Strategies of ICT Use for Women's Economic Empowerment[1]

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) provide a great development opportunity by contributing to information dissemination, providing an array of communication capabilities, and increasing access to technology and knowledge, among others. Access to and the cost of ICT continue to be a major development obstacle, particularly in the developing world. Despite the growth in mobile telephony, peri-urban[2] and rural areas—home to a great majority of women and poor populations—continue to lack infrastructure and ICT services in general. For ICT to become meaningful development tools, ICT policy and programs must address the needs of women and the poor in general. This article discusses the main challenges and obstacles faced by women, suggests practical strategies to address those challenges and provides recommendations on how to proceed to improve the conditions leading to women's economic empowerment.

CHALLENGES OF ICT USE FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Just as in many other areas of development (e.g., agriculture, health, and education), women face enormous challenges to use ICT for their own economic empowerment. Using and benefiting from ICT requires learning, training, affordable access to the technology, information relevant to the user and a great amount of support (to create enabling environments). The challenges are many and they fall in a few categories. The following is a discussion of some of these challenges and how they hinder ICT use for women's economic empowerment.

Affordable Access and Availability of Infrastructure

Access to affordable services and availability of infrastructure is, without a doubt, a major requirement if ICT are to be used for women's economic empowerment. While this discussion focuses on access to telecommunications and ICT infrastructure, it is important to note that other infrastructure and service-related factors may influence the use of ICT, such as availability of electricity, transportation means and security, among others.

Access to Telecommunications Infrastructure

Telecommunications infrastructure is limited in most developing countries and costs are exceedingly high. Whatever little infrastructure is available is concentrated in the larger urban areas, and services provided are only affordable to a few. Bandwidth costs as well as transmission costs incurred by Internet Service Providers (ISP) are high and passed on to users. In rural areas, where women make up the majority of the population, infrastructure is almost non-existent, and services are generally too expensive to poor populations.

The rapid expansion of wireless technologies as well as decreasing costs provide great opportunities in rural areas and areas with little or no infrastructure. For example, in the Dominican Republic, fixed wireless public telephones (using satellite technology) were installed in rural areas without service. These telephones, operated using phone cards, not only provided the community with greatly needed telephone service, but also provided rural women with an additional source of income, as many sell the phone cards that they buy in bulk from the telephone company.

Figure 1.

> **Grameen Phones, Bangladesh**
> Evidence shows that when provided with access and business opportunity, women have become owners and frequent users of cellular telephone services. The Grameen Phones program in Bangladesh, which sets Village Phone Operators to resell wireless telephone services, is an example of an initiative that has contributed greatly to women's economic empowerment and has increased cellular telephone use by women tremendously. In fact, "where women are operators, 82% of the users were women; with men operators, women comprised only 6.3% of Grameen phone users." (Hafkin & Taggard, 2001).

Access to ICT

Access to ICT is highly dependent on telecommunications infrastructure, particularly if one is focusing on telephone service, faxes, e-mail and the Internet. However, the use of ICT is not only based on these services. Radio, for example, provides a great source of information dissemination in many areas of the world, and so does television. Where available, computers may be used as a source of information and a tool for training without the use of telecommunications. The use of CD-ROMs, such as in the case of the IDRC-IWTC CD-ROM for illiterate women in Uganda, *Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money* (both in English and Luganda), illustrate that ICT can be used in creative ways and in ways that are more effective and affordable than other solutions (such as browsing or obtaining the information via the Internet) (Mijunbi, 2002).

Radio and television, as the widest form of communication, provide one-way solutions for information dissemination. Women's radio clubs are increasing in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and provide a means to share information on development issues. Recent projects show that radio can be used well beyond a listening-only device, and effectively become a successful two-way communication tool.

In Zimbabwe, some 52 women's radio listening clubs are active in the Development Through Radio (DTR) project, aiming at giving rural women access to radio through participation in production of programmes based on their development needs and priorities. Information exchange is a significant part of the programmes.

Women pose questions and an information intermediary puts the question to a concerned official. The response becomes part of the weekly broadcast. (Hafkin & Odame, 2002, p. 28)

Access to ICT is crucial if they are to be used as a means for women's economic empowerment, and no community should be left short-changed simply because of a few alternatives. The challenge here is that we need to work towards universal access to ICT while actively devising creative solutions to provide alternative access to information to those who need it the most and can immediately benefit from the exchange of information, increased knowledge and diminished isolation.

Cost of Access and Lack of Affordable Solutions

Even when infrastructure is available, affordable access is a concern in most developing countries. Pricing regulation within a privatized and competitive environment (as is the case for most telecommunications operators) has not proven successful in ensuring universal and affordable access. Universal-access policies aim at developing solutions that provide community access at affordable prices, including expansion of public telephones and ICT access points (e.g., in post offices, community centers).

Lack of Gender Awareness in Telecommunications and ICT Policy

Telecommunications and ICT policy lack a gender focus in most countries of the world. With a few exceptions (e.g., South Africa, Korea), there is no emphasis on gender-specific projects or any attempt at ensuring that policies reflect gender equality goals. There are no positive discrimination efforts in place to improve women's access to ICT, increase women's participation in decision-making or project-management positions. Policies that increase women's participation in decision-making and policy-making positions or that, for example, ensure a proportion of funds to be allocated to women's ventures, women's organizations or organizations with a strong gender focus, can contribute to in-

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