

# Empowering Women through Home-based Income Earning Opportunities, Malaysia

Sheau Ching Chong & Audrey Desiderato

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## Background

### Context

*Improving women's lives through income-earning opportunities:* The generation of income-earning opportunities for poor women is an important indicator for improved gender equality and empowerment. A woman's ability to earn an income translates to both improved nutrition and medical care for her family, and more gender-equal education opportunities for her children. Moreover, a woman's earning power leads to greater self-confidence, which in turn moves her to pro-actively improve her life through self-governance.

*High costs of working for poor urban women:* For those women fortunate enough to find jobs, a 2002 survey conducted by eHomemakers on low to middle income female office and factory workers revealed that the lower income urban worker sacrifices almost 40 percent of her monthly salary on fixed working expenses such as commuting, childcare, and personal expenses for their work image. Thus, the real take home pay does not commensurate with the wage earned to cover household expenses. The research also showed that ICTs are vital in the creation of a work option which would allow women to earn a higher real income by working from their homes.

*ICT as a solution for development:* An increasingly popular means for poverty alleviation is to train the poor in information communication technology (ICT) for income-earning purposes. Following the global effort to bridge the digital divide, poor rural women have successfully gained income-earning opportunities in non-agricultural sectors through employment in telecenters.

*The digital divide within an urban setting:* While the ICT for development movement continues to grow, it is unfortunate that many poor urban women are still left behind. Although slums and low-income housing are surrounded by modern infrastructures, the urban poor women face many barriers to access ICT resources and training. The barriers range from high financial costs, triple work burden to training schedules that clash with their daily priority tasks. They are thus unable to improve their lives in an increasingly competitive urban setting.

*An invisible population facing high barriers to ICT access:* Urban poor women such as the disabled, chronically ill, mothers of disabled or chronically ill children, and single mothers who must support their households as both caretakers and income earners face extremely high barriers due to the immobility they face. In addition, these women also face cultural barriers in the form of gender role expectation. Disadvantaged women of the above profile are still expected to fully fulfill their roles at home as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters instead of giving themselves time and mental energy to acquire new skills and knowledge. Self-improvement efforts are low priorities or non-existent in their lives.

*"Homeworking"—an informal sector in Malaysia:* Additional research conducted by eHomemakers in 2005 -2006 on Southeast Asian homeworkers elucidates the situation experienced by homeworkers. While homeworking is a growing sector, allowing those facing issues of immobility to contribute to the economy by earning income from home, it is not officially recognized as a part of the Malaysian formal economy. Thus, there is an absence of regulating policies for the sector. Homeworkers are left facing multiple forms of discrimination

and exploitation. They possess little or no bargaining power to secure fair prices and wages besides being exposed to health and safety problems.

## Rationale

*Working@home-- a sensible solution for poor, urban immobile women:* Due to their inability to work outside of the home, these women would especially benefit from home based ICT-focus employment opportunities. Working @ home options effectively increases women's participation in the economic sphere as it allows women an opportunity to balance traditional roles with income-earning opportunities without giving them a triple burden (work, household, and children). To this end, eHomemakers provides a grassroots e-network aimed at overcoming the extreme lack of information on working at home, connecting thousands of women facing similar barriers and reversing the social prejudice homeworkers face in an informal economic sector. eHomemakers promotes the use of ICTs such as mobile phones, computers, Internet, and an integrated platform, DWMA, (web-to-handphone) for both income-generating opportunities and grassroots-to-grassroots self-help for women who aspire to become homeworkers, teleworkers or home-business owners. The web portal and integrated platform allow easy inter-connectivity between women for discussion and mutual support.

*Crafting an ICT-based solution for "invisible women":* In order to help disadvantaged homemakers such as single mothers and the disabled, eHomemakers established a project titled "Salaam Wanita" (recognizing women). eHomemakers has spent much effort on researching the needs and barriers that urban poor women face in order to formulate a multi-faceted, end-to-end approach to steer these women towards self-reliance. Specifically guided by the research, eHomemakers ensures that once it provides training for disadvantaged women it does not abandon them; instead, eHomemakers' over 15,000 e-members and core team are dedicated to provide critical assistance, mentorship, and counseling besides marketing and work sourcing support throughout their transition to self-sufficiency. The DWMA allows low income disadvantaged women to generate an income from home, overcoming their physical and social circumstances, by connecting them to the eHomemakers network and facilitate the earning of more real income through ICT enablement. For example, a woman can market her catering service via the eHomemakers network, process orders through her mobile phone, and cook from her very own kitchen without having to pay travel outside of the home.

## Project Formulation

The eHomemakers network was formed via grassroots initiatives by middle-income homeworkers and homemakers who wanted to create a resource and support network to connect to other home-workers. The network (first known as Mothers for Mothers) was formed in 1998 by a single mother along with a group of multi-ethnic homemaker volunteers.

In 1999, a static website was built by volunteers to meet the information-hungry homemakers and provide a woman-to-woman networking platform at no financial cost to members. As they encountered public prejudices labeling them as useless "housewives" who did not contribute to society, the initial members soon saw that static information provision would not suffice to help women break through gender discrimination and ICT barriers.

In the first few years, the Mothers for Mothers network organized a number of "Working @ Home" conferences without any funding. The volunteers creatively found solutions to offset costs by bartering with companies. As the network successfully grew, its empowerment activities expanded to reach socially and financially disadvantaged members. To increase its capacity and accommodate increasingly diverse groups of women, the Mothers for Mothers network was replaced in 2002 by eHomemakers. A trilingual, interactive community portal was built under a one-year community grant (Demonstrator Application Grant) from the Malaysian government.

## Project Goals and Objectives

### Core Objectives:

- i.) To develop a self-sustaining social enterprise by leveraging on the resources cultivated from the 15,000 strong e-community to maintain gender empowerment activities
- ii.) To build an e-community of ICT savvy homemakers, homeworkers and homepreneurs and provide them with a platform for self-help, and people-to-people activities in business and work
- iii.) To encourage homemakers, especially the disadvantaged, to generate income through home-based activities and ICT usage
- iv.) To disseminate family-orientated information at a one-stop e-centre to enable members to be smart and efficient in balancing home and work life
- v.) To integrate the principles of sustainable development into our programs so as to be part of the Millennium Development Goals at the Malaysian level

### Project Goals:

- i.) To sustain a grassroots e-network for mutual assistance and gender empowerment through information provision, interactive activities, networking and teletrading besides ground based trainings, work sourcing and business activities
- ii.) To raise the profile of unpaid work, telework and homebased work in Malaysia through research especially gender-based analysis, information dissemination and advocacy
- iii.) To educate women to enhance their skills and talents through the use of ICTs by educating them on ICT usage, and on the importance of ICTs.
- iv.) To provide disadvantaged women with training, long-term support, and an e-platform for self-help and clusters-to-clusters assistance
- v.) To facilitate strategic partnerships with the Small Office Home Office & ICT community
- vi.) To develop a replicable model for an efficient grassroots e-social enterprise
- vii.) To promote the concept of CSR in the Malaysian corporate sector

## Key Elements of the Project

### Target Beneficiaries

Even though eHomemakers members were initially comprised of Malaysian mothers in the middle to lower income group in 1998, it has grown to include unmarried women and grandmothers, and even some house-husbands who support their wives. Today, the ratio of women to men in e-membership is 3:1. Most members are from the urban/para-urban areas, married, and in the 30-50 age group. About 10% of the over 15,000 e-members, comprising both genders, come from the ASEAN region. Beneficiaries also include over 300 Salaam Wanita members who are unemployed and residing in slums and low-cost housing areas.

### Geographic coverage of the project

The e-members are located in the urban and para-urban areas all over Malaysia where ICT resources are accessible. Salaam Wanita members are located in and around Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh.

### Project activities

#### Key Components

- i. *Managed by Grassroots:* Grassroots management as opposed to a top-down approach ensures that the needs of target groups are clearly understood.

- ii. *ICT solutions*: Promotion of ICTs for income-generating opportunities allows diverse groups of women to work from home, empowering them to set up e-businesses, market online and through phones, do freelance work and telework.
- iii. *Virtual Office*: eHomemakers' virtual office allows for cost savings while providing a successful, replicable organizational model for members.
- iv. *Income Generation*: eHomemakers is self-sustaining via revenue generation through web banner ads, newsletter ads, corporate sponsorships, consultancy fees and research grants.
- v. *Targeting an invisible group*: The Salaam Wanita project is designed to alleviate urban poverty among homebound disadvantaged women.
- vi. *Advocacy*: eHomemakers embarks on gender-based action research and is actively involved in promoting healthy policy changes concerning ICTs for urban poor women and the homeworking sector. eHomemakers also works hard to encourage the public to refer to its members as "homemakers", 'teleworkers', or 'homepreneurs' rather than the negatively charged term "housewives" in order to pave public acceptance of homemakers into the formal sector.

### Key Activities

- i. *Teletrading*: eHomemakers provides this free service to allow small home businesses with little capital and no advertising budget to get a wide exposure through the network.
- ii. *Newsletters*: eHomemakers members can receive both cyber and printed newsletters; *Home + Work*, that highlights achievements of homepreneurs to inspire potential home workers and homepreneurs.
- iii. *Portal section resources*: Various sections of the portal like *Homebiz Management*, *Homebased Profiles* and *IT Tips & Issues* provide resources developed by members and experts that enable women to work from home, embark on entrepreneurship and sustain their home businesses.
- iv. *Forum maintenance*: The Forum board is an avenue for members to network and exchange ideas and experiences. Typical day-to-day postings discuss the difficult process of decision-making, the authenticity of home-based jobs available on the Net and various e-books/ resources for life-long learning.
- v. *Research*: eHomemakers has published research on ICT and gender dynamics to advocate for the development of innovative strategies geared towards benefiting the urban poor.
- vi. *Events*: eHomemakers hosts annual Mothers Day competitions; celebrating mothers that are exceptional change agents in their community. In addition, eHomemakers hosts a series of seminars geared towards working@home.
- vii. *Salaam Wanita training, product marketing and securing of homebased work*: eHomemakers provides basic eco-basket weaving skills and markets the finished products for the women. Women who have gone through training in computer skills, customer service skills and speaking skills are in an on-going project, "Unlimited Potential", to secure them free-lance homebased ICT work.
- viii. *Justmarketing.info website*: eHomemakers maintains a website to market the services and products for Salaam Wanita members including the innovative hand-woven eco-baskets made out of used magazines and flyers.
- ix. *Donations appeal*: eHomemakers coordinates appeals to its over 15,000 members and other donors to secure donations in the form of cash, food, medical needs, used computers, used mobile phones, fax machines, printers, and scanners to benefit its 300+ Salaam Wanita members, thus facilitating assistance from those who have the more resources to those with the least.

### Key technical inputs

➤ *Portal* - [www.ehomemakers.net](http://www.ehomemakers.net) is built with open-source software with 'cut-and-paste' CMS (content management system) enabling the team to manage and update the portal. It is hosted by Lunar Pages ([www.lunarpages.com](http://www.lunarpages.com)).

➤ **DWMA** (Distributed Work Management Application)  
The DWMA uses ADSL, Internet access and cellular communications short message service (SMS) to connect women with mobile phones to eHomemakers' larger network. The DWMA web application server is hosted on an APACHE web server running over the Fedora Core Linux Operating System platform. The DWMA application manages and tracks all recorded users/administrators within a local database system. Users/Administrators log into the DWMA application using any available web browser to view/set or create/delete new job schedules/users/administrators. A fixed Internet Protocol (IP) address is assigned to the server with a fixed domain name.

## Timeframe

1998	"Mothers for Mothers" network formed by volunteers
	Organization of serial "Working @ Home" conferences began, working @ home movement grew
1999	Static website <a href="http://www.mom4mom.com">www.mom4mom.com</a> was built
2000	Publication of "Working @ Home—A Guidebook for Working Women and Homemakers", in English
2001	DAG proposal to build <a href="http://www.ehomemakers.net">www.ehomemakers.net</a> was submitted to the Government
	Publication of "Working @ Home—A Guidebook for Working Women and Homemakers", in Bahasa, Chinese and Tamil
2002	1-year DAG proposal approved to build a trilingual portal
	Won the 2002 Pan Asia Networking Small Grant to research on disadvantaged women's entrepreneurial and ICT barriers
	Completed a mini research on Costs of Working
	Quarterly printed newsletter, Home + Work, launched
	Annual Mother's Day contest and award inaugurated
2003	<a href="http://www.eHomemakers.net">www.eHomemakers.net</a> replaced <a href="http://www.mom4mom.com">www.mom4mom.com</a>
	200 Salaam Wanita members completed basic ICT training
	Monthly e-news to e-members started
	eHomemakers won the Pan Asia R & D Small Grant to research and develop a web-SMS/fax integrated application (DWMA)
	Donations to help women in dire needs (medical, housing, food) begin to be generated from eHomemakers' members
	Founder was the sole winner of the WENT award given at the WSIS I by APC and Sookmyung Women's University, South Korea
	Completed a gender dynamics study on women teleworkers
2004	eHomemakers won the IDRC competitive grant ground for research entitled "Research on Homeworkers and ICT in Southeast Asia"
	<a href="http://www.justmarketing.info">www.justmarketing.info</a> built to market disadvantaged women's products and services
	Most of the disadvantaged women trained in basic computers found work in offices, thus they were graduated from the Salaam Wanita project. The rest continued to be given empowerment talks. A group of 120 women was trained in eco-basket weaving.
2005	Malaysian Government announced its support for home-office concept after close to 8 years of advocacy by eHomemakers
	eHomemakers research papers incorporated into the University of Pennsylvania's Gender/ ICT Encyclopedia
	eHomemakers was the runner-up in the GKP Gender and ICT Awards at WSIS II
	Eco-basket group continued to self-train and improve on quality

2006	Salaam Wanita eco-basket project began to secure corporate orders through more design innovation
	Research on 'Homeworkers and ICT in Southeast Asia' completed
	US-based Advocacy Project partnered with eHomemakers by sending summer interns to prepare basket project to enter Fair Trade
	Formed strategic partnership with local corporate sector, MIRC (Malaysian Internet Resource Center) to incubate micro-businesses, GIRC (British Telecom's Global Internet Research Center) for innovation and seed funds, and Lordman Alliance for business referrals
	70 disadvantaged women were trained in basic computer to enable them to serve as home-based Administrative Assistants
2007	Re-building of justmarketing.info website under way to market Salaam Wanita products and services overseas under Fair Trade. Stabilizing of eco-basket project through product range consolidation and re-branding
	Became an actively participating member of GKP
	Stabilizing the workings of the virtual office and fixing technical problems in <a href="http://www.ehomemakers.net">www.ehomemakers.net</a>
	Beginning of a process to construct a platform for a more sustainable revenue model to carry on eHomemakers to help the poor
	Developed and published the Malaysian government's working from home guidelines
	eHomemakers founder invited to chair session in Global Knowledge III Conference in Dec 07

### Impact or outcomes

- i. Official recognition of "Working @ Home" guidebook in 2005 by the Ministry of Women, and enhanced coverage by the press to pave the way for an increase in government-sponsored working from home activities as a tool for poverty alleviation
- ii. Increase in home-based ventures amongst members
- iii. Transformation of vulnerable women into empowered individuals (Salaam Wanita)
- iv. Promotion of social entrepreneurship within eHomemakers network
- v. Generation of ad revenue for network's sustainability by transforming business opinions of homeworkers
- vi. Encouragement of gender equality in the ICT sector & promotion of ICT-based micro-businesses and SMEs
- vii. Mentoring women entrepreneurs through grassroots ICT platforms
- viii. Development of a sustainable social e-enterprise model
- iv. Publication of "Working @ Home—A Guidebook for Working Women and Homemakers" distributed to 20,000 readers
- viii. Publication of monthly e-newsletter (7,000 subscribers) and quarterly printed newsletter (10,000 subscribers)
- ix. Sustained growth in membership registration (see table below)

Year	New members
2002	1651
2003	1776
2004	1600
2005	1044 *
2006	1667 *
July 2007	1225**

\* eHomemakers portal encountered technical bugs and errors

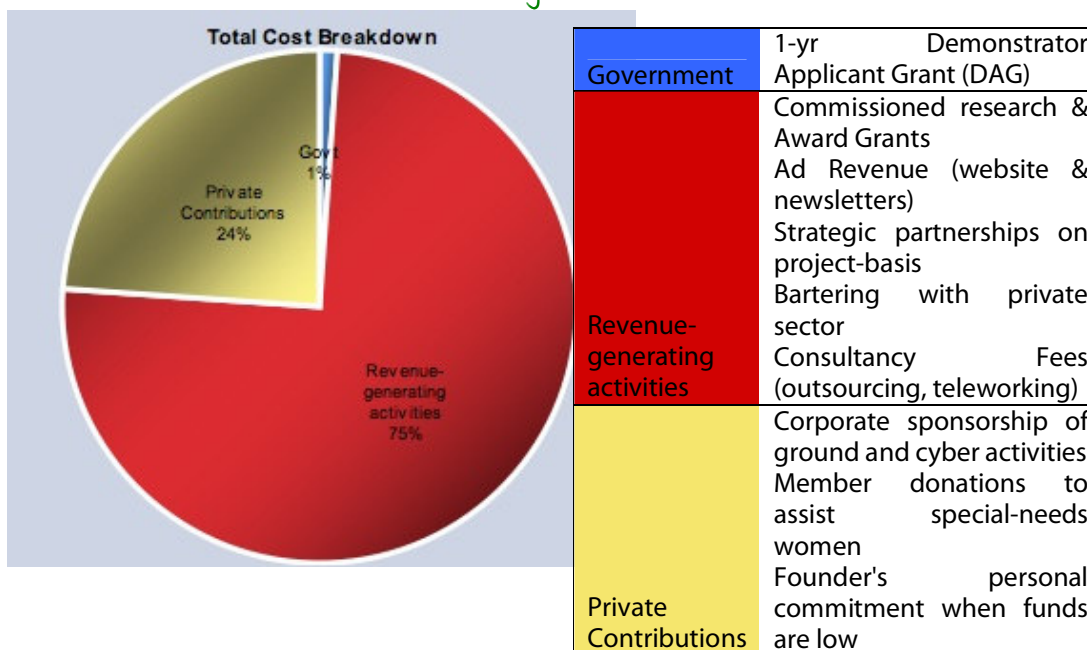
\*\* This is only for the first six months of 2007!

- x. Increase in discussion topics and member participation: Table below illustrates a comparison of portal activities between 2005 and 2007

Portal Activities	2005	July 2007
Number of Xchange ad posts	407	598
Total forum board posts	550	2045*
New topics added to forum board	120	444

\* Most active topic is on "work @ home decision making"

### Total Project cost



### Project Management

#### 2.1.1 Implementing agency

- Decision Making:** The core eHomemakers team is headed by an Executive Director with overall accountability to sponsors/ funders/ partners/ advertisers. The ED supervises the sub-teams; each of which has a team leader who is responsible for making joint decisions with team members on implementation of various projects. When critical major decisions are needed, the team leader or the ED compile team's feedback and send a document outlining advantages and disadvantages. Decision is taken on the options most favoured by the team to ensure a more egalitarian form of decision-making
- Accountability and Transparency:** All financial transactions are audited by eHomemakers' finance manager and by an external auditor. The information is made available to sponsors/ funders upon request. All eHomemakers members can read updated information of activities in the portal and are free to call, email, SMS or send letters to the core team. Prompt replies are given and timely actions are taken.

### Monitor and evaluation of project activities

- Use of Gender Evaluation Methodology standards and other international standards on research projects to ensure high level of impact and statistics for advocacy purposes.

- ii. Internal management reports for the core team, a virtual office team, to evaluate output achievements on a monthly and weekly basis that are available to the whole team online
- iii. Gender governance framework derived by eHomemakers for gender impact evaluation of eHomemakers' project activities
- iv. Portal membership can be recorded, as well as the website's unique visitors, hits, page views and downloads to ensure steady increase in membership acquisition and website activities
- v. User feedback to the portal and DWMA are taken into consideration in all activity planning and implementation

### Challenges and how they were overcome

#### Project Design: Women in ICT-focused social enterprises

eHomemakers is the only e-social enterprise with a large e-community in Malaysia, and the only one managed solely by women. The name 'eHomemakers' initially prevented the group from gaining professional respect due to its association with negatively perceived "housewives". To help overcome this challenge, eHomemakers is continuously advocating for the term "housewives" to be replaced by "homemakers". In addition, eHomemakers makes clear that this is a social enterprise that uses business principles to help women telework and form micro-businesses to balance work and family needs. While others measure success in terms of financial profit, eHomemakers measures its success in terms of social profit – women empowering themselves at various stages of their lives under different situations. A communication gap with the male-dominated ICT sector and extremely profit-oriented private sector still exists; however eHomemakers is confident that with increasing exposure and time the e-social enterprise will be one that will garner respect and support

#### Management: Virtual Office

During the DAG grant (2002-2003), eHomemakers had over 60 full-timers and part-timers forming a virtual office, working mostly on portal building. However, many left for more lucrative jobs after they gained valuable experience with the team. Luckily, a small group of dedicated teleworkers has stayed on to become knowledge workers. A virtual office work culture has thus emerged characterized by documentation, achievement, problem tracking, lateral decision-making and teamwork.

The other challenges of the virtual office have to do with the fact that it is a relatively new way of running an office. The eHomemakers team must rely on communicating via email, a high degree of organization and documentation, and a fast-pace working environment. This can be challenging when new team members come aboard, uncomfortable with self-directed work, or unfamiliar with using ICTs to achieve a faster-paced, organized environment. Challenges occur when the staff members are unable to supervise themselves, especially when the eHomemakers power relations are more horizontal than hierarchical. Since most Malaysians are used to face-to-face meetings and top-down instructions, it is difficult to transform them into the practices of a virtual office where interactions are mostly done online. The pith of overcoming these challenges is to facilitate an easier and increasing means of communication and accountability. For instance, each team member must submit both weekly and monthly progress reports for the whole team to see online, all members are signed onto Skype during work hours.

#### Implementation: Coping with technology

- i. Lack of accountability in the ICT sector: eHomemakers' e-community building requires strong technical capacity and community building knowledge. Unfortunately, Malaysia lacks support for ICT for development, technical/management assistance networks and pro-bono advice for social enterprises. In addition, the nascent ICT sector lacked corporate ethics; seven of eHomemakers'

technical partners closed down in the middle of ICT development activities or did not followup with warranties. Without funds to pursue legal actions, eHomemakers faces great challenges in deciphering if technical partners are taking advantage of the organization's lack of advanced IT and legal resources. To overcome these, the eHomemakers team works hard towards self-learning, building IT knowledge through technology news publications and speaking up on corporate ethics in the ICT sector.

- ii. Preference for big contracts by ICT service sector and a lack of choice: The ICT sector in Malaysia is geared towards hardware selling and software development. So far, eHomemakers has not found any company which is interested in assisting social enterprises in technological development for social purposes. Most companies are into securing large, one-time contracts rather than several small contracts. Those which were willing to take on small non-profit contracts had not served eHomemakers' needs well as they left technical problems unattended to for weeks, leading to frustrating downtime.. eHomemakers is still working to overcome this challenge.

### *Financing: Status as a Social-enterprise*

eHomemakers' status as a social enterprise prevented it from receiving Government or external funding. eHomemakers' income generating activities distinguish it from non-profits, but are not substantial enough to be considered equal to profits earned through traditional business practices. This puts eHomemakers in a very difficult position in Malaysia because there is no such provision for social enterprises in Malaysia. The government focuses its aid to government related agencies and traditional NGOs that rely on government largess to sustain themselves. Therefore, limited funds have been a constant constraint to innovations and extending activities to reach more disadvantaged, low-income women requiring special assistance. eHomemakers has been able to overcome the obstacle of limited financing by drastically lowering administrative/operational costs, pursuing revenue-generation activities and continuously providing a valuable resource for loyal members.

*Women's Barriers: Disadvantaged women face several barriers impeding them from achieving economic self-reliance*

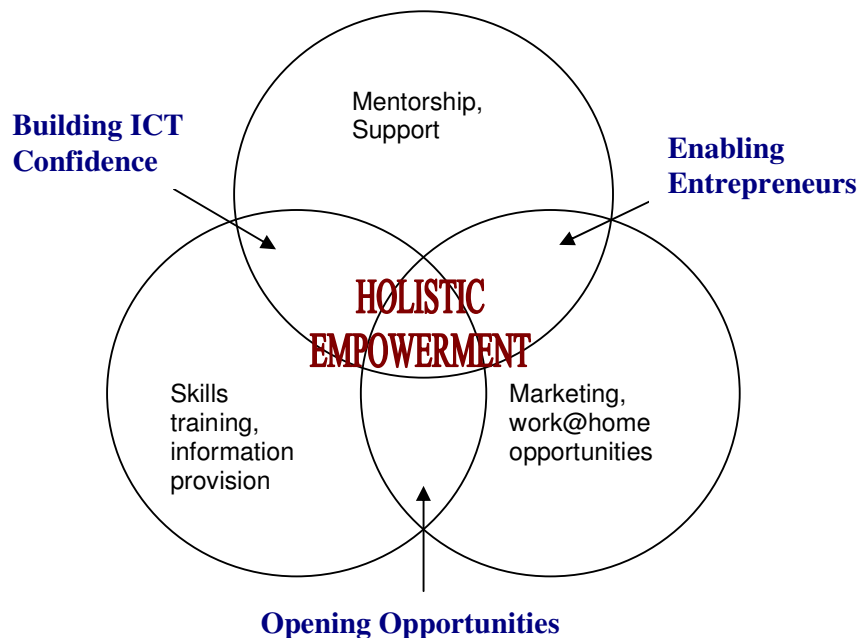
Attitude: The single most problematic barrier preventing the disadvantaged women from taking up ICT- enabled and entrepreneurial opportunities are a product of culture and experiences. Most of eHomemakers' beneficiaries have been bound to the home and family responsibilities for years to care for their families. Isolation, combined with low-self-confidence and their status as low-income women prevents them from venturing outside the home to seek an income. The cycle of low self-confidence, high risk aversion and passivity is difficult to break through, and prevents disadvantaged women from taking steps to improve their lives and persisting in self-improvement activity participation when challenges present themselves. eHomemakers has helped women overcome this by guiding women through the 5As Process of Change (outlined in Section 8). eHomemakers also provides the social support which is lacking to help a woman lift herself out of complex circumstances-- constantly providing suggestions and in-person mentorship, as well as support through the e-community.

Finance: Budget constraints prevent the acquisition and maintenance of equipment and Internet. An aspiring homemaker's small capital costs can become a financial burden when there are additional business expenses required to set up a home-based income-generation work station and start the business rolling. eHomemakers has been able to partially overcome this by helping women acquire used ICT equipment through the eHomemakers network (via donations) and by appealing to some companies' CSR initiatives. Tips on maintenance and operations are available on the eHomemakers network, where members can access resources and post on the forum board. Another solution is to use lower cost ICT solutions like a mobile phone.

## Lessons learned

### Success factors:

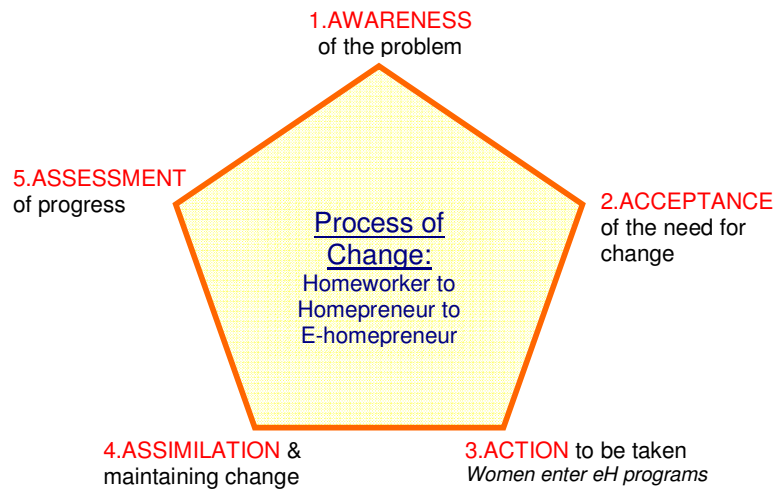
- *A holistic approach:* Based on research findings, eHomemakers chooses a holistic approach



to economic and social empowerment to ensure sustainability of activities. Continuous capacity building is required; skills training and information provision are combined with mentorship, support, counseling, regular seminars, workshops, web-enabled marketing opportunities and practical tips to provide a multi-faceted approach to women's economic empowerment. In addition, eHomemakers learned that the faster a disadvantaged woman can gain returns for her activities and investment, the more confidence she has in her skills, thus facilitating the ease of entry into entrepreneurship. Finally, it is important to remember that the simplest form of technology like a mobile phone linked to an integrated platform is the best ICT solution for low-income women.

- *A Social Enterprise model:* eHomemakers is self-sustaining and not reliant on donor or Government funding. eHomemakers generates revenue by selling advertising space on the website/ newsletters; its research projects are conducted through award grants. eHomemakers operates like a business, centered on efficiency and balances revenue and costs at a sustainable level. The difference between a regular enterprise and a social enterprise is that eHomemakers measures its profit in terms of social profit or impact. In order to maximize social profit, eHomemakers has formed a virtual team allowing it to run on a very small operational and administrative budget to ensure that the bulk of the revenue generated is used for project activities. Furthermore, eHomemakers' 15,000 members provide a reliable pool of volunteers and donated goods or services for the poor. Until eHomemakers can earn more revenue through its social business model however, the financial constraints limit the number of poor women it can reach and help. Thus, although considered a success factor, it is a double-edged sword which eHomemakers is currently working to improve on.

- *Gender Governance*: ICTs combined with entrepreneurship are keys to women’s self-sufficiency, and importantly, barriers for entry need to be identified by monitoring and tracking changes through the use of indicators. The 5As Process of Change within the Gender Governance framework, as proposed by eHomemakers, assists women to take ownership of the management of networks, information sharing and activities to enable and empower them to work from home. Each stage of the 5As Process of Change reflects different levels of economic empowerment. Disadvantaged women must go through the first 3 levels to break through barriers (Awareness, Acceptance and Action) before entering the e-entrepreneurship building levels (Assimilation and Assessment). The “assimilation” stage is the beginning of the process of change where a woman is able to



use ICTs for business by networking and managing information resources on her own. When she reaches the “assessment” stage, she completes the process of change to reach gender governance by evaluating her own efforts to overcome the barriers and take action. Once a woman has completed the 5 A’s process of change, she has acquired the ability of growing her business through the use of ICTs and becomes an active member in business and cyber support networks. Her feedback, inputs and active responses towards the networks’ needs form part of the governance over information networks that she belongs to.

### Support

- *Building a community by promoting cross-collaboration*: Through its tightly-knit cyber-community, eHomemakers ensures that members are loyal to the network, and that eHomemakers’ activities remain loyal to members’ needs. eHomemakers promotes partnerships between women of different interests and talents, the skilled and the unskilled, those who are mobile and those who are less mobile. It also caters to Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society by ensuring that the portal is trilingual and that the “Working @ Home” guidebook is available in four languages. Furthermore, middle-income members often volunteer their time and services besides donating used resources and small cash to aid the disadvantaged women.
- *External support*: In addition to its strategic partnerships with corporations such as MIRC, GIRC and the Lordman Alliance, eHomemakers has secured a good amount of support from higher-income women’s groups such as The Association of British Women in Malaysia. These groups of women empathize with eHomemakers’ mission, and support the organization by volunteering, making donations, purchasing Salaam Wanita’s eco-baskets, and helping to establish strategic connections through their social circles.

## Role of Champions

Salaam Wanita members who have successfully overcome their disadvantages by taking control of their lives provide the motivation and drive for eHomemakers' dedication to its mission, project activities and methods. These women's experiences, feedback, challenges and triumphs allow eHomemakers to be continuously innovating ways to improve the activities. Champions are women who prove that disadvantaged women, with the right kind of help, can become excellent role models to attaining empowerment through the 5As Process of Change.

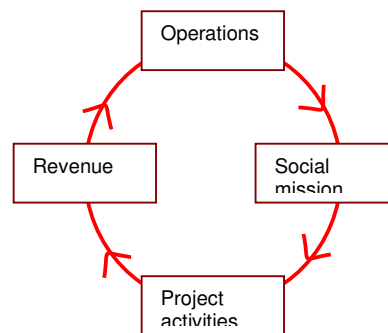
For example, Norarita, a Salaam Wanita member from Ipoh, joined the group in 2002 as a basket-weaver and has now evolved to coordinate basket orders for up to ten other Salaam Wanita members. Working outside the home was not an alternative for Norarita as she could not afford the childcare facilities for her special sons, who suffer from paralysis and speech difficulties. When she was approached by a Salaam Wanita coordinator, she jumped at the opportunity; regularly attending the various seminars and skills training workshops hosted by eHomemakers, and practicing weaving techniques after her family had gone to bed. It is no surprise that Norarita has become an enthusiastic networker-- taking advantage of her circle of contacts to market her products, and obtain other home-based job opportunities. Nowadays, Norarita is more secure about her family's future, knowing that she has what it takes to face her children's increasing medical costs. She is a champion because she took it upon herself to contribute to Salaam Wanita by organizing and coordinating the other weavers in Ipoh—becoming a self-motivated micro-entrepreneur, and inspiring other disadvantaged women to stand on their own two feet.

## Justification for the good practice

*An innovative and localized prescription to gender governance:* eHomemakers' low cost ICT, person-to person empowerment concept is unique. It is the only local e-community that promotes working from home by providing free resources and a platform for homemakers and homeworkers to teletrade. As a grassroots initiative, it best serves the individual beneficiaries as much as the beneficiaries' local communities because its information and activities are generated by the beneficiaries themselves. In addition, the activities do not only provide resources, tips and income-earning opportunities; but also a close-knit support group for women whose voices and concerns are not usually heard or addressed. Furthermore, the e-community becomes self-propagating-- with members helping disadvantaged members through donations of resources and volunteering. Thus, eHomemakers allows for all women to participate in empowerment and manage the information network together, driving self-governance, corporate governance and perhaps one day, e-governance for the government.

*A sustainable model for poverty reduction solutions:* eHomemakers is able to sustain itself through a social enterprise model; it exists neither as a non-profit organization nor a profitable business. Rather, it is an e-enterprise driven by a social mission; sustaining itself by trading goods and services for a social purpose. eHomemakers' operations accomplished its social aim and they are sustained by revenue generated through its various activities. The social enterprise model should be promoted because it yields a high level of productivity and autonomy, calculated risk-taking, community benefit as a main mission to all activities, citizens' initiatives, egalitarian decision-making, accountability, a participatory process and impact maximization.

*A model for people- to-people collaboration:* eHomemakers' mission and community affiliation with a group long-deprived of recognition and assistance, creates a remarkable bond between its members who would otherwise not have access to important resources, support, and a place to openly discuss gender and work issues. In the ICT world created by eHomemakers,



ethnicity, class and religious differences are eliminated, and people are encouraged to help themselves and each other through the e-community. The promotion of collaboration amongst a diverse group of women -- between middle and low income women, between Malay, Chinese and Indian women, and between skilled and unskilled women – creates a community devoid of any discrimination and a comfortable place for women to access the things they need to become empowered. Moreover, the valuable exchanges between this diverse group of women, including donations from middle-income to lower-income women regardless of race and religions, elicits a momentum which adds to the organization's long term sustainability, growth and capacity.

### Potential for replication

- The CMS of the portal are enabled with open source software; they are simple and user-friendly. Thus, homemakers can be trained to be IT managers of such information network.
- eHomemakers has prepared a series of easily understandable working manuals from managing a cyber office to how disadvantaged women can work @ home
- The DWMA can be used to transmit quick information and organize production lines which are located in diverse sites. If this application and the social enterprise model is replicated, it can be used to help a network of rural villages or a network of urban-based individuals to work @ home or group market their homebased products or services.
- The "Working @ Home" book is available for translation and modification by other organizations into other languages to promote working @ home in different countries.

### Conclusion

To localize gender equality and empowerment in Malaysia's urban and para-urban areas, eHomemakers has created a low cost ICT-assisted economic empowerment project that is research-based, grassroots-managed and self-sustaining. This means that the project directly addresses core problems faced by the beneficiaries because the network's training and empowerment resources are themselves generated by the beneficiaries. Furthermore, its social enterprise model ensures that it is cost-effective, impact oriented and sustainability-focused so that no activity is planned without building a workable revenue model for implementation and sustainability.

As eHomemakers' activities continue to increase homemakers' confidence and productivity, eHomemakers will continue to establish strategic partnerships; thereby advancing corporate social responsibility (CSR) amongst the Malaysian corporate sector to help the poor through self-reliant activities. In all, eHomemakers is making large steps to improve its community capacity and credibility; advocate for inclusion of the homeworking sector into the formal sector; and strengthen the homeworking sector through ICTs for development, especially for the long-neglected urban poor with no political power.

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