Chapter 11
Women and IT in Lilongwe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter was to investigate and describe why women in Malawi and Africa at large are underrepresented in IT despite the widespread availability of IT through cell phones, institutions, and general computer hardware and software. Gender discriminates women in education and world of work. The gender issue is all rooted, promoted, and strengthened in cultural beliefs. Literature reveals that for their part, African women have internalized the so-called inferiority position through their culture and society. Critiques of these beliefs commonly agree that there is need for mental rewiring on gender equity roles. Women need to believe in themselves and shun the positional gender differences that are causing severe imbalances in education and workplaces across Africa. The findings led to the overarching conclusion that African culture is not really changing with the times and it pushes women on the edge. One recommendation will be arrived at; there is need to include to a larger scale gender equity and justice system in education and workplaces across Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is like one family on the issue of gender. Women are deemed inferior and men are labeled superior in all arenas including education, world of work and even in health.. Both parties have internalized their positions as 'natural'. The mentality is rooted in the African culture and socialization. Some women and men are now accepting a 'wake up call' but at a very slow rate. Women in Lilongwe and Africa in general are lagging behind in IT and society in general. This paper focuses on gender as in 'women' since they are the most disadvantaged in IT. However, gender challenges can be overcome.

BACKGROUND

When the word gender is mentioned it seems to refer to women only simply because women are the most affected between the two. According to Unesco 2004 gender differences are 'manmade differences' and can change and vary from region to region. Both men and women are born with a 'clean slate' on the issues of gender; it is society which construct them. Sex is a 'biological difference' (Mbiti 1997).

The physical differences are interpreted differently and at most to the disadvantage of the other. One's sex at birth will either give power or poverty. According to the African culture, contrary to the western culture, the fact that one is born a boy means intelligence, IT skills, fame, riches and high positions. On the contrary, being born a girl means inferiority, submission, poverty, lack of IT skills and second class position. There is need for a powerful mental rewiring for women to be emancipated from this hard shell.

Conversely women on their part have internalized the inferiority complex to the extent of enduring abuses, protecting the abusers and dying under the hands of their abusers. According to Haralambos et al (2004) socialization is ' the process of learning roles, norms and values appropriate to the people of that particular society'. The process enhances the inferior gender roles of women and the superior gender roles of men. If girls display the so called 'masculine behavior' they are discouraged. Social negative sanctions can be applied to them, sometimes as names for example 'sissy' for boys and 'tomboys' for girls (Haralambos et al 2004). This mentality discourages women to embark on acquiring IT skills.

In Africa and Asia, it seems being born a girl is a 'curse'. Female sex is traditionally perceived as inferior to male sex. In Chinese families with a feudal tradition, girls are ranked as low as pigs and dogs (China's Ministry of culture 1984, Unesco2004). Since socialization is a strong process most girls end up lacking confidence in IT, fight for their rights or to better themselves.

In families, men become tough with their wives in marriage as tradition considers tenderness 'un-masculine' (Soetan 2001). Women are viewed as mothers and wives and not technical experts. Women are considered 'stay at homes' (Fields 2004) although sometimes educated. If men try to help their wives they are ridiculed by friends, relatives or even their parents. This African perspective has brought detrimental effects to women in Lilongwe in all areas including IT, education in general, world of work, politics and in families. All this is reflected in the Malawian society where legal marriage age of girls was only thirteen years until recently in 2015 when a bill was passed to push the legal age of majority to 18 years. The responsible authorities are now trying to review the marriage age of girls from thirteen years to eighteen years. They take Gandhi's view that 'men can never be a woman's equal in the spirit of selfless service with which nature has endowed her"(www.google). Globally, women should be viewed as hard workers who deserve to be rewarded and women should view themselves as such too. According to Schaefer (2010) "there are no innate or biologically determined gender roles for men and women," society constructs them hence it is the same society that can correct the anomalies to achieve gender balance in IT. Women need support to showcase their IT abilities (Sadc protocol 2013). Unless there is mental rewiring on both sexes, women will remain IT illiterate, poor, abused and in low and non profitable positions both in Lilongwe and Africa in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of research has been carried out on the issue of gender and quite a number of publications have been produced (Unesco 2004, Beijing conference report 1995, Malawi Sadc Protocol 2013, Schaefer 2010, Torrington et al 2010). However, there seems to be a deficit of literature in terms of women and computer skills in Lilongwe. Women are still discriminated on the basis of sex and not abilities. Discrimination should be based on a 'fair criteria' and a 'level playing field' (Torrington et al 2010). Men and women should compete on equal terms in IT.

Women dominate low 'paying jobs' (Carroll et al 2009). They need to step up and go up the ladder. One way is by engaging in IT skills from infancy just like men. However this is restricted by socialization

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