

ICT – A VERITABLE TOOL FOR RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Caroline A Alenoghena (MNSE) & Yinusa A. Adediran (FNSE)

Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering
Federal University of Technology, Minna

ABSTRACT

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is now a flavour of the day in international circles. However, ICT access is still a mirage in most rural and remote communities of the developing countries where at least 60% of the populace is dominated by women who are either complete housewives or live on petty farming and trading. However, both the women and the communities where they live have a lot to benefit from availability of ICT facilities. The paper highlights some of these benefits and also discusses the likely obstacles that could militate against easy deployment and use of ICT facilities. Some strategic measures to ease deployment and aid effective use of such facilities are also proposed.

KEY WORDS: ICT access, universal access, women empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is a consequence of the convergence of information theory, telecommunications and computer technology. There is always the need for everyone to pass messages (information) in form of data, voice, images, or pictures to colleagues, relations or business associates. In the rural and remote areas, access to ICT facilities is still a mirage. This is particularly true of the developing countries where, on the average, 60% of the populace still live on less than US\$1 a day. It is also important to note that more than 60% of such rural communities are made up of women who live as complete housewives, or on menial/petty chores like farming, firewood sales and probably fishing. In general, rural women live a poorer life than their colleagues in the urban areas.

The correlation between information and poverty has been widely acknowledged by the information society, the main propositions given were as follow: information leads to resources; information leads to opportunities that generate resources; access to information leads to access to resources and access to information leads to access to opportunities that generate resources. We are in the information age, where knowledge is a critical resource and information is a primary commodity, it follows that the information poor has also become the resource poor. To develop with the age we need to incorporate the ICT development in Africa female friendly.

This paper discusses the benefits to be derived from making ICT access easily available, particularly in the rural community. Characteristic features of such rural communities in developing countries are also discussed, as well as the obstacles that could militate against ease of deployment to and use of ICT facilities in the communities. Proposals are then made on how to make universal access a reality in the rural areas, particularly to the benefit of the rural women.

BENEFITS OF ICT ACCESS TO RURAL WOMEN

ICT has become the flavour of the day in international development circles. It may be web-enabled, networked or stand-alone. It may generate an information or knowledge product or service. It is the convergence of multimedia (print, audio and video) and made possible by a common digital platform. The 2000 Okinawa Summit of G7/G8 nations describes ICT as “one of the most potent forces in shaping the twenty-first Century.... fast becoming a vital engine of growth for the world economy [Flor, 2001].

Indeed, ICT may be applied to almost every problem in probably all sectors. The lack of ICT may be considered, therefore, both as a cause and effect of poverty. Some of the general benefits to be derived for making ICT available in the rural areas include the following [Adediran, 2005; Ndukwe, 2000; Aitkin, 1999].

- More populated rural farm areas
- Drastic reduction in rural-urban drift.
- Updating of the local business Diaspora's knowledge
- More job opportunities (direct and indirect), and leading to more business opportunities.
- Early evacuation of perishable goods
- Information on prices and markets getting to the community early enough
- Replacement of costly and tiresome travel/journeys to urban areas by placing product orders and making shipping and pick-up arrangements by telephone
- Affording rural families the opportunities of learning about jobs, education opportunities,
- Improvement in community health through telemedicine (remote diagnosis and treatment).
- Easier access to government and wider awareness of government's programmes and activities.
- Enhanced security of lives and properties.
- Reduction of communal clashes and emergencies through pre-knowledge.
- Early warning on approaching environmental disasters e.g. fire, flood, etc.

- Keeping in touch with family members working abroad or in urban areas, thus improving the living conditions of the people.
- Tapping of vast resources by researchers and students.

In all societies, particularly the African society, women have a role that is different from that of men. Women are mothers and homemakers, but also farmers, educators, water-bearers, and entrepreneurs. In poorer countries, the demand of these multiple roles place women, and particularly non-elite women, at a special disadvantage. In orienting and directing policies, therefore, it is important to take into account the specific needs of women to ensure that they can have equitable and affordable access to facilities and service of all kinds. Women's needs for information are also structured according to their gender roles and responsibilities, which in turn influence their use of and response to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Because women's primary needs are rooted in their multi-faceted roles, the argument is often raised that investments in ICTs infrastructure have diverted much needed funding away from the obvious priorities that more directly benefit the lives of women, their families and their communities. However, improvements in ICTs are vital to the effectiveness of the very programs and projects that aim to benefit women's fundamental needs.

Empowering the women folk through ICT remain a strong tool for poverty eradication in Africa. The benefits of ICT are, therefore, inexhaustible. Modern development of ICT had made information as raw material for development, power and wealth of a country and directed for the well-being of humanity. The discovery and application of computer

in many dimensions - from PC to micro, mini, and super-computer - in one hand and on the other telecommunications, networking, satellite, video text, hypermedia, machine translation has firmly established modern ICT as the source of raw material, wealth and power of a nation. What ICT offers is an unprecedented set of tools; an opportunity for a win-win situation that makes the provision of services and the opening of opportunities for the African woman to improve her well being. It is, therefore, an opportunity that needs to be seized and built upon.

OBSTACLES FACED BY WOMEN TO ACCESS AND USE ICT FACILITIES

Today the African woman faces a lot of obstacles to achieving equitable access to ICT and in using these facilities for their best interest.

Gender Issues:

- Social influences affect women's relationship and attitude to information technologies. There is a tendency to direct women into non-technological professions; a stream, which originates at the elementary school level. This has the overall effect of creating a gender gap in technological expertise and familiarity in terms of information technologies.
- The internet cyber cafes are mostly male dominated with obscene pictures of females often used as screen savers.
- In situations where Internet may be introduced to a business, organization or institution, women regularly find themselves at the low end of the hierarchy, and are passively barred from access to computers and the internet.

A common complaint at a workshop on ‘Women and the Internet’ at the NGO Forum in Beijing was that computers and modems tend to go to the (male) Director’s office where they remain used, instead of to the (female) receptionist or secretary who is willing and able to use the computer for communications, management and printing. It is ironic that though more women are involved in careers in the communication sector, few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy.

Economic Issues:

For the African woman the barriers to Internet use are exacerbated by their

1. lower economic and social status,
2. lack of training and literacy,
3. lack of autonomy, and
4. lack of time.

The cost of connectivity is an impediment to the adoption of ICTs by women in developing countries. Because of women’s overall lower economic status, the barrier of cost is more pronounced. The cost of connectivity likewise excludes women to ICT use, as, with limited access to finance and property, they are generally poorer than men are. For example, women now constitute 60% of the world’s one billion poor, and of the 1/3 billion people living in absolute poverty, over 70% are women [Aitkin, 1999]. In Nigeria today the cost of surfing the net is N100 for 60 minutes. The cost of setting up email and Internet facilities is high in relation to the country’s per capita income.

STRATEGIES

The following recommendations/strategies are put forward in order to alleviate poverty among women, particularly in the rural areas of developing countries such as Nigeria:

1. Participation of stakeholders is required at various stages of ICT planning and implementation to ensure that the technology serves their needs and interests. Also to be sustainable, ICT need to be designed with rural people, including women, as active participants in strategizing, planning, implementing and evaluating.
2. As a means of bridging the digital divide between urban and rural areas of the developing countries, private agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should initiate ICT projects for poverty alleviation programmes. For example, ICT projects could be integrated into an existing community project. In the alternative, a development project could be built around the installation of new ICT services and systems.
3. Women should be involved in any decision-making process regarding the development of new technologies, ICT in particular, in order to fully participate in their growth and impact.
4. Governments at all levels (federal, state and local) should fully endorse and support educational applications of ICT, particularly in the rural areas in order to harness the socio-economic potentials of their introduction.

CONCLUSION

Women constitute a large percentage of the productive group in developing countries, particularly in the rural areas where more than 60% of the women are mainly housewives or live on petty farming and trading. Since the development of ICT has been seen as a tool to development and poverty alleviation, it is pertinent to make drastic effort to empower the rural women to use ICT facilities. The cost of connectivity is, however, an impediment to the adoption of ICT in such communities because of socio-economic problems. Therefore, governments at all levels should encourage the introduction of ICT initiatives in schools and in the communities through empowerment of private and nongovernmental organizations. Women should also be made to participate actively in the decision-making process regarding ICT access and usage in the rural communities.

REFERENCES

Adediran Y. A. (2005): “*Universal Access for Communities in Rural and Remote Areas*”. Proceedings of the International Conference in Engineering, 23-26 May 2005.

Aitkin H (1999): “*Rural Women and telecommunication in Developing Countries*”. Proceedings of a Workshop on Women in Agriculture and Modern Technology; TeleCommons Development Group, Canada.

Flor A. G. (2001): “*ICT and Poverty: The Indisputable Link*”. Paper for 3rd Asia Development Forum on Regional Economic Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific; organized by Asian Development Bank, 11-14 June 2001, Bangkok.

Ndukwe E. C. A. (2004): “*Telecommunications in National development*”. Management in Nigeria, NIM, 39/40(2/1), pp 39-44.