

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS FEMINIST TECHNOLOGY?

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From iPhones to microwaves to birth control pills, few of us take the time to consider whether technologies we use in our daily lives are gender neutral or if they are somehow encouraging gender stereotypes. Shivani Gupta of Feminist Approach to Technology (FAT) explains how the various technologies in our world can be tools of liberation or oppression.

Everyday Technology Gendered?

Privileged society uses technology everyday. We wake up with an alarm set on our phones; we read news while traveling to work on our phones or tablets; our work is saved on computers and backed up on the Cloud. We can't imagine life without emails, or jogging without music plugged in our ears. This holds true for most of us—the “haves” of the society. In this context, technology seems mundane, typical, and gender neutral. Nothing about using a phone or computer seems gendered. But if we trace our memories and recollect our experiences, many of us will realize that technology was first introduced to us and brought into our home by a man. It was brothers who were addicted to video games while sisters were taught how to bake cookies in the oven. Fathers had laptops to do accounts for work, whereas mothers used paper and pen to maintain a household's expenditure record.

At the same time, women are encouraged to use household appliances because they helped women be more efficient at housework. Whether it is an electric stove, oven, vacuum cleaner, mixer, or other gadget, these types of technology are invariably associated with women's labor. Thus, there *are* certain technologies that have been feminized—including reproductive technologies such as birth control or tampons. While some reproductive technologies can be liberating, they were invented by men, with the comfort of men—not women—in mind (Layne 2010). Thus, certain technologies have been specifically demarcated for women, which serve to further entrench gender stereotypes.

This gender stereotyping continues when women are warned against using technologies like computers and machines, which are either expensive or “complicated.” In fact, in rural societies in India, there is a common myth that a woman's touch will destroy technology. So, let’s ask ourselves again: is technology indeed gender neutral if it serves to reinforce gender stereotypes and puts men at a greater privilege than women?

Putting it in Context: Technology and Men

Gendered technology goes back to the Enlightenment, during which new inventions allowed for printing the written word, and men could now study the moon, stars, and galaxies. The history of this period is clearly male-biased; it speaks only of men and their contribution, completely ignoring and sidelining women’s significant achievements that were taking place at the same time in similar fields. In later years, technology came to be associated with traditional military weapons, factory machinery, and work tools, all relegated to the sphere of men (Wajcman 2009). So technologies of the past have certainly been gendered—but contemporary technology is no less so.

Today, 60% of countries have yet to achieve gender parity when it comes to access to technology (United Nations Educational 2010). Girls are made to fear science and mathematics, which leads to a lack of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education and careers across the world. In the US, the percentage of women who graduate with a degree in Computer Science has dropped to 18% nationwide, when compared to 37% in 1985 (The World of Data 2014). This data doesn’t exist in an Indian context—indicative of this country’s general silence on the issue of STEM and women. Women are excluded from almost all aspects of learning and developing technologies, unless they are consumers.

Feminist Technology

For women to be able to participate equally, we need technologies that empower women and bridge the digital gender divide. We need feminist technology (because feminism also means equality). While there cannot be only one understanding of the term feminist technology (because there isn’t only one feminism), I can offer the following basic definition of “Feminist Technology” as: “technological innovations that would enhance women’s lives through women’s agenda to make them equal (Layne 2010).”

Another question that surrounds the idea of feminist technology: is it necessary that technology should be created by a woman with a feminist consciousness? The short answer is that it's complicated, and not everything is completely black or white. For example, tampons were invented by a man with a sexist attitude towards menstruation, but female contraceptive pills were invented by a man to provide options to women (Layne 2010). Some technologies, such as a pink phone or a jeweled laptop, might be the innovation of a woman, yet do nothing to improve women's lives or pave a path toward equality. Instead, they end up reinforcing gender stereotypes in a consumer-centric world. Thus, technology needs to be strategically evaluated by examining its impact on the lives of women, regardless of the inventor's gender.

Works Cited

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