

**THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH THE INTERNET :THE  
AFRICA WOMEN EXPERIENCE**

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## **THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN THROUGH THE INTERNET :THE AFRICA WOMEN EXPERIENCE**

*The paper will analyse how the Information Communication Technologies (ITCs) can empower young women in the education and economic sectors, as well as their advocacy to end violence against women and the girl children. The focus is on the young women in Africa. Examples of different initiatives and strategies by women organisations to empower young women through ICTs will be highlighted. The paper will furthermore, discuss the bottlenecks young women face in accessing and using ICTs for their self – determination. The presentation will then conclude by giving recommendations that need to be put in place in order to enable young women to fully utilise the ICTs/ internet for their empowerment.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When we talk about empowerment we basically mean one's ability to improve her/his well being. Economic power is at the centre of this whole process. As we all know the world economy today is shaped around the potential of the ICTs to contribute to the processing, storage, and retrieval of relevant information in a timely manner. Therefore, it is crucial that young women worldwide and especially in Africa, demand for an environment where women have increased access to communication tools and knowledge needed to change and fulfill their lives in order to improve their quality of life. This is crucial in Africa because, knowledge has remained the missing link in women's ability to make informed decisions for their empowerment and holding accountable those responsible for their marginalisation and violation of their rights.

If telecommunications services are so critical for sustainable and equitable development, it is necessary to analysis the general situation in relation to connectivity in Africa especially in rural areas where majority of young women live. This helps us to understand the dilemma women especially young women face in their efforts to reach out for and use the internet services for their empowerment, bearing in mind the marginalisation they generally face in different societies.

Gillian Marcelle (1999) indicates that 70% of the South African population who live in the rural setting are only accessible to about 11 main telephone lines giving a rural teledensity of about 0.04 lines per 100 people. This is a better picture compared to the Uganda situation which estimates that 72% of the country's connectivity is based in Kampala (the capital city) alone (source Uganda Telecom, 1999). The statistics further show that the number of main lines per 10,000 people in rural Uganda is 0.2. This situation is common to most African countries.

Although many African countries have embraced the policy of deregulation of their telecommunications services, giving a rise to the use of mobile telephones even in rural communities where electrification lack, the service has remained in the hands of the haves. Worse still radio, television and print media are in the hands of the men. The traditional media where women in Africa seem to still have control and if utilised, would be a basis for women to make their views, ideas and demands for their empowerment made accessible through the internet, have been marginalised because of the present globalised communication policies. It is important to note that the traditional ICTs in Africa are still very vital in linking, generation and dissemination of information on and by women to the internet. This is a very strategic approach in making the internet contents relevant to the women in Africa.

Given the above situation and that the internet has proved to have educational, economic and social benefits, then the African population who live in rural areas, majority of whom are women, will continue to be excluded from these empowering tools. Therefore, their marginalisation will continue and hence, their failure to improve their status.

Notwithstanding the above circumstances, individual young women and Africa women's movements have attempted to put in place a number of strategies to break this isolation by using every opportunity availed to them to use the ICTs to attain their self-determination. Women in Africa have fully utilised the opportunity the technology has offered them to open up the geographical barriers that have for centuries barred them from interacting, sharing ideas for their own development, as well as strategizing together to fight common issues in regard to the violation of women's rights.

### **EDUCATIONAL/TRAINING FACILITIES**

In Africa, there has been a new initiative where some governments have put in place national education and telecommunication policies to give both the young students and the old opportunities for distance learning. In addition, some education policies now give equal opportunities for education to both girls and boys. This has resulted into a reasonable number of girls having opportunities to improve on their education status through access to the internet.

Dorothy Okello (March, 2000) argues that the introduction of distance education through the internet in Uganda, has not only increased the programmes available but has also increased the opportunity for young women's education. She backs her argument by analysing the increase in number of female students enrolling for the African Virtual University (AVU), a world Bank Project. In 1997 out of 321 enrolled students for AVU in a polytechnic institute, 61 were female students giving 19%; (figures for 1998 and 1999 were 39% and 42% respectively). At Makerere University in Uganda, out of 52 students who took an AVU course in Electric circuits 15 (29%) were girls. However, it is important to note that by the end of 1999, the number of female students enrolling decreased because there was no more subsidy from the World Bank.

The strong socialisation entrenched in most African societies, which still dictate that any development opportunity is first given to a boy child, could probably be one of the causes of decline in number of girls paying for the enrollment of AVU. It is still evident that parent would first pay for the boy child and consider the girl child later.

Another initiative is the school net a world Link for development initiative whose aim is to help coordinate the use of ICTs in schools with varying level of connectivity. The initiative provides internet connectivity for teachers as well as students in developing countries in the use of technology for educational development. This initiative has also increased the number of young girls who have accessed this opportunity in Uganda. Out of the 23 schools in this initiative, four are for girls only and nine are co- education (mixed schools). The contribution of this initiative in increasing the number of girls using knowledge derived from ICTs for their education and consequently for their empowerment can not be overlooked. However, I must say more such intervention are required to bring positive change in this male conservative dominated environment especially in the IT sector. For example there are 691 government aided secondary schools let alone, the increasing number of private secondary schools in Uganda. If only 23 were able access this opportunity, a bigger proportion still remain wanting.

Nevertheless, this particular empowerment has seen young women enter new careers which for a long time were preserved for men who, due to stereotype, were perceived to be the ones who “could understand science and technology”. We can now see some young women take up decision-making positions in Telecommunications, Banking, Computer Technology, Insurance e.t.c., bringing improved status to these young women.

## **INITIATIVES BY WOMEN'S MOVEMENT**

Outside the academic sphere, to some extent, the women’s movement have also broken through this male dominated sector and have initiated a number of gender sensitive projects that have empowered women in various sectors such as the economic sector. A good example is the ACACIA initiative in Africa. In Uganda, the Council for Economic Empowerment of Women in Africa (CEEWA), a joint project of the International Women Tribune Centre (IWTC), IDRC Nairobi office and the local CEEWA office, are developing a package of learning materials using ICTs focused on small business activities for rural women in Uganda.

The core purpose of this project is to respond to the present gap in accessing for relevant information on the internet, by availing the targeted groups with information that relate to their needs i.e the market prices in Uganda capital city where women would earn more than what they presently receive from the middle men; where to get cheap raw materials, the appropriate seed to grow; weather information; how to improve on the agricultural yields; etc. These materials will also be utilised by the already established telecentres in Uganda through the CEEWA website and the CDROMS. Although the project is at its

initial stages this initiative will go a long way to enable rural women in Uganda to share relevant information for their economic empowerment.

### **INTERNET CAFÉ AT ISIS-WICCE**

The globalisation trends call for efficient and effective flow of information. Therefore it is inevitable that girls and women of all walks of life acquire skills that would enable them to compete by making their voices visible and accessible. Young Women must be knowledgeable and must access these tools to enhance their efforts in literacy and advocacy. Information technology is at the centre of enabling young women achieve this goal. Isis-WICCE having realised these gaps is looking for opportunities to open doors for young women to have access to the internet by setting up an internet café. The dream is to emphasise on empowering young women with skills in using IT to access appropriate information that would facilitate their sharing of ideas and strategies to strengthen their solidarity to participate in developmental activities. It is also intended to demystify the myth that computers are only associated with word processing or that it is a male domain.

It is also evident that a few women in Africa have been able to acquire computers and open up their own work places even within their homes and have successfully targeted specific markets and earn a living out of using the internet. This has improved their economic status and yet at the same time they are able to fulfill their gender roles, an issue which, has remained a hindrance to women's exploration of opportunities for employment in the African setting.

### **INTERNET AND ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

On the issue of advocating for women's rights through the ICTs, women organisations and networks identified the need to capacity build as many young women as possible, to bring about greater empowerment of women through the effective use of communication strategies to improve their well being. Several initiatives have been effected by organisations such as SangoNet in South Africa; Abantu for development in Kenya; APC the Women's wing; Women Connect based in USA but with a training focus for women in Africa.

As a result, a number of electronic communication networks have been created i.e. Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), FLAMME, as well as individual organisations, developing their own websites and linking to other global women networks such as WomenAction for global impact and identity. Although there is still a huge disparity in accessing the ICTs by many women organisations and individuals in Africa, the African women's movement has used the available resources to share the relevant information for the empowerment of women and young girls at all levels.

Networking through e-mail and internet is a strategy women in Africa have adopted especially with regard to advocacy for women's rights. This is because of the timeliness and uncontrolled space for discussion that the technology has availed the women.

Women have mobilised to advocate against violation of collective and individual's rights. Two successful stories in Uganda are a testimony.

The first case is in relation to failure for justice to take place involving a man who perpetually bartered his wife Margaret and eventually killed her mother and sister. Margaret as a victim, had failed to access justice due to the rampant corruption in the relevant organs that were responsible for assisting her. Isis WICCE came to learn about the case through its rural women information units where the use of tape recorders enable Isis-WICCE to access rural women's concerns. In this particular case Isis-WICCE used the recorded information to contact the relevant government organs but in vain.

Isis WICCE then shared the information with the rest of its human rights networks globally through the internet. The World Organisation Against Torture based here in Geneva took it up and registered it as a Uganda case that needed government response (UG020699/VAW). Many other networks demanded for justice from the government of Uganda. It was only then that this case was given the urgency it required. Justice was eventually done. This is a success story depicting the power of the internet in promoting women's human rights.

Another case was about a traditional rite by the Buganda Kingdom that was due to violate the rights of a 13 year old girl in the name of culture. Uganda women's movement took it up and made all its strategic plans to reverse the decision by the loyalists through e-mail interaction. Isis -WICCE shared and called for support from its global networks through Uganda-Online. Little did we know that our simple e-mail advocacy would change a culture that has existed for centuries. The little girl survived the ritual she was to perform and went back to school. The tradition was also later done away with by the Kingdom Loyalists.

The above examples are clear evidence to show that indeed ICTs are vital tools in the empowerment of women and girls in Africa. However, it is very important to note that the number of women and girls that are able to get such opportunities are a drop in the ocean. It is therefore, vital to streamline some of the obstacles that impede women from accessing the opportunity.

## **PROBLEMS WOMEN FACE IN ACCESSING THE INTERNET**

There is a belief among the controllers of the ICTs that the world has become a global village because of the opportunities the telecommunications have given societies to timely process and disseminate information, hence, the information society we talk of today.

However, we need to recognise the disparity in connectivity between the more developed and less developed countries, the urban and the rural dwellers, more so between gender relationships in the production, control, attitude and access to the ICTs. What I mean to say is that the relations of power between women and men which are revealed in the practice, ideas and presentation of information on the internet, roles and resource

allocation of the needs of the two genders is far from being equal. It is evidently clear that most of the information circulating on the internet is modeled in the male view point let alone the designing of the technology and its availability to both genders. This has caused a huge imbalance in the utilisation of this valuable resource, and manipulation of the available information by the women for their empowerment.

The major barriers being;

#### *Connectivity problems*

Young women are failing to utilise the technology due to limitation in accessibility and the obsolete technology in most parts of the rural areas with the technology. This has hindered women's views, ideas and knowledge on how to empower young women in Africa to become visible on the internet.

#### *Affordability*

The cost of the technology is beyond the means of many women in Africa. Let alone the high tariffs charged by the internet service providers compared to women's low income. In Uganda there is still a small number of qualified personnel to give the technical (maintenance) service and therefore costs for their services are quite high. This was very evident during December 1999 when unknown virus hit computers in Kampala. It took days for organisations like Isis- WICCE to access technicians to rectify the problems let alone the costs incurred.

#### *Availability of Appropriate Content*

The 1998 UNECSO survey conducted in Uganda revealed that most of the available sources of information for development are either out of reach of many women living in rural areas or are not relevant to their needs. This situation is aggravated by a high level of illiteracy among women.

#### *Lack of Know-how*

There is still very limited opportunities for young women to acquire the ICT knowledge due to the commercialisation of the available training institutions. Coupled with the high level of poverty among women as earlier indicated, attainment of this skills become a luxury to most young women.

#### *Lack of adequate resources allocation for training of women in ICTs*

The women organisations capable of imparting such required skills to young women lack adequate resources to conduct such training. Resources received for capacity building from most donors are minimal to train enough trainers for a multiplier effect.

## *Language of Communication on the Internet*

There is a lot of relevant knowledge on the internet that would benefit young women to uplift their status. However, the complexity of the language used necessitates repackaging of the information in forms that can be understood by the recipients especially in rural communities. The task calls for a lot of time, financial and human resources.

Despite all these gaps, there are some critics who argued that women need not come up with alternative approaches to the use of the ICTs and that what women need to do is to just jump on band wagon (the global super highway) and get on with it. I, on the other hand, do agree with Tauli – Corpuz’s (1999) argument in regard to these particular critics. She says;

“It would be folly to ride in a runaway train which is carrying us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century at an alarming and ever accelerating speed without being part of those in control of it...”

Indeed this is what African women’s movement in particular are asking for. “Women must be given an opportunity to participate fully in the development of this so called information society, share equitably in the potential benefits of the far reaching developments in the production and consumption of the ICTs (Gillian Marselle Chair AIS –GWG)”, by providing the women with adequate technology within their vicinity.

Just a reminder before I give my few recommendations; who controls the access to ICTs, who distributes the technology and to whom? Who controls the financial resources?

Women organisations and individuals in Africa do realise that despite the foregoing observations, they have no option regarding the use of ICTs for their empowerment given that communication is a fundamental human need. Knowing that women are the key holders of the traditional knowledge in Africa, and that they play a crucial role in its transmission to the next generation, women organisations have endeavoured to put some strategies in place that would enable more knowledge on and about women to be accessed through various ICTs and more so the internet for obvious reasons.

Women organisations have used all forms of media to communicate and advocate for the causes they feel are important for their empowerment. Women organisations have strengthened women's communication capacities by building several communication strategies to link up to the internet. However, a lot needs to be put in place for women to fully utilise the internet for their empowerment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Organisations like Isis WICCE strongly believe that women organisations with some technology and skills should be funded to open up hands-on training in ICTs for young women. This will enable more young women to get the opportunity to have a hands-on training in ICTs to enable them to appreciate the role of the technology to their empowerment and be able to complete in the global market.
2. There is need for a detailed research in women and the use of ICTs in Africa to be carried out so as to come up with appropriate way forward. Multi-disciplinary associations with appropriate skills and know-how i.e. the Africa Information Society - GWG should be supported to give appropriate data and advisory services to international and regional initiatives which are seeking to engender the policies in the ICT sector.
3. We must include the gender dimension i.e to include the social roles that prohibit women form participation even where the technology is available.
4. The deregulation of telecommunication in Africa must have relevant regulations to protect the interest of women's plight in order to be able to reach out to the majority of young women in Africa. This is very critical if Africa is to reduce poverty among its population and have a sustainable development.
5. Young women, regardless of where they live, must be provided with the technology to enable then contribute to the internet what is relevant to their needs. Creation of subsidized community cyber café's would be a good starting point.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, as we celebrate the promotion of women's rights today, we need to consciously remember what is stipulated in article 19 of the UDHR. Therefore, Women in Africa call upon ITU to further strengthen its ITU gender task force in terms of budget allocation and human resource, to enable the task force come up with the appropriate and relevant strategies in the use of ICTs by the women in Africa.

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