

Promoting ICT Opportunities For Women Empowerment In Nigeria: Issues And Strategies.

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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication technology (ICT) has become a potent force in transforming social, economic and political life globally. Women are often unsung heroine in the advancement of information technology especially in the developing nations like Nigeria where women are dramatically underrepresented in the ICT field. This paper examined the present trend of women and ICT usage in Nigeria. It is noted that lower numbers of women are accessing and using ICT compared with men. Women are also more strongly represented in lower level ICT occupations than in higher status and higher paid areas. The various ICT opportunities that are of benefits to women were examined. ICT has potentials to bring development to a nation by reducing trade distortions, eliminate poverty, provide employment opportunities, improve health- care delivery and others. Empowerment strategies to promote and improve the present situation such as creating an enabling environment which supports and encourages women more access to benefit from ICT projects, creating a regulation and policy which supports women's use of ICT were recommended.

Key words: ICT opportunity, women empowerment, empowerment strategies.

INTRODUCTION

There is a tremendous pace and improvement in ICT field globally and the need for the skills of the ICT work force to keep up with the pace of technological change is paramount. Empowerment of women means investing in women's rights with legal backing, and moral and financial support to enable women function effectively (Ogbomo n.d). The empowerment of women involves assessment of women's needs and designing programmes to address those needs.

ICT sector remains a buoyant and growing sector for empowerment, a key factor that enhances national development. Advances in ICT are occurring on an incredible scale in many countries that have translated to a definite abundance of wealth and opportunities for their entire people (Olaleye 2013). ICTs are a complex and heterogonous set of goods, applications and services used for producing, distributing, processing and transforming information, included in this set are the outputs of industries as diverse as telecommunication, television and radio broadcasting, computer hardware and software, computer services and electronic media.

Employment in the ICT sector has continued to grow significantly in recent years. The perception in most countries that ICT sector is a male-dominated industry persists. Male dominated most high- value and income jobs in the ICT sector. The research carried out in both developed and developing countries, revealed classic cases of vertical gender segregation, with women more strongly represented in lower ICT occupations than in higher status, and higher paid areas. The study showed that 15 per cent of ICT managers, and only 11 percent of IT strategy and planning professionals were women (Girls in ICT portal n.d).

Gillian Goddard (n.d) said that the lack of belief in our female to be engaged in ICT in different areas constituted an obstacle. Burch a gender and information society activist in Latin America, echoed this sentiment. "ICT policy, perhaps even more than other policy areas, is often perceived as an issue reserved for specialists. It is therefore not often seen by women's organizations or other gender focused groups as something with important development and social implications that they should therefore take on in the

frame work of their advocacy initiatives. Hafkin (2002) said that ICT sector was not only seen as an area for specialists, women as well as men regard it as the province of men. The African information society Gender Working Group argued and fell into the trap of saying "these are not things for us to deal with" hence women are accepting gender stereotypes. In order for women and girls to enter the information ages and for ICT policy to be engendered, women must transcend these attitudinal barriers (Marcelle 2000).

Observations have shown that girls and women are lacking behind in ICT field as far as getting adequate knowledge is concerned. The society seems to perceive ICT sector as masculine dominated occupation. It is apparent that culturally certain occupations are preserved of women folk. It seems the women are not keeping pace with ICT but the men are taking upper hands in gaining more access to ICT sector. The purpose of this paper is to examine ICT usage among women and girls, and the various ICT opportunities that are beneficial to women, and so to come up with strategies that could promote ICT opportunities and subsequent women empowerment.

ICT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

There are numerous possibilities for information technologies (IT) to improve women's economic activities. Increased access to information is probably the greatest benefit that IT can bring. If women are able to use it productively, they can substantially improve their lives and increase their income.

Small Business

A great number of women in developing countries, Nigeria in particular engage in running small business. The most valuable application of IT for women small business owner is information, accessing information to facilitate their business, generating and disseminating information about it (Heeks n.d). There are many ways of using the internet to do business, from making contacts and checking prices to displaying goods and entering into contracts (Weeks 2000). Women entrepreneurs in developing countries can secure gains from IT with little technical training for instance after an internet workshop for members of the Association for Support to Women Enterprise (ASAFE) in Cameroon. Bio-vital, an ASAFE member that manufactures cosmetics made from local herbs and plants use the internet to locate a French company that now buys 80 per cent of its production (ASAFE n.d). Small business enterprise needs information about supply, demand, finance and environment. They tend to rely on informal information from friends and family, which may be in- accurate. Web site can promote information about the business to potential clients, as well as sell products and service.

Outsourcing: Teleworking and Teleservices

Outsourcing is the relocation of information intensive jobs from high-wage countries to developing countries. Teleworking is remote work in the sense of being remote from the source of the work. In developing countries those working in the jobs, which involve information transfers by telecommunication, are said to be engaged in tele-services. Teleworking and tele-services are the areas of the new economy with the largest growth potential for developing countries. The international labour organization (ILO) predicts that there will be 12 Million new jobs in IT enabled service in developing countries in the next decade, as employers look to developing countries for cost advantages over United States or European employees (ILO 2001). Teleworking is a mode of working rather than a type of employment, whereby IT allow work to be carried out at sites away from a company's principal premises. (Gender and IT n.d).

Data entry

The employment generation potential of the data processing area is large. Given the high skills requirements for software programming, the lower ends of teleworking such as data entry are more realistic

possibilities for large numbers of women in developing countries. Women are trained for processing of forms largely for work in fields such as insurance, health, banking, law, surveys, and taxes that are the lifeblood of the service industry. These are activities that are largely unaffected by the current economic downturn that has hit the global technology sector as a whole.

Women Farmers

Women play important role in agriculture which is the major industry of most developing countries. Munyua (n.d) said, "Information technology can empower rural women to participate in decision making, exchange ideas with others in developed and developing countries and improve the quality of life of the Africa". IT has great potential to help meet, the needs of rural women farmers and to benefit rural communities. IT could provide women farmers with guidance on where and when to sow, harvest and market their produce to avoid having to off-load their goods at throw-away prices. Women agriculturists need information on improved farming technologies, access to credit, agricultural inputs, transportation systems, product potentials, new and environmentally sound production techniques and practices, new markets, food preservation and storage, trade laws, trend in food production, demand and processing. Women farmers could improve their productivity with information on improved seed, alternate crops, and weather.

Self-employment and job creation

ICT job has created avenue for jobs. Women could take up ICT job in various forms ranging from data entry, cyber café operators, technicians, programmers, web designers, computer engineers, data processing and analysis, and computer operators. These job opportunities are for both men and women. This is the age when ICT has created numerous job opportunities in the midst of non-ICT job scarcity.

Women and health care delivery

ICT has apparently been useful for family health information. Information that are of paramount advantage to women concerning: childbirth, family planning, children nursing and caring, breast feeding, and women clinical cases are readily available through information technology. Technology is providing women with data concerning diseases and cases of treatment and clinical counseling on the web. IT has apparently reduced anxiety about certain health issues which can be easily accessed on the internet.

Education and indigenous Knowledge

IT offers invaluable tools for women empowerment through education, particularly literacy education, continuing education, non-formal education, and lifelong education, all which combat illiteracy. IT can also empower women through codification and dissemination of their indigenous knowledge. Traditionally women have been the incubators and transmitters of knowledge relating to food processing, preservation, and storage, the growing of specific crops, nutrition, and health. Much of the knowledge that women in rural areas possess has scientific value. IT can help organize and transfer this knowledge to outside communities that might benefit from it (Brodman, Yunus 2001).

ICT and women rural living

The use of mobile phone has impacted rural living, entrepreneurship and job search. Mobile phone reduces the costs of running business and some cases; the technology could even enable a user to start one. A good example of this would be the case of the women in Pakistan who have been able to start small business offering beauty and hairdressing services, without having to shell out moving for setting up beauty salons (ICT for development n.d). Client can easily contact them via their appointment and enjoy their services. IT impact on education and health in rural dwellings. Mobile services are being used to spread

located, generated and locally relevant educational and health information. In case of severe drought, floods, wars or weak economies, mobile phones can be used to keep in touch with one's home community. Mobile operators have proven to be incredibly helpful in disaster relief efforts by providing emergency related communication infrastructure. ICT has impacted on transport substitution. The improvement in information flows between the buyers and sellers make for a more effective bartering of information without travelling. This is particularly significant in rural areas where traders need to travel to urban areas simply to check for whether demand for their products exists before leaving their rural homes. The use of mobile phones can correct market inefficiencies, therefore regaining the balance in the supply market. The information and services that could be available through mobile phone would prevent exploitation by middlemen or traders, reduce information gaps, save costs and time, and strengthen access of services providers to rural people (ICT for development n.d).

TREND IN ICT USAGE

The impact of ICT on our daily lives has been steadily increasing. Computers and the internet cannot be dismissed from the contemporary scene; even the importance of mobile phones cannot be over emphasized. Thus it is impossible to imagine life today without digital media.

In an empirical research on the use of ICT among entrepreneurs in industry in South –West Nigeria revealed that women entrepreneurs under-utilized ICT infrastructure, and system in the production and marketing of garments. It further revealed that the use of radio and television for marketing and advertisements is under-utilized, due to the fact that it is expensive to explore. It also showed that most of the women producers in the garment industry lack computer literacy. Nigerian women entrepreneurs' use of ICT infrastructure and systems is limited and even the ones in use are not widely explored for business development (Olasanmi, Ayoola and Kareem-Ojo 2012)

Olatokun (2007) revealed that the usage of ICTs by Nigerian women academics showed that the majority of women academics were ICT literate. They made use of computers, internet, telephones, mobile phone and photocopiers while ICT facilities such as scanners , facsimiles, video conferencing and teleconferencing were not used. It was also revealed that ICT were used to perform data collection, statistical analysis, word processing, information search, storage and retrieval of materials, electronic communication, search and preparation of course materials. Majority of women academic affirmed that they had unequal access to the use of ICTs in their institutions in comparison with their male counterparts.

Most women in developing countries who use ICT use it at work. Except in upper income classes, home access to a computer and the internet is not a phenomenon. Users of ICT at work, use it as a tool of production, in other words ICTs are used in routine office work, data entry, manufacturing, computer industry jobs, programming, and related work. While some use ICT as a tool of communication in creating and exchanging information. E-mail is the major ICT application that women's organizations and individual women in developing countries use (AED's Global communications and learning system n.d)

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE ICT FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Engendering *ICT Policy*

Engendering *ICT Policy* is an area of great importance, it is very important to secure the benefits of ICT for girls and women. If gender issue is not well focused in ICT policy, it is likely that girls and women will

not adequately benefit from ICT field. According to Nafkin (2002), he said decades of experience have shown that without explicit attention to gender in policy, gender issues are not considered in implementation.

Marcelle (2000) was of the view that there is much evidence to show that policy – making in technological fields often ignores the needs, requirements, and aspirations of women unless gender analysis is included. Gillward (2001) pointed out “ICT policies should be integrated with other policy areas to ensure that efforts towards sustainable development are co-ordinated and cohesive”. He said further that national gender equality policy needs to be aware of the opportunities that ICTs offer for the advancement of women. Women engaging in intensive advocacy: women’s organizations already know how to influence policy. Women organizing, locally and internationally at the policy level has become a global phenomenon, they have learnt how to participate, formulate demands, organized and build alliances. We have seen it with Beijing, Cairo, Rio, Venna, and Johannesburg (Hafkin 2002).

ICT Training and education

Transforming the live of girls and women focusing adequate training in ICT is desirable. Women need specialized training so as to use more sophisticated information technology (IT) applications. It is universally accepted that gaining sufficient skills for application of IT determines women’s chances for equal participation . Unless women gain increased access to training in scientific and technological fields, it is likely that even greater numbers of them will be disadvantaged by IT facilitated changes yet to come (Marcelle 2000 b). Science and technology education is the prerequisite for work in information technology at the level of computer programmers, engineers, systems analysts, and systems designers. Women’s enrolment rates in science are lower than those of men globally. There is the need for orientation for women in science oriented courses both at the secondary and tertiary education.

Equitable Distribution of ICT Job between Women and Men

The ICT sector needs to invest more resources in human capital development and in creating an enabling environment for women and girls. Closing the male-female employment gap is good for economic growth. Research indicates that the narrowing in the Male – Female employment gap has been an important drive of European’s economic growth in the last decade. The world economic forum reveals that those countries that are role models in dividing resources equitably between women and men, regardless of their level of resources, fare better than those that do not (Gender and ICT n.d)

CONCLUSION

ICT opportunities for women and girls provide ample chance for them and create an enabling environment to support their self – determination and economic empowerment in the face of high rate of unemployment, and struggling for survival in the male donating world. Based on the discussion on this paper, it was recommended that enabling environment which supports and encourages women more access to benefit from ICT been created. Women should continue to be orientated so as to break their attitudinal barrier on ICT usage. There is a need for a regulation and policy which supports women’s use of ICT, and equitable distribution of ICT jobs between men and women.

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