Chapter 23
Impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the Advancement and Empowerment of African Women

Marian Pelletier
Saint Mary's University, Canada

ABSTRACT

During the past decade, global communications have changed dramatically, as a result of the increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT's). ICT's are becoming increasingly necessary if countries are to compete on a global scale. It has also been widely acknowledged that ICT's have the potential to play an immediate role in the quest for sustainable and equitable development in Third World countries. ICT's allow people to collect, store, process and access information and/or communicate with each other. How people in developing countries use these technologies to solve problems, organize their activities and realize their own objectives will determine the impact that these technologies will have in the course of their development. ICT's are realities and concepts that have become unavoidable for anyone involved in issues of development and sustainability. However, access for women and especially rural women to ICT's cannot be assumed to naturally occur. According to various authors and organizations most of the positive effect of the "information revolution" has bypassed women. It has not been easy to determine whether women have benefited from the information revolution. There is also the consensus that very little research has been done on women's information needs and access to appropriate information in developing countries. It is therefore necessary to examine the impact that ICT's are having on women and whether or not they are serving women's needs and preferences. It is also necessary to examine ways that policies can be put in place in order to assure that women have access to the technology, which is necessary to fulfill their information needs. This chapter, using case-studies from Africa, will examine the above issues.

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INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, global communications have changed dramatically, as a result of the increased use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).[1] ICTs are becoming necessary if countries are to compete on a global scale. It has also been widely acknowledged that ICTs have the potential to play an immediate role in the quest for sustainable and equitable development in Third World countries. ICTs allow people to collect, store, process and access information and/or communicate with each other. How people in developing countries use these technologies to solve problems, organize their activities and realize their own objectives will determine the impact that these technologies will have in the course of their development.

In Africa, access to information, communication and technology is often limited, especially for people living in rural areas. One reason for this is the majority of ICT's are located in urban areas and those who do have access are often the educated working class. But access among the poor and rural classes is critical for development. The object of ICT's is to create conditions in which the poor can generate, understand, have access to and creatively use technologies to satisfy their basic needs. Basic needs can be defined as "the minimal requirements for sustaining life: adequate nutrition, health services, water and sanitary facilities. Also implied is access to elementary education and information to enable individuals and communities to be productive and make rational use of the basics good and services available" (IDRC, 1997:35). The complete picture of poverty alleviation is a complex one and widely understood as a serious challenge. ICTs may have a role to play in the process of poverty reduction and can possibly offer new opportunities for impoverished African to improve their daily lives. By providing improved access, enhanced sharing and timely delivery of information, ICTs may be able to empower people to take action.

The importance of ICTs to transmit and disseminate information for development in Africa is now being well recognised. However, the impact of ICTs in African society and elsewhere in the third world has not been uniformly beneficial. "The information highway is still predominately male-oriented" (Huyer, 1997:5). In assessing and promoting women's access to and use of ICTs in Africa, it is important to understand the gendered nature of the social and economic systems which frame opportunities for women. Women's needs for information are structured according to their gendered roles and responsibilities, which in turn may influenced their use of responses to ICTs, (Huyer, 1997).

The purpose of this chapter is to address the following questions: *What Impact do Computers and the Internet have as an Instrument for the Advancement and Empowerment of African Women? How do Women use these technologies to Effect Change within their Lives?* To answer these questions the chapter will do the following: examine why ICTs are important; provide an overview of the situation for impoverished women in Africa; review the critical debates on ICTs and empowerment; examine some of the barriers that African women face in regard to ICT usage; look at ways to improve women's access to ICTs; provide some examples of how women are being empowered though the use of ICTs in Africa; examine the types of policies that need to be put in place in order for women to have better access to ICTs; and provide an analysis and discussion of the research;

BACKGROUND

In this age of global ideas, market, knowledge and cultures, a county's ability to create and obtain wealth, in whatever form, depends on a population's capacity to learn (Mansell & Wehn 1998). Knowledge is power, and ICTs can offer women a unique opportunity to reshape the outdated