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Career Choices in Information and Communication Technology among South Western Nigerian Women

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ABSTRACT

This study is designed to discover the key factors for the under-representation and lack of career progression or otherwise of women in the ICT field, specifically in South Western Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered to women (i.e., students, lecturers and other staff) studying or working in selected higher institutions. The results show that 90% of the women studied are self-motivated in their choice of the ICT career with very little external incentivizing or encouragement supporting their choice, besides the lure of high compensation and prestige associated with skilled ICT work. The slight influence on the career choice of women to pursue ICT derives from everyday use of computers and career information provided by role models and mentors, which are atypical, while, those women who did not choose a career in ICT did so because of their perception of the overabundance of required programming skills. Other barriers include environmental working conditions, infrastructure and electricity in the work area needed to support ICT related work. Although, many of the career women believe that they are competitive with their male counterparts in ICT; the fact remains in South Western Nigeria that only a few women are senior associates at organizations in the ICT field. Recommendations are offered to decrease this disparity and address enabling conditions for change.

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INTRODUCTION

A robust globalized information and communication technology (ICT) sector is emerging in the 21st century and offers promising opportunities to elevate the social status of women in developing nations working in this sector. ICT provides a great growth opportunity and a suite of indispensable tools used by all to deal with the limitations of time, cost, knowledge dissemination and distance problems among others. Women serve as an untapped resource in most under-industrialized nations to exploit this growth opportunity. This is especially the case in Africa and particularly in South Western Nigeria, the focal area of this study. According to Castaño and Webster (2011), the low and declining proportion of women in the ICT career field has been widely noticed and much lamented (Cohoon & Aspray, 2006; OECD 2007; Kirkup et al., 2010; Misa, 2010). Underrepresentation of women in ICT in both developed and developing countries could have a negative effect on the society increasing gender disparities and robbing the ICT community of diverse thought and innovation potential that women may offer to the field.

The threat from this state of affairs in ICT can jeopardize the current sustainable roles of the industrialized countries in the ICT sector and the economic promise for under-industrialized nations (Barnard, 2009; Gras-Velazquez et al., 2009). For example in the US where women constitute half of the workforce, women only comprise about half of the ICT field with far less earning potential than men and this is projected to continue decreasing through 2018 because of the lack of women selecting ICT degree programs (NCWIT Workforce Alliance, 2013; US Department of Labor Statistics, 2010; Trauth, 2008; Sanders, 2005). Similar statistics have been reported in the European Union with a shortage of about 300,000 qualified engineers in ICT and only one in five computer scientists are women (Barnard, 2009; Gras-Velazquez et al., 2009). Studies of some European countries also revealed that the industry and policy initiatives to attract more women into the profession have not been successful enough (Trauth & Quesenberry, 2006). This problem continues to proliferate in the international community as well with greater disparities noted in developing countries in South America, India, Asia, and particularly Africa; thus, warranting more explication and resolve (Chang, 2013a, b). Thus, there is a global need for more “cyberellas” – women equipped with the e-Skills, and more attention is needed to tap into this vast pool of talent (Gras-Velazquez et al., 2009). Therefore, the purpose of the study is to understand the contributing factors to the dearth of women in the ICT field and explore opportunities for promoting beneficial change in a generalizable manner based on insights learned from the state of affairs in South Western Nigeria.

Evidence of social exclusion of women in the ICT sector in developing countries and Africa is a typical representation of this international phenomenon (Trauth & Quesenberry, 2006). For instance, a study shows that only 1 in every 250-400 people in Africa had access to the Internet, in contrast to the world average of 1 in every 15 people (Primo, 2003). The African woman’s situation is particularly of concern, as African women have the lowest enrolment rates in the world in science and technology education at all levels (Derbyshire, 2003; Volman and van Eck, 2001). Factors impeding African women can be generalized to the international community because the social exclusion phenomenon is less region based and more centred on social inequities, particularly the gender digital divide (Githinji, 2011; Hilbert, 2011). In Nigeria, there is evidence of growing use and adoption of ICT (Olatokun, 2007), but there is gender disparity in terms of professional positions (Obayelu & Ogunlade, 2006). Findings from UNIFEM (2000) have revealed that in the formal sector in Nigeria, women constitute 30 percent of professional posts, 17 percent of administrative/managerial positions, and 30 percent of clerical positions;

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