Chapter 60

Role of ICT in Socio-Economic Development in Kenya:
Demystifying Gender Empowerment Through Mobile Telephony

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ABSTRACT

The growth of Information Communication Technology (ICT) has empowered communities in diverse ways. Both males and females use ICTs to transact businesses and carry on relationships. Access and use of mobile phones have changed people's lives. This chapter discusses the magical revolution of mobile telephony in Africa and specifically in Kenya. Innovations such as MPESA have transformed people's lives in Kenya and in other emerging economies. Both males and females have used the innovations to bring about development that has enriched their lives. Secondly, the role of gender socialization is discussed in relation to how the ICTs have eliminated the long-held belief that females are not participants in societal development. Thirdly, the role of the media in development is examined because they socialize people into the gender roles. Through mobile telephones, females perform diverse roles. Positive portrayal of men and women in development acknowledges that men and women must be active members of the process.

INTRODUCTION

The development of ICTS especially the mobile telephony in Africa- has been faster than any other innovation that came before. The access and use of mobile phones in Africa and specifically in Kenya have shown that gender empowerment is possible. A study conducted in Machakos, Kenya, by Wandibba, Nagendo and Mulemi (2014) showed that both men and women have equal access and use of mobile phones and that more women than men used MPESA. Also, it has been observed that the mobile phones have enabled participants with low level of education to transact businesses that they would not have done before. They have opened and ran mobile telephony related businesses; at the same time, some of them have used the mobile telephony innovations to empower others through small and medium enterprises.

As business owners and employers, they have proved that given the right environment, males and females equally contribute towards socio economic development of their countries.

The media in Kenya have consistently been voted as the most trusted institutions therefore the massages that are broadcast or written in print media carry a lot of weight in matters of credibility. When the media positively set the agenda for the nation and positively communicate development messages, the listeners or views take the messages seriously. The media portray men and women differently and this has lead many gender scholars to argue that women's contribution is towards social economic development in African countries is ignored (Macharia, 2016a).

In this chapter, the writer discusses the access and use of ICTs-the mobile phones- and the role that mobile money services such as MPESA have played in gender empowerment in Africa and specifically in Kenya. Studies, such as the one conducted by Wandibba, et al (2014) on Machakos in the region, demonstrate that when women access and use mobile money, their communities have been empowered to a higher level. This is evident in the field of business, agriculture, education, health and others. Projects that rely on mobile telephony are identified and examined in details to see how they have contributed to gender empowerment in Africa. There are more female-headed households who are economically empowered in East Africa than before. Technology as a double-edged sword has brought about advantages that have positioned ICT access and use in some African countries with those in the developed world. However, the challenges that ICTs and specifically the mobile telephony has introduced in the social and economic contexts are discussed. Recommendations are made on how to mitigate the challenges brought by access and use of ICT in Kenya.

Access and Use of ICTS in Africa

The African ICT landscape shows that Information and Communication Technologies have enhanced communication. United Nations (2014) and World Bank Group Strategy (2012-14) demonstrate that they are available in most African countries and the only difference is the level at which rural and urban populations access them. The way communicators used to disseminate information has changed in recent times, though the traditional channels of mass communication, the radio, film, television, newspapers and magazines are still in use. However, new communication technologies such as: computers, mobile phones, internet, radio, television, websites, messaging services, satellite systems have changed the communication field.

According to African Partnership Forum (2008), ICTs contribute to economic development of African countries in the following ways:

- Increasing productivity across all sectors;
- facilitating market expansion beyond borders to harvest economies of scale;
- lowering costs of and facilitating access to services, notably in administration, education, health and banking;
- providing access to research products and services;
- contributing to better governance.

Information Communication Technologies can enhance networking, participation and advocacy within a society and can also improve interaction between governments and the citizens (UNESCO, 2003). That is, men and women need to have access to ICTs but we find that in Africa and in Kenya, women's

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