

Access and Use of ICTs Among Women in Jamaica

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made the global village a reality with the Internet, cell phones and other digital communication technology disseminating messages instantly through the fast information superhighway. The United Nations (U.N.) Development Program (UNDP, 2001) defines ICTs in terms of innovations in microelectronics, computing (hardware and software), telecommunications and opto-electronics—micro-processors, semiconductors and fibre optics. These technologies enable the processing and storage of enormous amounts and rapid distribution of information through communications networks. As new innovations, ICTs are also described as “the building blocks of the networked world,” (UNDP, 2001, p. 30), with ICTs, particularly the Internet, being used by a variety of organizations as a global networking tool.

Access to, knowledge of and effective use of ICTs is crucial, particularly where access to the technology is equated to social, political, economic and human development. Internet usage, for example, is regarded as the standard indicator of the use of ICTs and also the most democratic of all mass media, mainly because of their low investment (Internet World Stats, 2006). This technology has been used effectively as a tool for delivery of various services and applications, including distance learning, agriculture, telehealth, e-commerce and e-governance. Individuals, organizations and institutions now use the Internet to strategically reach a large audience of markets through e-mails and other advertising strategies, since it is fast and economical, irrespective of size or location of business.

There are many gender issues, however, related to connectivity and access to available ICTs, some of which are visibly documented and most often examined as the digital divide based on gender.

Rakow (1986), in her classic studies on gender and ICTs, however, points out that technology should not be examined based on the differences in the behavior of men or women towards a technology, but instead to look for the ways in which the technology is used to construct us as women and men through the social practices that put it to use. Rakow further argues that more attention needs to be paid to how communication technologies alter, aid, or construct women's opportunities for interacting with each other and with the wider public domain.

This article is based on data gathered through a detailed open-ended questionnaire, with a sample of 121 Jamaican women, ages 21 and older, and explores their access and nature of use of ICTs as well as challenges they face in their attempts to use them effectively. Like other Caribbean islands, Jamaica has embraced ICTs as a tool for national development, adopting the most recent technologies to ensure global connectivity. The study examines how these technologies could be used effectively to address some of the developmental, economical, health and human developmental challenges that face the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). These findings are used to complement existing studies, including national surveys and literature on the gender and ICT issues in the Caribbean.

BACKGROUND

Gender analysis has been applied to virtually every social, economic, political and environmental field of study, including communication technology. The latter is an area of research that has attracted interest among researchers, scholars, practitioners and policy-makers from various disciplines. Over the years, such interests have ranged from the “social shaping of technology” tradition (MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1999) to gender involvement in production and use of

technologies (Henwood & Hart, 2003; Robins, 2002; Shade, 2002, 2003). These studies have questioned the existing gender imbalances in ICT access and use while at the same time recognizing the possibilities that technologies allow for gender equity and empowerment (Cooks & Isgro, 2003).

Gender equality is integral to a human rights-based approach to development (Hafkin & Odame, 2002) and for sustainable development. Since the early 1990s, ICTs have been pushed as a tool for women's empowerment and development, but the effort heightened by the U.N. declaration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Goal 3 focuses on gender equality and empowerment of women as a contributor to "free out fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanization conditions of extreme poverty" by 2015 (UNDP, 2005). This is done through advocating and supporting active participation of women in development while recognizing their triple role in production, reproduction and community work.

Today, a vast majority of women in developing countries use ICTs for information dissemination and retrieval, while others, mostly women's organizations, use the technology to network with other agencies in their area of operation; search for grants and other support from the international community; and promote their activities online. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there has been a felt need for gender and development through access and effective use of ICTs. One of the most successful information networks for women is in Latin America, where a gender and ICT project was initiated following an urgent need for news with a gender perspective. As a result of this need, a feminist activist in Mexico, who felt the lack of communication and the need to link women's organizations nationwide, launched the creation of an electronic communication network with minimal infrastructure and some previous training in e-mail. With a group of women they started the *Mademmujer*, an information and communication network that aimed to strengthen women's participation (Plou, 2003).

When ICTs are accessible, affordable and designed to support specific needs for analysis, storing and exchanging information, they can enable people in all sectors of society to accomplish tasks that otherwise would be too costly or impossible (Commonwealth, 2001). Several other organizations world-

wide recognize that the benefits of public recognition for concerns that have been private and hidden can provide for women in contexts that would otherwise have remained peripheral or invisible.

The Jamaican ICT Situation

ICTs have been adapted in the Caribbean to a great extent within the government ministries, non-government organizations (NGOs) and the private sector, a trend that was exacerbated in the wake of the 2001 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The summit facilitated the creation of an environment through which the full power of ICTs can be brought to bear on the issue of development to the benefit of all. The government of Jamaica, for example, has made the integration of information technology (IT) into the economy a high priority and a strategic imperative, thus facilitating the diffusion process. The Ministry of Commerce spearheaded this effort by having recently added "Technology" to its name to read Ministry of Commerce, Science and Technology (MCST).

Diffusion of ICTs in Jamaica has taken several approaches, but the most visible is the training efforts by government and academic institutions. Two government-supported institutions—the HEART Trust and National Training Agency—offer a range of critical skills necessary to compete in the labor market. Courses offered include MS Office; basic and intermediate IT; call center; worker training, including data entry; networks; and programming, in concert with the Caribbean Institute of Technology. These programs have had about 70% female enrollment since 1999 (Francis-Brown, 2003). At the tertiary level, the University of the West Indies has played a leading role in IT training along with the neighboring University of Technology. The Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC), with 90% of female students enrollment, has a stronger focus in ICT training, offering undergraduate and graduate courses in effective use of the technology while enabling access to the technology for institutional affiliates. The graduate program, Masters in Communication for Social and Behavior Change (CSBC), launched in 2004, for instance, provides laptop computers with wireless Internet connection to participants as part of the package while the University installs hotspots on

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