Information and Communication Technologies as a Tool for Women's Empowerment and Social Transformation in Africa

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Introduction

This article considers how critical issues around Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as access, policy and rights, have affected "development" in Africa. My focus on access to computers and the Internet draws attention to how many African women have advanced their interests through ICTs, and to obstacles remain in making ICTs meaningful tools for the women of Africa. As an ICT practitioner engaged in gender work in Africa, I will take stock of the achievements and challenges that individual women, women's organisations and networks in Africa have faced in using ICTs for their empowerment.

Proponents of the information revolution promised that with the coming of the new ICT era, the world would become a global village in terms of the opportunities that new technologies could contribute to development. The argument stressed the potential of ICTs in accelerating the sharing of information, ideas and strategies by individuals and communities, and in enhancing people's ability to make the informed decisions that would lead to economic and social development. This development, it was felt, would help to bridge disparities between the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, the North and the South, and encourage collaborative global work towards equality and empowerment for all.

The potential for development that ICTs suggested led some African governments to work tirelessly in attempting to set in place relevant requirements, including the expansion of infrastructure, in order to reach out to the populace. The liberalisation of telecommunication services undertaken by a number of African governments was meant to open up space for different service providers to bring in new telecommunication services, and to enable rural-based institutions such as village schools, agricultural firms and clinics to use computers and access the Internet to advance their development activities.

Regional initiatives such as the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) have attempted to support the building of Africa's information and communication infrastructure so as to accelerate socio-economic development across the continent. The private sector has contributed to similar initiatives. Generally speaking, therefore, if one compares what the case is today (see Kihoro, 2001:11) with circumstances in the early 1990s (see Net Gains, 2000), there has been a tremendous development in ICTs on the African continent. Yet an urgent question remains to be answered: who benefits?

Effectively used, ICTs can stimulate development through the use of the Internet to enable rapid marketing of products; to facilitate discussions among experts on critical development issues; to share strategies for poverty alleviation; to carry out research on the management and treatment of deadly diseases such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS; to predict weather and provide other relevant information to the public; among many other things. The extent to which ICTs provide individuals and groups with the ability to interact and access ideas from each other has led to shifts in attitudes, thinking, analysis of issues and appreciation of the differences among people and nations. This process has significantly contributed to the improvement of many people's lives, but what is still lacking among many disadvantaged people is the ability to access relevant technology and to use ICTs to develop and distribute knowledge for their empowerment.

The majority of women who have access to ICTs in Africa are those in academia, the ICT professionals and the elite activists from non-governmental organisations. These individuals

have often tried to utilise available opportunities fairly aggressively in order to ensure that women are not excluded from the information revolution in ways that they have been in relation to other transformational processes. The concerted growth of ICTs in Africa occurred at a time when many African women had already organised themselves into networks and coalitions aimed at raising awareness, lobbying and contesting injustices that hinder women's full liberation. This reveals that African women have long been aware of the power of sharing information and knowledge as strategies for advancement and empowerment. There are, however, many new opportunities that ICTs have added to traditional African networking and the sharing of information. These opportunities revolve around the minimising of geographical distances; diversifying and increasing the amount of information transmitted at any given time; and efficiency and consistency in accessing information and sharing ideas.

ICTs and Women's Empowerment

The formation of e-networks in Africa has been an efficient catalyst in the dissemination of information on issues affecting women organised at grassroots, national and international levels. These networks include those with developed listserves such as Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), [1] which was formed in 1997 to share information on gender justice in Africa; Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), [2] established in 2000 to encourage the use of ICTs among women; and the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) for African Women, [3] launched to promote gender equity in the design, implementation and use of ICTs in policy and the use of ICTs in building women's networks. South African's Women'sNet [4] supports the coordination of the South African women's movement through the continual flow of relevant information and the training of women in the basic skills of using the Internet. Femmes-Afrique, [5] an electronic information service for francophone Africa, is based in Senegal and was set up to circulate information about the health and rights of women throughout Africa. Women's Rights Watch, [6] which is based in Nigeria, campaigns against gender-related persecution and also offers free legal service to affected women.

Some women's organisations in Africa have also set up networks of rural information centres and have provided mechanisms for availing rural women with a supportive environment for interfacing with ICTs. In addition to these women-centred initiatives, gender-neutral initiatives such as the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) telecentres established across Africa are intended to provide access for underprivileged rural Africans, the majority of whom are women. The wide range of initiatives on the continent suggests that many women have effectively created spaces to share information, to build crucial skills in the use of ICTs and to lobby for policy change by building and distributing information relevant to advocacy and redress. The momentum for lobbying, networking and advocacy that ICTs provide to networks has helped women to develop confidence in their work and to form alliances across communities, nations and regions. This has generated a vanguard of women activists who, with their new opportunities to collaborate, mobilise and support one another, are effectively contesting the decades of isolation, marginalisation and discrimination that African women have endured.

The recent advocacy and lobbying among individual activists and women's networks demanding redress in the case of Amina Lawal of Nigeria is one example of the ability of women using ICTs to influence decisions that affect women's rights and dignity in the face of discriminatory laws. This example draws attention to the special role of ICTs in supporting the struggles of women - working as individuals or networks - in relation to gender-based violence. Violence against women has long been a silenced and hidden phenomenon. The publicising of information about its prevalence has played a tremendous role in raising awareness and creating opportunities for pro-active lobbying. It should be stressed that the

effects of timely advocacy by women's networks prompted the UN to influence the majority of governments of African countries to recognise and act on the enormity of gender-based violence by ratifying vital agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Some governments have gone a step further in reforming the national policies that oppress women or impede their advancement.

While ICTs have helped women to make informed choices as individuals and on behalf of others, its impact for the vast majority of Africa's women needs further consideration. Some tough questions still need to be asked. Although ICTs have provided a great deal of important information about poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS, why are most African women affected by poverty and HIV/AIDS unable to benefit from available information? Even though ICTs offer many opportunities for networking and problem-solving, why are so many women not able to control the food insecurity in their households through using ICTs? Why is women's economic rate of empowerment still so severely stunted, despite the fact that ICTs have been rapidly circulating knowledge about effective marketing and networking for economic empowerment?

Answers to these questions uncover deeply entrenched structural and political hierarchies. As shown by many ICT experts and women activists, issues such as affordability and access, language and skills for operating ICTs indicate that these tools do not operate in a social and political vacuum; opportunities for democratising ICTs are linked to broader questions about policy-making, resource distribution and access to and control over economic and other resources. In what follows, I consider two key factors that reveal African women's marginalisation in ICT processes: control over knowledge in the ICT process and the impact of different forms of policy-making.

Knowledge and Power

Whose policies determine the knowledge that is central to ostensibly global ICT processes? I concur with scholars and activists who argue that one of the major problems with the use of ICTs for development in Africa lies with the paucity of knowledge and information available on the Internet that address the needs of the majority of African people. This becomes evident when one analyses the services and contents on the web vis-Ã -vis women of Africa as the target audience. In most cases, the expansion of ICT resources is directed at those activities that are regarded as being of economic value. Consequently, information about activities that are central to the lives of African women, such as reproduction, subsistence production and the management of families are not targeted.

As stated by Musimbi Kanyoro (2002), women in Africa are still not making much impact in generating what is deemed "acceptable global knowledge". One may ask why this is so when activists on the continent are producing a great deal of information reflecting the realities of women on the continent. This anomaly reveals the hegemony of certain groups in knowledge distribution and production. It is this situation of hegemony that results in the monopolising of "global language and skills" by a select few, with African women often remaining alienated from the packaging and processing of information, and their knowledge and information continuing to be marginalised within the sphere of "global knowledge".

Proponents of ICTs started by asserting that ICTs would make the world a global village, meaning that all would share information freely and without feeling censored. ICTs were to allow all individuals and nations freedom of expression and information exchange, it would allow for diversity of content, democratic ownership and control, broad awareness and realisation of the rights of different groups, the protection of users' rights, and all users' right to privacy. The effect of this would be to guarantee users' freedom from surveillance, and to guard against global, regional and national forms of supremacy through the Internet. Even

before many Africans have had a chance to cope with the prolific policies and regulations the proponents originally put in place, however, the same proponents are scheming to introduce new policies to protect their hegemony and control. For example, if the world follows suit with what is practiced in the United Kingdom and Japan and the proposal the USA is lobbying other nations to adopt, that emails be secretly tapped in the name of "threats to state security", it will be very difficult for the activists who have been trusting ICTs for privacy to pass on information about those who are in danger and need protection without fear of persecution.

Very limited resources, if any, are directed to research towards understanding the appropriateness of ICTs and content for the different categories of women on the continent. One initiative in this area has come in the form of the IDRC's gender working group, which made observations in 1997 on how global ICT policies had impacted on women's use of ICTs in Africa and the need to engender the African ICT policy (see Rathgeber and Ofwono, 2000). To date, however, very little of what has been discussed has been reflected in the regional and international forums that have been implemented. Given the disadvantaged position of women in taking up decision-making positions in the ICT industry, ICTs seem destined to remain a tool for the advantaged few and likely to continue being irrelevant to the majority, especially the women in Africa.

Politics and Policy-Making

An important factor affecting the democratic use of ICTs concerns the numerous exploitative economic policies originating outside Africa that have exacerbated the limited use of ICTs among women in Africa. Examples of these policies are the structural adjustment policies and the liberalisation and privatisation of almost all available national resources that women once depended upon to attain some gainful employment and economic empowerment. Some of the emerging policies (that are touted as action-oriented alternatives for empowering women) have generated yet another crisis. An example is the micro-finance institutions with their high interest rates. To use ICTs one requires economic empowerment and skills, which most African women have been denied.

Crucial political factors affecting the use of ICTs by women stem from patriarchy. Immediate ways in which gender hierarchies affect women's use of ICTs concern their unequal access to education and skills training. Social and cultural pressures on women to perform domestic and reproductive labour enormously constrain their access to the public world, of which ICTs are a part. As a result of exploitative policies and patriarchal dominance, even the few African women who have basic ICT know-how face the problem of not having adequate opportunities to deepen their understanding of the tool. During the Beijing Conference, many women's organisations from Africa reported having one or two computers for a staff of 6 to 10 (see Ochieng, 1998). This is still a reality in many organisations on the continent. Most activists in Africa, unlike their counterparts in the developed world, have access to ICTs solely at the workplace. Ongoing retrenchments, often resulting from externally imposed economic rationalisation, have left many without jobs and their sole means of accessing ICTs.

Although many African governments have nominally been committed to ending discrimination against women, it is very evident that many governments have not put in place appropriate mechanisms to implement and address women's skewed relations to ICTs. As Musimbi puts it, "all the steps taken to develop ICTs remain but a charade… In most cases the setting up of regulatory bodies is simply done to fulfil donor conditionalities" (2002:11). Very few governments in Africa have instituted effective information and communication policies that reflect the needs and realities of the majority of African people. While governments have endorsed the proponents of ICTs in their affirmation of the

relevance of ICTs to economic development, minimal expansion, or none at all, has been introduced in rural contexts, where the majority of contributors to the economies live.

An activist once told me, "You cannot fight what you do not know." For me, this raises the importance of mobilising a critical mass of multi-disciplinary professionals to deal with the numerous problems regarding ICTs and development in Africa. As activists, we need to position ourselves to deal with the critical issues that are stepping stones in the development of our communities. There is a need to form coalitions between gender teaching departments, agencies involved in telecommunication and the development of ICTs, and technocrats in policy development and formulation in order to come up with viable and comprehensive plans for developing ICTs for the benefit of women. The advocacy likely to grow out of these coalitions would subsidise and develop appropriate technology that could make women in Africa actors in the production of global knowledge, rather than the recipients of others' expertise.

Liberalisation with no regulation to protect and empower the masses amounts to the selling out of a country's people to elites with economic and political power at a global level. Africa's own lack of policies to shape ICTs in distinctive ways has enormously undermined its relevance to the majority. It seems imperative that a comprehensive evaluation of ICTs' performance in Africa be conducted, in order to assess properly what real impact it has had, and to lay the basis for shaping the technology and its use to the benefit of ordinary people, especially women.

In order to fit into a changing society, as African activists we must position ourselves within the ICT world. But we must also question all that is provided for us, and consider what we read in relation to the value it adds to our lives. We must identify innovations that will help to empower women in Africa, and challenge those that trap us in conventional roles of passivity or dependence.

Universities, especially those with already established gender and women's studies departments, should initiate course curricula that offer special training in ICTs. Such training should be based on the development of concepts, theories and analysis that are geared towards African women's priorities and the need for radical social change. It is important, therefore, not simply to demand access to ICTs as tools of international elite interests, but as tools that we can transform for our own interests.

Footnotes

[1] gain@lists.sn.apc.org

[2] http://www.wougnet.org

[3] apc-africa-women@lists.sn.apc.org

[4] http://www.womensnet.org.za

[5] http://www.enda-sn/synfev/fainfo.htm

[6] womensrightswatch-nigeria@kabissa.org
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