

Chapter 42

Gender Digital Divide and National ICT Policies in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The chapter provides an examination of the concept of the digital divide in Africa and its effect on the women in Africa, how ICTs can be used as tools for gender equality and empowerment and the barriers women face in regards to access to ICT infrastructure. These barriers includes: lack of access to physical infrastructure, illiteracy, social and cultural limitations, lack of finance, decision making ability, segregation in employment issues, etc. Also examined is the historical development of ICT policies in Africa, alongside a gender analysis of African ICT policies and policy oriented strategies for making ICT beneficial to women in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that information and communications technologies (ICTs) are important enablers of growth through wealth creation, increased productivity and the creation of opportunities. In the information society where progress and power depends on information and knowledge, the role of ICT becomes even more critical, they contribute immensely by providing efficiency gains and increased productivity. It is

the key to advancements in social, political and the economical well being of any society, has become a potent force in transforming lives globally and the chance for Countries or regions to develop without it is becoming ever slim. Gyamfi (2005) contends that in this info sphere, ICT is the key resource for effective functioning and participation in society.

Statistics show that Africa is the least advanced of all the regions of the world in information technology and this leaves us at the far end of the digital divide. With 14.1% of the world's population, women and children constitute a

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greater percentage with most of them leaving in rural communities (Olatokun, 2008). As stated by Nicol (2004), women constitute fifty percent of the world's population, perform sixty percent of the work done on earth, earn one tenth of the income and own only one out of every hundred asset. Indeed information technology (IT) can be used as an important tool in meeting the basic needs of women and provide them with access to resources which can lead them out of poverty (Olatokun, 2008).

The ICT sector is traditionally perceived as male dominated and very little statistics are available on the involvement of women in this sector. Presently, the interest is growing in the potential that ICTs offer women, and bringing gender perspectives into ICT policies will help in securing the benefits of the information age for girls and women. Women in organized civil society have expressed that it is essential that the gender digital divide be addressed, so as to ensure that women have access to the benefits of ICTs and to make it a central tool in women's empowerment as well as the promotion of gender equality (Munyaua, 2002). It is against this background that this chapter is written with the intention of x-raying the concept of the digital divide and its effect on women in Africa, how ICTs can be used as tools for gender equality and empowerment and the obstacles women face in using ICT infrastructure. The historical development of ICT policies in Africa was also examined, as well as a gender analysis of ICT policies in Africa and policy oriented strategies were suggested on how to make ICTs beneficial women in Africa.

BACKGROUND

Information and communication technologies consist of technologies and tools that people use to share, distribute, gather information and communicate with one another using computers and interconnected computer networks (Wood,

2005). The term ICTs also refers to technological innovations and convergence in information and communication, which has turned our world into information and knowledge societies (Wikipedia, 2006).

"Gender refers to the social difference and relationship between men and women which are learned. These vary widely among societies and cultures and usually changes over time. However, it should be noted that the term "gender" does not replace the term "sex". Sex according to the International Labour Office (ILO, 2000), refers exclusively to biological differences between men and women, while gender is used to analyze the roles, responsibilities, opportunities, constraints, and needs of women and men in all areas and in any given social context. Sex is also seen as a biological characteristic determined at conception. It is fixed for a person's life and the same biological differences between men and women exist in all countries around the world. It does not change over time, while gender refers to differences between men and women that are not fixed but determined by social and cultural values (Anker, 1998). This means that gender differences between men and women vary across countries, regions, societies and communities. Unlike sex, gender roles are manmade and can be changed by education, government policy, media images and opinion leaders. Also, gender roles could change in response to economic conditions, natural or political circumstances, national or international based forces (ILO, 2000).

The digital divide mostly focuses on the differentials in access to computers and the Internet among people in a society. Factors that are usually associated with access to the information society include socioeconomic status, gender, age, educational backgrounds, and geographic location. People who are considered disadvantaged in their access to or knowledge of technology include people with low incomes, people who have few educational qualifications or have low literacy levels, the unemployed, elderly people, people

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