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Education, Knowledge, Capacity building

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been widely accepted as an integral means for transforming the path of development. As an area of policy research, the Information Society includes several general issues, such as the Digital Divide, and the linkages between ICTs and economic and social development. Global agreement that gender equality is essential for building a *"sustainable, just and developed society"* was re-affirmed in Beijing at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women.

The digital divide, which refers to uneven distribution of benefits in accessing ICTs, between the developed and developing world, the urban and the poor, men and women etc. is the result of various factors including poverty, lack of resources, illiteracy and low levels of education. Africa is an area of greatest concern, as African women have the world's lowest participation rates in science and technology education at all levels.

When considering the factors that contribute to these inequalities, and in reflecting upon the priorities and strategies for a network on "gender, development and information society policies", it is important to understand the ways in which ICTs are allocated between women and men (the gendered allocation of ICTs), the different opportunities that exist for men and women with respect to education, training and skills development, employment and working conditions, content development and access to power structures and decision-making processes.

Background thoughts on the African woman

The southern African region has strong patriarchal cultural values and norms that tend to keep women in subordinate positions. Moreover, women in the region are the major custodians and upholders of culture. It is women who largely socialize their children on gender issues which tend to uphold patriarchal tendencies. Major emphasis is needed to raise women's awareness on gender and equip them with the tools that facilitate their inclusion in the Information Society. Women after all, are central to economic and social development, through their productive, reproductive, and community management responsibilities. Women make a major contribution to the production of food, the provision of energy, water, health care, and family income in developing countries (ECOSOC 2004). In Zimbabwe, like in many other countries of the region, 70% of rural dwellers who are poorer, and have little or no infrastructure and less access to support services. Poverty levels are high in rural and some urban communities of the region and have a severe impact on women and girls, and households headed by women are especially affected (Hafkin et al, 2005). Efforts must be made to reduce poverty levels if the majority of African women are to participate effectively in the Information Society and the democratization of knowledge processes.

Women make up the majority of HIV AIDs infected persons in Sub-Saharan Africa; women and girls are more vulnerable to infection for sociological, physiological, economic and cultural reasons. Moreover women are the major care givers even if they are sick themselves. Extra burden of care is placed on the girl child who in most cases is forced out of school to care for sick relatives in a region with the highest HIV prevalence rates.

Problems encountered

- Infrastructure problems
- Electricity problems black outs in the region; unreliable service
- Connectivity issues; dial up too slow and unreliable need to focus on other technologies wireless, satellite etc
- Poverty, needs to be addressed before women can participate in IS
- Relevant ICTs that fit into women's day to day lives and must not create extra burdens for women
- If ICTs make woman's life easier then she can invest more time
- Time availability HIV AIDS- women busy caring for the sick and standing in food lines.
- Universal access issues; majority of women in the region do not have access to the technology to be used in democratization
- Education – fewer women in technology subjects
- Government control in media related markets; monopoly in fixed telephony; inhibitory regulations in mobile, internet access, Vsat, inhibitory media laws
- Slow independent regulators; slow to act
- Ministerial veto powers on activities of regulator – S Africa

Education and capacity building

The issues of ICT literacy and skills are central to including and encouraging women to fully participate in, benefit from, and contribute to the Information Society. Do women have the education and training required to use ICTs effectively? How do they compare to men in this regard? The following paragraphs show some statistics on selected countries in the region taken from SARDC WIDSAA reports of 2005.

Namibia
Overall school enrolment is higher for girls 75% than boys 72%, however 56,2% of the boys are more likely to proceed from primary to secondary school compared to 42% for girls. Of the students taking science degrees at the University of Namibia University, 37% are women and 61% (men). Adult literacy for men (83,4%) and women (81,9%).

Malawi

Drop out rates at primary education are male (9,5%) and female (14,1%). Secondary school enrollment is 72% boys and 28% girls. University enrollment in science and technical subjects is 28% as at 2003 (an increase from 19% in 1999).

Zambia
Literacy rates for 15-24 year olds male and females dropped from 1990 79% males and 71% females to 2000 levels of 75% males and 66% females. A main reason for the dropped figures is high costs of education. Basic school enrolment in 2002 was 48% girls and 52% boys. The secondary school enrollment was 28% girls and 72% boys. University of Zambia enrollment figures were 5% female in engineering subjects 95% male; 32% female and 68% male in natural sciences.

As the above statistics show, the gender gap tends to increase at higher educational levels with girls dropping out of school due to early marriages, pregnancy or lack of resources to support higher educational level fees. Numbers of girls taking up science and technical subjects is still generally low across the region. According to Hafkin N 2005, barriers to female participation in science and technology education fall roughly into three categories: socio-cultural barriers; qualification barriers; and institutional barriers.

Socio-cultural barriers include; lack of family commitment, attitudes about what is considered appropriate for girls and women can also affect parents' encouragement, or lack thereof, for girls' choices of subject or discipline and discomfort or disinterest in scientific and technological subjects. For example, a narrowly focused technology curriculum, while appealing to boys, can alienate girls, who tend to be more interested in understanding how the technology fits into a larger social, historical, environmental or work context. Social class is also a factor in women's access to higher and technical education.

Qualification barriers arise as women take breaks in their professions to have babies; thus tend to lag behind their male counterparts.
Institutional barriers include lack or fewer female role models in the science and technology arena for girls to learn and emulate from. Women in higher social classes are more likely to have family support for continuing their education, as well as access to the necessary resources.

Digital literacy (non formal ICT training) can be developed and encourage women to use ICTs for communication, or for sharing real life stories and experiences (digital story telling). Efforts must be made to make ICTs relevant to the every day lives of women and girls.

Some thoughts on advocacy strategies for the network

- Bring ICTs on the national agenda, get governments to allocate budgets to the sector

- Drivers of information society are currently male rich company founders and executives – have the money copyrights, control the IS determine the nature of ICTs that are developed whether these take women into consideration. Most boards of ICT companies are males with females occupying largely human resources and marketing. Formulate strategies to increase % of women with technical skills.
- Some countries of the region need to opening the telecom industry to more players
- Increase research grants and scholarships for women in science and IT related fields
- Curriculum in gender – incorporate this in schools. Gender stereotypes must be challenged from an early age
- Governments are mostly active at policy formulation; have little or no choice but accept technologies introduced by big players who profit driven with little social responsibility functions. These use money to have a leverage on the technology employed in specific countries.
- Learn from Linux and open source software how have they managed to penetrate the Microsoft software empire. Learn from their strategies
- In our individual countries, locate female IT specialists and build their capacity gender and development issues and make them visible and active, by providing research grants and scholarships and encourage them to start venture companies. Encourage them to mentor other women and girl child to take up science and technology classes.