

# Egyptian Women Artisans:

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ICTs are not the entry to  
modern markets



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# The research idea

- This project is one of the 14 GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment) Network projects carried out between 2005-2008
  - The research analyses the potential for Egyptian craftswomen to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve their earnings.
  - The idea for the research came about when several women taking part in Egyptian NGO ArabDev training courses began asking if the organization could assist them in selling their goods online, as a way to improve their earnings.
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## Particular elements of the research context

- There is a strong focus in Egypt by development agencies on micro- and small-enterprises as a tool for poverty alleviation, based on the belief that women will benefit by becoming entrepreneurs.
  - Egypt is planning to institutionalize e-commerce in the coming years and therefore it was important to explore the potential of ICTs, the Internet especially, to market craftswomen's products.
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# The research questions

- What are the issues and challenges facing a woman who wants to establish an on-line crafts selling business?
  - Does the notion of entrepreneurship, self-sufficiency, and a “can make it” attitude need certain contextual circumstances, and need to take into account the constraints that craftswomen with limited resources face?
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# Methodology

- The analysis is based on case studies of women and organizations working in the crafts sector.
  - The study also reviewed the regulatory and transport issues involved in crafts export and made a quick market analysis of the national and international craft business as far as it relates to the female handicraft sector in Egypt.
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# Methodology

- Ten women in craft production and marketing from different regions of Egypt, having different education levels and of different ages and religions were interviewed.
  - Open-ended, life-story interviews were conducted that encouraged the women to go beyond the specific focus of ICTs. This enabled the research to assess the use of ICTs in the women's lives and it brought out issues that were important for the interviewees as females struggling with various life challenges that would not have been included in a more structured ICT focused interview.
  - This approach was combined with field observations, and was grounded in years of community development practice focussed on using ICTs to enhance livelihoods and education in Egypt.
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## Findings: barriers to on-line marketing

- Very few cases women artisans have both experience with handicrafts and information technology. In a few cases craftswomen were using the Internet for design ideas.
  - Those craftswomen who gained ICT skills, such as computer competencies, tended to move into better-paid employment situations that use those skills and they stop producing crafts.
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## Findings: barriers to on-line marketing

- For many craftswomen the international market and on-line marketing constitutes new sets of limitations, inequities, and barriers. Crafts sold in the international market have to be highly competitive in terms of price, quality and design – they are currently not at the standards needed to compete in the international electronic or craft-fair marketplace. Furthermore, on-line marketing requires technical and language skills, the financial resources to access and utilize the Internet, physical access to ICTs, knowledge of legal aspects of the export trade, quality control, transport requirements, and the availability of e-commerce.
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## Findings: conditions for entrepreneurship

- One woman who participated in the research runs an on-line crafts marketing e-business. Her entrepreneurial activity is enabled by her situation in a middle-class family, by her completion of higher education, her competency in English, her sophisticated ICT skills, her access to the Internet from home, and her access to the financial resources to develop her business without requiring it to cover its costs.
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## Conclusions from the research

- The research concludes that an export oriented strategy for marketing crafts in Egypt, requiring the use of ICTs, is not a promising means to secure a better income for craftswomen. This Egyptian case study highlights the challenges faced by local craftswomen who have a restricted domestic market for traditional, higher-end handicrafts. Increased local demand for their wares would make income generation easier for these craftswomen
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# What the research illustrates

1. A certain level of supportive internal and external factors has to be in existence for a woman to be able to use ICTs to make her life better.

The one case in this research shows that while some women, mostly the more educated and privileged, could indeed benefit from utilizing ICTs in their entrepreneurial quest, most Egyptian crafts-women face prohibitive barriers to use this technology.

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# What the research illustrates

2. Access to ICTs is an individual experience influenced by socio-cultural norms and political-economic realities and processed through internalized belief systems about the self (in relation to others).
    - ICT enabled entrepreneurship for the female crafts sector is not yet realistic, especially if it is geared towards selling globally. There is a big difference between a woman selling her wares at a local market, while she sits on the side of the street, and a woman marketing to outside venues, especially through the Internet. One cannot extrapolate the development of a street vendor to an on-line merchant.
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# Research into ICTs for empowerment

3. ICT research that aims to contribute to women's empowerment needs to recognize the global, national and local power structures that limit their economic, political and socio-cultural expansion, and needs to find ways to enhance the emerging new knowledges and new spaces that women create for themselves using ICTs.
    - Egyptian women are restricted from access to public internet cafes by religious, economic and other social factors. Creating, supporting and increasing female-friendly domestic/public areas could assist girls and women to achieve socio-economic, educational and skills development goals that are elusive at present. Making these female learning and earning spaces more accessible would benefit society as a whole and unburden many women from severe barriers to their self-actualization.
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