poor men seem to be more feckless borrowers than their female counterparts. Another example during the past decade has been a dramatic surge in the use by women in several Asian countries—including China, India, Malaysia and Thailand—of something that is far from new in much of the world, the motorised scooter. The scooters, over 60% of which in India are now bought by women, have provided a fairly safe and reliable way for women to travel to more distant places for education and work, greatly increasing their opportunities and productivity.

Including women in the design of the innovation can also help—for instance, a campaign to get poor people to switch to environmentally friendly stoves did not succeed at first because the new stoves did not actually make a woman's life any easier. It was only when they were redesigned with the involvement of women's groups, to reduce cooking time and require less standing over them, as well as burning less fuel, that they took off.

The authors are optimistic that, “more than at any time in history” there is the prospect of using innovation to improve the lives of poor women. Notwithstanding the examples of the scooter and the mobile phone, which were not particularly designed with women in mind, they argue that to make the most of this great potential, there needs to be female involvement within the innovation strategy from the start. Among the promising ideas for the future that the report mentions are foot-pedalled water pumps, the “microfranchising” of heating and lighting provision in rural areas not served by the electric grid and the “crowdsourcing” of work to local communities. Each of these has the potential to liberate many more poor women in the coming years.

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