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EXPLOITING THE POTENTIALS OF INTERNET IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Empowering women particularly is currently an issue of concern. Exposing women to information and communication technology will improve the lives of women economically, socially, and politically. This paper looks critically at the way by which Information and Communication Technology has been employed in enhancing the powerlessness and voicelessness of women in various parts of the developing countries. It also raises questions about some basic considerations to be made in the planning and execution of empowerment approaches for women.

Introduction

Empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies control over resources and decision. For women that freedom is severely curtailed by their voicelessness and powerlessness in relation particularly to the state, market and society at large. There are important gender inequalities including that within the household. This is embedded in a culture of unequal institutional relations. World Bank (2000) defines empowerment as "the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives".

Empowering women requires the removal of formal and informal institutional barriers that prevent them from taking action to improve their well being individually or collectively and limit their choices. The key formal institutions include the laws, rules and regulations upheld by states, markets, civil society and international agencies. Informal institutions include norms of social solidarity, sharing social exclusion, corruption and others.

Airiohuodion (1996:12) indicated that the term empowerment of women is often misconstrued to mean "women liberation" or "women militancy". Put in fine words – to antagonize men folk. In our context here, empowerment of women is concerned with improving the lot of women for development at all levels. The powerlessness of women is multidimensional and they need a range of assets and capabilities at the individual level (such as health, education and housing) and at the collective level (such as the ability to organize and mobilize), to take collective action to solve their problems. Empowering women is an end in itself and is also critical for development effectiveness. It is a way of facilitating development with the conviction that women are the most

invaluable partners in the task of poverty reduction and economic growth. It involves programmes that help build in people self-confidence and respect for their dignity. Empowerment also reduces the human degradation of powerlessness and releases the energies of people to contribute to their societies. It represents not only key inputs to development effectiveness but also criteria by which the development efforts of the 21st century will be judged. Empowerment is of intrinsic value and has instrumental value because given lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers, even in many formal democracies, poor people, nay women, are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to invest in their individual rights.

Empowerment approaches place the voiceless and marginalized as the most important resources worthy of honour, respect and dignity, capable of exploring their knowledge, skills, values, initiatives, motivation to solve problems, manage resources and rise above poverty level. However, because the societies are not homogenous, but predominantly different in terms of class, ethnicity, caste, religion and gender, there is need to vary the institutional strategies employed in empowerment approaches. Any successful effort to empower people must apply these four basic elements (World Bank 2002:19).

- Access to information
- Inclusion and participation
- Accountability
- Local organization

Empowerment Approaches

Empowerment is relevant at the individual and collective levels and can be economic, social, political, legal and educational, geared towards using their assets in different ways to increase their wellbeing. Areas in which women could be empowered include the following: education, economic and entrepreneurship, protection of legal rights, information, etc. This paper discusses the need to empower women by giving them access to education and information necessary for exploitation of internet facilities.

Dimensions of women empowerment

Education

There is an old saying that "when you educate a woman you educate the entire family and subsequently the entire nation". Women empowerment through education opens up new choices and creates new roles for the women within their families and societies. Female education is recognized as one of the critical path-ways to promote social and economic development. Efforts are being made at all levels by African governments, non-governmental organizations and donors to develop programmes that address the problems associated with improving girls' educational participation (Odaga & Heneveld (1995) thus, ensuring that educational institutions are made

responsive to the needs of the less privileged and the poor. This has become imperative considering Abubakar's (2001) assertion that

> *The Nigerian girl children are less likely to have access*
> *to formal Education, are more likely to be Pushed too early*
> *in their lives into the labour market or even get married off…*
> *it is not strange that parents continue to give greater priority*
> *to the male child and not much values is attached to the need*
> *of the girl child education.*

Subsequently, females have disproportionately low access to all sub-sectors of the educational system. Available data on education gives insight into these desperate positions. Where curricula are not gender sensitive, girl children drop out of school earlier than boys, and they are not sufficiently educated to recognize to enforce their fundamental human rights. Efforts are being made to remove those multiple, interrelated school, socio-economic, socio-cultural, political and institutional factors hindering female education. An educated woman is more disposed to knowing her rights, being independent, productive and will participate in politics and local governance.

In fact, in the society, women struggle to reconcile activities outside the home with their traditional roles of home keeping, child birth and upbringing. They cannot participate fully in economic and public life, have limited access to positions of influence and power, coupled with narrower occupational choices than men. Too often they have little or no voice in decisions made outside the household, even their reproductive health is ignored.

These inequalities must be redressed to fulfill women's rights, roles, improve their status and enable countries to progress towards sustainable development. This is a task that must be tackled holistically by joint efforts of society and government through education, orientation, sensitization of the citizen and importantly backed by legislation and sanctions. The National Policy on Education (1981 and 1998) indicate the government's stand on this issues. Section 3.17 of the 1981 and section 5 (40) of the National Policy on Education specifically stated that "more effort shall be made to encourage women to embrace technical education. Section 6(e) of the National Commission for College of Education Decree (1989) also has similar provisions. This National Policy on Education (1981) emphasized that "special efforts will be made by Ministries of Education and Local Government Authorities in conjunction with Ministries of Community Development to encourage parents to send their daughters to school". Moreover various United Nations Agencies have in various activities promoted education, emancipation and empowerment of women through their programmes in Nigeria. The WHO, UNIDO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, ILO, FAO and UNIFEM have initiated and sustained efforts to harness the potentials of women in Nigeria (Okwudili, 1995:23). Niger and Bauchi states have enacted laws prohibiting the removal of girls from school for marriage (Abubakar, 2001:15). In addition, it is recommended that

government should make education realistically accessible to every citizenry in a manner that would render it inexcusable for girls to be removed from school as a result of poverty or cultural bias.

Urgent attention should be given to this situation because empirical studies have shown that societies that discriminate on the basis of gender tend to experience more poverty, slower economic growth and lower quality of life than societies in which gender inequality is less pronounced.

Moreover, if the level of literacy rises, more women will have access to information that will dissuade them from harmful traditional practices and health risks associated with them, lead to smaller healthier families and better reproductive health. More than any other investments, the education of girls and women is the key to enhancing their status and this is critical to the development process itself. There is a significant relationship between the education of girls and women's ability to escape from poverty, early marriages and its attendant complications, unplanned families, high infants and maternal and mortality rates. It will break this vicious cycle of low status, poverty, redundancy, discrimination and increase their ability to participate at all levels.

Information

Access to information is power and it is a vital tool for the empowerment of women. When women have information on government policies, legal rights, reproductive health, facilities and services they are better equipped to take advantage of opportunities, access services, exercise their rights, negotiate effectively and hold state and non state actors accountable. Without information that is relevant, timely and presented in forms that could be understood, it is impossible for poor people to take effective action. Information dissemination should vary depending on the peculiarities of the society-from the written word to group discussions, poetry, story telling, debates, street theatre, soap operas and other culturally appropriate forms. Other media include radio, television, brochures, flyers, information tables at community events, meetings with women groups and the internet. Information presented in the local languages provide enabling environment for production of informed citizenry.

Moreover, timely access to information at the local level from independent sources is also a necessary requirement as more countries adopt the local government structure of government. Uninformed people cannot hold governments accountable.

Information flow from the governments to the citizens and back is of critical importance for responsible citizenship and for responsive accountable governments. Information about rules and rights to basic government services, about state and private sector performance, about financial

services, markets and prices can only then be better appreciated. Information communication technologies (ICT) play important roles in connecting poor people to these types of information.

For governments to be responsive to their poor people, they must device ways of collecting information about their priorities and preferences. Mechanisms for providing a systematic feedback from them must be institutionalized (World Bank, 2001:19). In fact empowering women is more than providing them with education, health care and protection of their legal rights. It implies removing the barriers that prevent women from realizing or even exploring their full potentials and recognizing their roles as vital and valuable members of society.

The Internet and Women Empowerment

According to Sadler (1995) "the Internet is not a single network of computers but a network of nets – a large network that connects many smaller networks to one another". The combination of all these networks and the ability to exchange information between them is essentially what the internet is all about. Presently, the real spirit of the internet is the willingness to share information with others so that everyone might benefit.

Information and communication technologies often play a pivotal role in broadening access to information which is a *sine qua non* for empowerment to be successful. It is only the informed that can participate, and utilize information so obtained to improve and empower themselves.

Information and communications technology (ICT) creates economic, social and political empowerment opportunities for women in the developing world. The ICT consists of hardware, software, networks and media for collecting, storing, processing, transmitting and presenting of information that can be in the form of voice, data, images or text. Although most poor people and women remain isolated from the new information revolution, cellular phones and telecenters and other innovative solutions are in fact beginning to provide low cost ways for women's access to ICT. The telecenters are shared locations that provide access to ICT for educational, personal, social and economic development. As these technologies open communication and spread information, ICT is helping poor people and the less privileged overcome powerlessness and voicelessness even while structural inequalities exist in the distribution of traditional assets such as education, land and finance.

Quite a lot of innovation has gone into the development of technology to empower humanity, the poor and women. The "Simputer" (Simple Inexpensive Multilingual Computer), developed by scientists at the Indian Institute of Science and a software Company in Bangalore, is a user friendly and inexpensive handheld computer particularly suitable for illiterate people. The device features locally relevant icons, touch sensitive screens and a text-to-speech function in different languages. The Simputer can be adapted to meet a range of functions including micro-banking, data collections, Internet access and agricultural information. It is designed to be shared by a local community of users. It can also be rented out for a charge in telecenters (Cecchini, *in press*). Women have used the Internet for organizing and lobbying at the regional and international

levels for many years beginning most notably in 1995 to prepare for Beijing + 5 – the fifth anniversary of the Beijing Conference – more than 40 women's media network formed **'Women's action'.** This has developed global and regional websites on women's issues and has also initiated workshops to train women from all regions in the construction of websites, facilitated regional and national dialogues, and repackaged information downloaded from the Internet for its constituents (Carr & Huyer, 2001).

Information technology can empower women in a broad area including the provision of basic services, improved local and national governance, and support for entrepreneurship and access to financial services. Through the exploitation of the potentials of the Internet, women have increased access to information on finance, government, education, health and agriculture.

In addition, the 'Smart Card' technology (Mathew, 2001) personalizes the device by smartcard interface. The smartcard looks like a plastic credit card and has a microprocessor or memory chip embedded in it. The chip stores electronic data and programmes that are protected by security measures enabling controlled access by appropriate users. Smart cards provide data portability, security, convenience and transparency of financial records and transactions. It is available at the International Women's Tribune center website at httpw.w.w.iwtc.Org/start.html.

In Kothmale, Sri Lanka a joint project between the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka uses the radio as an interface between rural people and the Internet. A daily one hour live radio programme is broadcast during which an announcer and a panel of resource persons browse the Internet responding to listeners requests in real time. This process enables the project to overcome linguistic barriers to Internet use by non-English speakers. In addition to the live programmes, the Kothmale community radio station maintains a public rural database primarily by packaging public domain information often requested by listeners for on-line use. The radio station also functions as a mini-Internet service provider by offering Internet access points at two public libraries located within the radio's target area and running an Internet café at the radio station (Grace et al, 2001). In Uganda,a CD-ROM produced by the International Women's Tribune Centre in partnership with International Development Research Center (IDRC), Nairobi office, is providing business training and best practice information to women micro-entrepreneurs. *"Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money"* developed both in English and in local languages is available for use at rural telecenters which enables the process of peer learning among groups of women entrepreneurs. By using sound and visuals, the CD-ROM content is accessible to women with low levels of education. In addition to providing useful information, the new tool was designed to give first time computer users a positive experience, which has encouraged them to continue to use computers as well as other technologies (World Bank, 2002:100).

In Mexico, an NGO, *Women to Women,* used e-mail connections with women's groups in California to obtain information on business practices, project structures and ownership of a textile

company that had announced plans to build a plant in the community. As a result, they were better prepared for negotiations with plant officials and management as well as with local government.

In India, the women's rights NGO, *Sakshi*, faced difficulties in lobbying for sexual harassment legislation. With help from *International Women's Networks*, through the internet, *Sakshi* was able to receive advice and technical assistance on legal issues surrounding sexual harassment. As a result of these on-line discussions, the group was successful in convincing the Indian Supreme Court to establish sexual harassment guidelines in work-places and brought the issue within the purview of Human Rights violations.

In Nigeria, women organizations such as the *Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative* (WRAPA), a non-governmental charitable organization formed in 1999 have created e-mail and website Info@wrapa.Org,wrapahq@hyperia.com and www.wrapa.org. It offers legal aid counseling for women, free reconciliation/counseling for families, sensitization, mobilization, advocacy on women's rights and adult literacy and vocational training for women. It also publishes the *WRAPA Newsletter*, a quarterly publication for the enlightenment of women. Its historic achievement in case of legal rights of women, discrimination against women, economic empowerment of women through entrepreneurial development and training is laudable (Bappare, 2001:18). It was among the NGOs that went into Networking relationship with ALF Foundation to mobilize women with 200 participants from Nigeria who were trained in skill acquisition, gender awareness studies, management and leadership training and principles of business management. As a member of Electoral Reform Network (ERN), the WRAPA has made a lot of contributions in the politics of the country and also sensitized its members on various political matters. Through its advocacy programmes in liaison with international organizations such as UNICEF, it campaigned against violence on women and protection of children's rights. Through its prison and Legal Aid Outreach project, it has attended to the situation of women in our prisons and effected the release of 38 women from prison (Imahnobe & James, 2001:4). The celebrated case of Safiya the woman condemned to death by stoning for adultery and the ease of Aisha Maikudi who lost her hands to violence are all cases fought for and pursued by WRAPA in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Exploiting the potentials of ICT to improve the lives of women is not automatic, it requires supportive policies and strategic project design. The primary factor for reaching women is low cost access to information infrastructure. However, inadequate or absence of connectivity and unstable power supply limit the usage and jeopardize the economic viability of most ICT projects. Rigorous and regular monitoring, evaluation and beneficiary impact assessment are additional key considerations. Others include appropriateness of the content, effective intermediaries, and local ownership are necessary for realizing the empowerment potentials of ICT.

To make it more relevant, it must make content available in local languages, convey concepts with visuals and graphics. The information needs of a community should be thoroughly

assessed in a participatory process that includes the active involvement of the target community pursued by organizations and grassroots intermediaries that have appropriate incentives.

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