THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question is there a common good in our common home?

I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're looking at the ways in which issues of economic justice intersect with the question of the common good. Today, we will examine the digital divide in the global south: does access to technology bring about a leveling of economic and social hierarchies and the advancement of the common good?

SREELA SARKAR: Globally, access to technology is rapidly being considered as a cure for deep economic and social divisions. Through stepping into the everyday lives of people like the computer girls of Seelampur, we see that ICT access can actually reinforce social inequities and create new ones.

TRICIA SERVISS: I can work from day to night but I feel that we're learning computers without a plan here.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these questions, we're joined today by Sreela Sarkar, assistant professor in the Communication department at Santa Clara and Bannan Institute Scholar in the Ignatian Center. Professor Sarkar's research critically examines technology led economic modernization and development as neutral enterprises. Drawing from approaches in global communication, feminist studies, and critical policies studies, her ethnographic research seeks to understand how economic development is experienced by urban, marginalized communities who have complex and intersecting identities of class, caste, religion, and gender. Welcome Sreela!

SREELA SARKAR: Thank you Theresa! It's so great to be here! And now, let's move from Santa Clara University in the Silicon Valley to New Delhi, the capital city of India.

India – the world's largest democracy, a nation of 1.2 billion people, known as one of the largest emerging economies in the world, the story of India's progress in recent decades is also a story of its technological prowess. India has emerged has the poster child for the use of technology to bring economic and social change among marginalized people. I focus on a globally acclaimed experiment in computer training and social change for marginalized communities located at the border of the capital city of New Delhi. I ask the question: if access to Information Technologies actually leads of leveling or breaking down of inequalities.

One of the first tracks of the capital city of New Delhi's new, globally acclaimed metro railway runs from the bureaucratic center to Seelampur, an urban "resettlement colony" located across the river Yamuna. This is how elite residents of Delhi, who lived in prosperous enclaves, first heard of Seelampur. Few of them realized that Seelampur was the site for the notorious

sterilization program practiced by the state on working-class residents during the National Emergency years in 1975 to 1977 when they were offered plots of land in exchange for self-sterilization or as the "motivator" for sterilization practices (Tarlo 2003). Acts of "participation" in the sterilization programs were based on desperate needs to prevent homelessness and keep families together under the totalitarian state (Tarlo 2003). Many of the city's poorest residents were also supposedly resettled in Seelampur in the 1960s when their homes in Old Delhi were demolished by the state allied Delhi Development Authority and Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

My cycle rickshaw ride from the metro Seelampur station to the neighborhood of Jaffarabad in Seelampur traverses a road crowded with buses, cars, rickshaws and bicycles. Stores line both sides of the road and sell seasonal goods like electrical fans, kites, winter jackets, and sweaters.

Billboards advertise "super luxury air conditioned apartments" and also computer training classes that promise jobs to young people in India's new, liberalized economy. Newly constructed house jostled for space with older buildings. Seelampur is a diverse community, but like the rest of the area, Jaffarabad is largely an area inhabited by a working class Muslim community engaged in the informal economy.

The average monthly income in Seelampur is 100-200 USD for extended families that can include about eight to ten individuals (Sharma 2006). The cycle rickshaw drops me in a narrow lane comprised of cattle sheds and small denim producing units.

In 2006, the ICTD initiative was brought under the combined partnership of the Delhi government and G-Tech Foundation under the public-private, Gender Resource Center program, or called GRC, that provides "vocational training" for women.

Inside the small GRC building and past the central helpdesk and up a narrow flight of stairs, a group of about fifteen women sat behind a makeshift screen. Students from other courses called the ICT students "computer ki ladki" or, translated from Hindi as, the "computer girls." About forty "computer girls" participate in computer training program at a time.

In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Goals emphasized that along with eradicating poverty, access to ICTs, or Information and Communication Technologies, should be considered a basic socio-economic right. ICTs is a broad term that includes computer, internet, cellular phones, network hardware and software etc.

So what is this leveling promise of ICTs? Especially to access computers and the internet, the promise to rapidly equalize economic and social hierarchies In his book The World is Flat (2005), Thomas Friedman traces his journey to the IT capital of India, Bangalore. According to Friedman, Information Technology enables a "flattening" of the world, leveling significant global inequalities.

Friedman states, "Globalization 3.0 makes it possible for so many more people to plug and play, and you are going to see every color of the human rainbow take part" (Friedman 2005, 11). Friedman's writing arguably invokes Orientalist tropes but this promise of "flattening" is precisely the promise of IT training initiatives.

I critically examine the promise of ICTs in ushering in inclusion in the information society through a "leveling" of economic and social hierarchies. My purpose is to show that instead of leveling economic and social hierarchies, ICT-led social change programs may actually have the opposite impact.

ELINA BARAHONA: "The other girls do not need to sit on the chairs. Our work is different. We need more space and we need to sit on the chairs to see the computers and focus on the class. For the tailoring or the beauty culture girls, they can just sit next to each other on the floor for their work."

SREELA SARKAR: On a narrow street in Seelampur, the GRC building is approximately 700 square feet and consists of two floors. The first floor includes a central helpdesk. On the second floor of the GRC building, the small room is informally divided into three separate spaces.

A group of fifteen young women sit on rugs on the floor working with sewing and embroidery as part of the Cutting, Tailoring and Dress Designing class. Next to the Tailoring class, another group of twenty young women sit on the floor as part of the Beauty Culture class that trains young women to work in beauty salons. The two groups are separated from the computer class by a partial screen.

The familiarity of the computer girls with technology reinforce the perception that they're more "intelligent," better educated, and more familiar with English. Nehat and Farad are two young women in the Tailoring class who come regularly to the center. This group of women sit closest to the "computer girls" who have their class just behind the partial screen in the small space of the GRC. As Nehat asserts:

CHARLOTTA KRATZ: I really want to learn computers. But I am not educated enough. I haven't even graduated tenth grade. I can't write English although I can read and understand it. My kids are learning computers in school. I know one of those computer girls.She is studying for her BCOM [Bachelor of Commerce]. She is so intelligent like the rest of them.

SREELA SARKAR: So within the GRC, the "computer girls' sit on chairs during lectures unlike other young women who sit on the floor. They also gather at the front desk and at the reception area more than other young women at the center. These spatial and physical distinctions are a mark of the superior status within the GRC. Such distinctions arise from a long history of domestic labor and employer relationships in India that function through some implicit but well-established rules.

Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum in their book *Cultures of Servitude* explain that these rules prominently include "politics of sitting." In the majority of households in India, domestic servants never sit on the same level as their employers or at the table with them but instead sit on the floor or on small stools. This extends even to more intimate situations such as television watching with employers in a small apartment or a house.

Such spatial distinctions are indicative of rigid class and caste boundaries. The discourses of upper caste purity and "hygiene" are reflected in domestic workers being prohibited from using the same toilets and toilets or the same dishes and cups. They usually eat in the kitchen or in their own rooms (Mattila, 2011).

I examine the interconnectedness of the girls' positions inside the center and in their everyday lives. As Shaira Muhammad says, when the "computer girls" sat on the chairs instead of the floor, they were often conscious of their superior position. The special status of the girls inside the GRC building was also significantly derived from their superior access to economic and cultural resources outside the space of the Gender Resource Center. So despite the claims of the project initiators that ICT was a leveling force, this initiative actually attracted women from comparatively better-off families in Seelampur.

Shahnaz Ali's average monthly family income is approximately $350, considerably higher than the incomes of even most of the other "computer girls." However, this income does not translate into economic and cultural resources for her family. Her brothers had to leave school after grade ten because of lack of resources. Shahnaz trained as a nurse for three years. She had to leave her hospital job that paid her about US$50 a month because she had not felt adequately protected during night shifts as a young woman.

Shahnaz recalls a class when a staff member Mahesh Rawat had spoken to the women about self-reliance. According to Shahnaz, the girls are told to be independent because Muslim women are thought to be conservative and not work outside the home. But as Shahnaz points out, most of the computer girls have had jobs in schools and private offices, and owned small businesses.

TRICIA SERVISS: We are told to be independent because I think Muslim women are generally thought to stay at home. But most of us have had jobs.

SREELA SARKAR: Shahnaz considers herself among the fortunate residents of Seelampur who own their own business. Although she had graduated from the ICT program three months ago, she is still looking for work. She points out the contradictions in her situation, including the potential of computer lessons:

TRICIA SERVISS: If you do not have the basics of food, clothing and shelter, then how do you think of computers? What has the government done? Just because it has opened a GRC does

not mean that the government has done everything. If the government cannot go in and see whether a stove has been lit in a home or if a quarrel is brewing in the streets? …I can work from day to night but I feel that we are learning computers without a plan here.

SREELA SARKAR: Many of the girls realized the limits of their ICT training. In contrast to the other women at the GRC, the computer girls have familiarity with written and spoken English although their proficiency is limited. At least ten girls had joined English-speaking classes at local, private institutes before joining the ICT center.

The families of the computer girls form a relatively privileged group in the urban resettlement periphery of Seelampur. About 30 out of 40 participants belong to families who own small businesses, such as auto repair shops, convenience stores, denim workshops, garment businesses etc. The ownership of small businesses bring relatively higher and stable incomes in in comparison to forms of precarious employment among Seelampur residents.

As the Sachar Committee (SCR) Report in 2006 points out, only 8 per cent of urban Muslims were part of salaried classes compared to the national average of 21 per cent for urban India (SCR, 2006).

As we see the lack of access to institutional and cultural capital thwart the ambitions of the computer girls to find desirable employment. Technology, or ICTs, has limited potential for their economic and social mobility, which disrupt more celebratory assumptions about inclusion in the global information society.

In Seelampur, ICT participants often work with Photoshop with images of blonde, white women. A common activity is to export the figure of such women into a fairytale-like setting with green woods, mountains, and a stream. This activity is often accompanied by peals of laughter and hilarity. As computer girl Sadiyah explains, "It is funny because we do not know any white women with hair like this. So just playing with her is funny. We can make her do what we want." Then, another girl Zohra said, "Yes but imagine if we put her in Seelampur. Dirty, narrow streets and a lot of traffic with buses and cycle rickshaws. How will she survive here?"

Zohra's comment is greeted with more laughter among the girls as they tried to visualize this situation. "She won't last a day," Nasreen replied, chortling. The girls are immediately told to be quiet by their leader. This play demonstrates the contradictions of the binaries of tradition and modernity in the everyday lives of the computer girls. While policy discourse frames the Seelampur women as "Muslim women" waiting to be liberated by modernity, the Photoshop activity instead placed the modern, Western woman in a vulnerable position. This powerful play points to the structural constraints that limited the economic and social mobility of the "computer girls," and does not bring in leveling of inequalities for a group of urban, young women positioned at the edges of the information society.

Globally, access to technology is rapidly being considered as a panacea or a cure for deep

economic and social divisions. A range of state institutions, NGOs, and nonprofits, and private sector actors are investing in technology-led social change projects, both in the global South and North. Through stepping into the everyday lives of people like the computer girls of Seelampur, we see that ICT access can actually reinforce societal inequities and create new ones. If technology in today's world is not regarded as a magic solution, how would we imagine economic justice and the common good for marginalized communities? What kind and amount of resources would we see diverted to societal issues that need our attention, such as access to roads, education, healthcare, and building community and public action? It is indeed vital that we pay close attention to the spaces and voices of communities to reimagine popular thinking about access to technology and social change.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Professor Sreela Sarkar for her contribution to today's episode. You can learn more about the computer girls in an article by Sreela published in 2016 in *Feminist Media Studies* entitled "Beyond the Digital Divide: The Computer Girls in Seelampur."

Coming up next week is Laura Nichols, associate professor in the Sociology department at Santa Clara, who will be investigating questions of economic justice and higher education: examining the barriers and bridges for first-generation college students in the U.S.

Technical direction for INTEGRAL was provided by Craig Gower and Fern Silva. Our production manager is Kaylie Erickson. Thanks to Mike Whalen for advisory and editorial support. You can find us on the web at scu.edu/INTEGRAL or subscribe via iTunes, Soundcloud, Stitcher, or PodBean.

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- Excerpt from interview read by Tricia Serviss
- Excerpt from interview read by Elina Barahona
- Excerpt from interview read by Charlotta Kratz