

Chapter 5.10

Gender and ICT Policy for Development and Empowerment: A Critique of a National ICT Policy

Kutoma Jacqueline Wakunuma-Zojer
De Montfort University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter pays attention to the role that ICT policy and gender play in the drive for development and empowerment. Particular focus is on Zambia and its National ICT Policy. The chapter analyses how notions of 'gender', development and empowerment are routinely incorporated into the ICT policy rhetoric and the strategies put in place. It assesses whether the goals of the National ICT Policy encourage social and economic development as well as empowerment for women. The chapter makes the case that as much as ICT policies are being developed and adopted in order to be incorporated into the development agendas of countries like Zambia, mere adoption without adequately addressing gender concerns within the policies themselves may not necessarily achieve the desired development and empowerment. The analysis subsequently brings to the fore some short comings within the policy that have not been addressed with the adequacy they deserve and which as a result, can potentially impact negatively on women's overall development and subsequent empowerment. The chapter particularly focuses on Government claims which suggest that women are important actors in ICT use for sustainable development without whom the successful diffusion and use of ICTs in the country cannot be a reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there has been a wealth of discussions and studies focused specifically on the potential of ICTs to enhance the development agenda. These have included the fact that the ICT ‘revolution’ has promised a variety of benefits to society, including a material difference to the lives of women and men living and working in the developing world. For instance, among some of the potential benefits that WSIS (2003) lists include achievement of universal education and health care. Other scholars have highlighted benefits such as increased self-sufficiency in small scale business (Sane & Traore, 2009; Munyua, 2009). However, there has been a parallel discussion which questions the extent to which the rhetoric of empowerment, in particular, for women in traditional societies is being transformed into practice on the ground (Gajjala, 2003; Gajjala & Manidipudi, 1999). With this, reference is made to Hanson and Narula’s (1990) question where they set out to ask the following:

These technologies may help fight illiteracy, disease, poverty, and other development problems, but they have also created different priorities and issues for these nations [Third World developing countries]. A major issue for developing countries concerns what the communication revolution will do to, and for them. Will they foster communication abundance, strengthen existing technologies, or enhance neo-colonial (dependency) forces? What are their technology options for appropriate technologies, training, and building an integrated communication infrastructure? (p. 1).

One step taken to answer the questions in the above quote has been the adoption of a national ICT policy which Zambia unveiled in 2007 as a road map to ICT implementation strategies. The policy also addresses women and development aspects including their empowerment. But to what extent is women’s development and empowerment a reality

when the policy is critically looked at? To help answer this question, this chapter aims to analyse the ways in which notions of ‘gender’ are routinely incorporated into the policy rhetoric relating to ICTs. The chapter does this by considering the official government ICT development agenda in Zambia and the ways in which it addresses issues of gender and empowerment through analysing the national ICT policy. Furthermore, the paper’s objective is to gain an understanding of the views of policy formulators towards issues of gender, development and empowerment.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The contents of this paper are part of a research study that was conducted between 2003 and 2007 in Zambia. The research approach adopted for the study was a mixed method approach which includes face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews¹ with some policy formulators involved in the construction of the ICT policy and ICT service providers. In addition, the major fabric that informs this particular piece of writing is documentary analysis of the Zambia National ICT Policy and other related policy documents such as the Strategic Plan of Action which emanated as a result of the Zambian Gender Policy of 2000. The Strategic Plan of Action is especially used in this paper because it identifies three areas of ICT in which women lack. The interviews with the ICT policy formulators and ICT service providers mainly focus on their perspectives and views on the perceived social and economic benefits of ICTs to Zambia and Zambians. The paper’s research approach assesses policy-makers’ rhetoric on gender equality and ICTs and in particular puts emphasis on the ways in which ICTs have been considered with particular reference to the Zambian ICT Policy. While paying special attention to the perceived potential of ICTs to empower women, the paper also pays particular attention to the conditions that inhibit these potentials

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