Gender and ICTs in Zambia

Kutoma Jacqueline Wakunuma
Coventry University, UK

INTRODUCTION

This article looks at gender equality combined with social and economic empowerment within the context of information communication technologies (ICTs). It discusses rhetoric surrounding the promotion of ICTs as tools for social and economic empowerment and subsequently challenges whether such rhetoric does mirror the real situation on the ground, especially as it relates to developing countries like Zambia. The main focus is underprivileged women, especially those in rural areas, and how access, or indeed the lack of it, to ICTs like the Internet and mobile phones does actually affect their daily existence.

BACKGROUND

There has been a great deal said and written about ICTs. A lot has been achieved and made possible through the accessibility, possession, and use of these ICTs. This includes learning, politics, shopping, and all kinds of businesses online, particularly in developed countries (Castells, 1996; Howard & Jones, 2004). In essence, what former United States President Bill Clinton had envisaged back in 1997 in his *State of the Union Address* has come to fruition and been mirrored by most developed countries. He stated,

the new promise of the global economy, the information age, unimagined new work, life-enhancing technology, all these are ours to seize. As the Internet becomes our new town square, a computer in every home, a teacher of all subjects, a connection to all cultures, this will no longer be a dream but a necessity. (Clinton, 1997)

Today, ICTs are indeed no longer a dream but a necessity in most parts of the developed world,

hence their becoming part and parcel of everyday life to most. In this respect, ICTs are having a major impact on people's lives. However, there is ambivalence as to what kind of impact they might be having on developing countries (Shade, 2003), more so when it comes to the underprivileged rural populace who are usually women. For instance, despite acknowledging how new technologies are impacting most aspects of daily life, Mansell and Silverstone (1997) are cautious and advise to tread carefully as far as the technologies are concerned. They assert that "simplistic utopian or dystopian visions of the future provide us neither with an understanding of how these changes come about nor with an understanding of the longer-term implications" (p. 3). It would seem Mansell and Silverstone are concerned that despite the assumptions of social and economic benefits, there may be a lack of in-depth analysis of exactly how such benefits are possible.

Having stated that, one cannot ignore that a developing country like Zambia, situated in sub-Saharan Africa, with all its social and economic challenges, has also recognised the global influence and to an extent is experiencing the impact that these new ICTs are bringing. The country has advanced apace and is experiencing a permeation of ICTs, particularly in the form of mobile phones and the Internet. This permeation has meant a steady growth in their accessibility and usage, especially in urban areas. Since the introduction of these technologies in the 1990s, urban areas in Zambia, for instance, have seen a steady mushrooming of Internet cafes and an increase in mobile-phone usage. However, rural areas do not tell a similar story even though 65% of the country's slightly under 11-million-person population live in rural areas (Republic of Zambia Central Statistics Office, 2004). According to the statistics office, of the country's total population, 51% are women while 49% are men. The country's population also accounts for about 2 million households of which 66% are rural households. Of the 66% rural

households, 68% are female-headed households whose survival depends on rural small-scale farming in addition to all the traditional stereotypical roles they have to attend to. For these rural dwellers, this has meant that the lack of a significant penetration of technology into their areas when pitted against the urban setting has deprived them of ICT accessibility and use. There are several reasons that can be attributed to this lack of penetration, some of which are that Internet and mobile-phone growth has been concentrated along the commercial line of rail where infrastructure exists. One clear impact of this permeation of ICTs, especially where mobile phones are concerned, has meant that mobile-phone ownership and usage has surpassed that of fixed landline ownership (Munsaka & Habeenzu, 2004).

This is in spite of the high price of acquiring and maintaining them because of the poor economic situation of the country. Other reasons why mobile-phone ownership exists more than that of fixed landline phones is because there is no bureaucracy in acquiring a mobile phone as there is when applying for a landline. In several cases, one has to wait for a while before a landline phone can be installed. Additionally, mobile-phone service providers are reaching and serving some parts of the country that were previously unreachable by the country's sole landline provider. For example, there are now approximately 450,000 mobile-phone subscribers compared to around 86,000 fixed landline subscribers. Adding on to that, there are around 13,000 Internet subscribers with an estimated 50,000 users (Communications Authority of Zambia, 2004). Evidently, there is substantial shared Internet use, particularly in public places like Internet cafes, universities, and even companies.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

Despite the continued growth, looking at the figures of subscribers and consequent users given above, the number is relatively small when compared to the country's population of slightly fewer than 11 million people. This is also bearing in mind that most of these subscribers and users are found in the urban areas of Zambia and are mostly men. Due to a lack of gender-disaggregated data, it is difficult to state how many women compared to men are Internet or mobile-

phone subscribers or indeed users, but it is generally agreed that the greater number is biased toward men. Having carried out fieldwork in Zambia from November 2004 to March 2005, the author found that both men and women felt that men had more and easier access. The respondents also disclosed that more men than women used mobile phones and the Internet. To get this information, the author conducted one-to-one interviews with, among others, policy makers, nongovernmental organisations, and underprivileged men and women, especially those in the rural areas. There were also 390 questionnaires administered to 209 men and 181 women, and focus-group discussions and observations.

The Zambian society is very much a patriarchal, hegemonic, and hierarchical society where men have more advantages than women and where inequality between both genders seems to be the norm. It therefore came as no surprise that respondents confirmed that men were more advantaged when it came to ICT accessibility and use. Some of the reasons given were that men were more financially stable, were more educated, had better access to employment, and generally had more time to access and use the technologies while women, aside from their lower educational attainments, had additional household and family chores to do. Supporting these findings, official government statistics confirm that in Zambia there are more men than women receiving higher education. Also, there are more women who are unemployed than there are men (Republic of Zambia Central Statistics Office, 2004). The government in effect accepts that there is a problem of inequality when it comes to accessing and using ICTs. In its 2004 Strategic Plan of Action for the National Gender Policy, the Zambian government indicates that women are unfairly and unequally represented in the media, that women have no say in communication, and that girls and women lag behind in engaging with science and technology subjects (Republic of Zambia Gender in Development Division, 2004). In this regard, the gender imbalance of technology is not surprising, as several studies have shown (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Wajcman, 1991). These studies indicate the gendered aspects of technology and also show that technology is not neutral. Faulkner and Arnold (1985) summed this aspect when they pointed out that "ultimately, the power of modern technology emanates from the

4 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/gender-icts-zamibia/12770

Related Content

A Concluding Pledge: With Technology and Justice for All
Mary Kirk (2009). *Gender and Information Technology: Moving Beyond Access to Co-Create Global Partnership (pp. 260-302).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/concluding-pledge-technology-justice-all/18813

Women and Recruitment to the IT Profession in the UK
Ruth Woodfield (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 1238-1244).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/women-recruitment-profession/12900

Gender and Anonymity in Virtual Teams: An Exploratory Study
Elizabeth Koh, Na Liuand John Lim (2012). *Gender and Social Computing: Interactions, Differences and Relationships (pp. 1-16).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-anonymity-virtual-teams/55340

Negotiating a Hegemonic Discourse of Computing
Hilde Corneliussen (2006). *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology (pp. 920-925).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/negotiating-hegemonic-discourse-computing/12850

Stereotype, Attitudes, and Identity: Gendered Expectations and Behaviors
(2013). *Gendered Occupational Differences in Science, Engineering, and Technology Careers (pp. 112-135).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/stereotype-attitudes-identity/69603