Gender and National IT Policy in Nigeria

Wole Michael Olatokun
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) has become a potent force in transforming social, economic and political life globally (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001). Without its incorporation into the information age, there is little chance for countries or regions to develop. More and more concern is being shown about the impact of those left on the other side of the digital divide—the division between the information "haves" and "have nots." Most women within developing countries are in the deepest part of the divide, further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share. If access to and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women in developing countries understand the significance of these technologies and use them. If not, they will become further marginalized from the mainstream of their countries and of the world. It is essential that gender issues be considered early in the process of the introduction of IT in developing countries so that gender concerns can be incorporated from the beginning and not as a corrective afterwards (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001). This article first gives a background to the Nigerian IT policy, followed by a gender analysis of the policy. It points out the gender issues to be incorporated in the policy and the strategies of ensuring women's ability to take advantage of IT. It finally makes recommendations on the way forward for incorporating gender issues in the Nigerian IT policy document.

BACKGROUND

The Nigerian government, in February 2001, formulated a national policy for IT to respond to the emerging global reality. The Federal Executive Council approved the national IT policy in March 2001, and implementation started in April with the establishment of the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), charged with the implementation responsibility. The policy recognized the private sector as the driving engine of the IT sector. NITDA is to enter into strategic alliance, collaboration and joint venture with the private sector for the actualization of the IT vision, which is to make Nigeria an IT-capable country, using IT as an engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness. It is also to be used for education, job creation, wealth creation, poverty eradication and global competitiveness. Analysis of the IT policy document showed that it was comprehensive in scope. It recognizes the private sector as the driving engine of the IT industry (National Policy for Information Technology, 2003).

A sectoral application of IT has been recognized in the formulation of the IT policy, which involves the development of the following areas of the economy:

- Human resource development
- Infrastructure
- Governance
- Research and development
- Health
- Agriculture
- Urban and rural development
- Trade and commerce
- Arts, culture and tourism
- National security and law enforcement
- Fiscal measures and so forth

The National Information Technology Policy (NITP) addressed the various objectives pertaining to these aspects of the economy and the strategies that are to be adopted in applying IT for making these sectors economically sustainable. NITDA's strategies revolve mainly around three major approaches, namely: human resource capacity building, infrastructure capacity building and institutional capacity building.

GENDER ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA'S IT POLICY

According to Zunguze (2003), gender-based analysis is a process that assesses the difference in the impact of proposed and/or existing policies, programs and legislation on women and men. It compares how policy issues affect women and men and analyzes how and why this is so. Gender-based analysis challenges the assumption that policies, programs and legislation affect everyone in the same way, regardless of gender. This is often referred to as "gender-neutral policy." Gender analysis focuses on understanding and documenting the differences in gender roles, activities, needs and opportunities in a given context. It should result in policies, programs and legislation inclusive of women by taking into consideration the existing social imbalances. Gender-based analysis leads to informed policy making and good governance (Zunguze, 2003). Gender role analysis is useful to understanding to what ends men and women utilize Information and Communication Techologies (ICT; i.e., reproductive tasks associated with educating children, productive tasks associated with work, community tasks associated with volunteerism), whether use of ICTs is time-saving, and whether men's and women's time use is different (i.e., does one sex have greater leisure or does increased time flexibility create the potential for more "double shift" as telecommuting blurs distinctions between private (home) and public (work) domains). In Nigeria, the progress towards gender equality is very slow (Olatokun, 2003). This is noticeable in government appointments, students' enrollment in schools, political statements, government commitment to issues that are gender sensitive and so forth. Countless examples exist of political statements that have fallen short because they were not backed by policies. Below we present a gender analysis of the Nigerian IT policy document.

Gender Bias of the Nigerian IT Policy

From the content analysis of the Nigerian IT policy document, the word "women" was mentioned only in three places, namely:

a. Under the General Objectives section on page (iv), the (xiv) objective reads:

   To empower children, women and the disabled by providing special programs for the acquisition of IT skills.

b. So also in Chapter 15, titled, "IT popularization and awareness." In sub-section 15.2, objective (vi) reads:

   To draw on the intrinsic ability of women to propagate positive values within the society at large as an instrument for IT diffusion and promotion.

c. In sub-section 15.3 of the same chapter, objective (v) reads:

   Collaborating with the Ministry of Women Affairs to organize workshops and training in IT skills for women and other special groups.

The above shows that the IT policy relegated gender issues to the background. All through the policy document, gender concerns are not addressed in a way that shows an understanding of power imbalances and gender relations. It makes no attempt to show an understanding or appreciation of gender issues as evidenced in the use of gender-neutral terms throughout the document that seems to assume that by using these terms, it is including everyone, within broader categories of people without recognizing the different contexts, needs or contributions by different sexes.

Also, the policy's vision statement reads:

To make Nigeria an IT-capable country in Africa and a key player in the Information Society by the year 2005, using IT as the engine for sustainable development and global competitiveness.

And the mission statement reads:

To 'USE IT' for: (i) Education (ii) Creation of Wealth (iii) Poverty Eradication (iv) Job Creation and (v) Global Competitiveness.

From the vision and mission statements, the Nigerian IT policy does not have anything relating to