Women's Access to ICT in an Urban Area of Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the rapid and revolutionized development of communication and media around the world in the last few decades, which culminated in the term information communication technology (ICT), most of the developing countries are yet to clearly understand its significance or maximize the use of various forms of ICTs, because of other pressing issues such as access roads, potable drinking water supply, electricity and health facilities. This has greatly caused a wide gap between and within countries in the areas of social, economic, political, health and educational developments.

ICTs encompass all the technologies that facilitate the processing, transfer and exchange of information and communication services. Various forms of ICTs exist, such as radio, television, newspaper, telephone, magazine, billboard, Internet, electronic and print media, and so forth.

In the past few decades, there has been a significant increase in knowledge of the importance and developmental trends of ICTs worldwide. ICTs are very important in analyzing one's existing/potential audience using the most cost-effective way to communicate; evaluating the quality of messages; and making provision for information feedback. ICTs bring about various opportunities, ranging from employment and education to economic, health, social and environmental development.

As a result of the digital divide between and within countries, there are uneven disparities between the economic, social, educational and political status of the international community. This brings about classification of countries into "developed and developing" or "haves and have nots."

Gender disparity has served as a strong barrier to women's use of ICTs, considering the fact that women in most developing countries are still considered unequal in status with their male counterparts. This has, thus, reduced enrollment in sciences and technological fields of study. This also is probably as a result of the limited awareness of the full range of opportunities in ICTs other than access to information.

To achieve the goal of universal access to ICTs, there is a need to bridge the gap between men's and women's access to the use of ICTs. This can be accomplished by making technology accessible, relevant and useful to both women and men. State policies could be made holistic by taking into consideration women's needs as well as addressing related issues, such as the urban-rural bias, promoting enrollment of girls in ICTs programs and empowering women to use ICTs for profitable ventures.

BACKGROUND

This survey is being carried out among in-school and out-of-school youths in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Edo State is one of the 36 states that make up the Nigerian federation. It is located in the South-South geopolitical zone, in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. The state is administratively divided into three senatorial districts and 18 local government areas. Edo State had an estimated population of 2.86 million people as of 1999. The major ethnic groups in the state are Bini, Ishan, and Afemai, who are collectively referred to as the Edo-speaking people.

Benin City, the capital of Edo State, is one of the ancient cities in West Africa, with more than 1 million inhabitants and a male-to-female ratio of 1:1. It is divided into three local government councils; namely, Egor, Oredo and Ikpoba-Okha. These rep-

resent the grass-roots administrative units and make up the major urban areas of the state[3].

Edo State is one of the poorest and least industrialized states in Nigeria, with more than 60% of its population residing in the rural communities. The majority of them are peasant farmers with no feasible means of livelihood.

Despite its poorly industrialized status, Edo State has one of the highest levels of literacy in the country. Nearly 70% of the inhabitants can read and write, which exceeds the national average of 40%. There are currently four universities, two polytechnics, one college of education and several secondary and primary schools in the state.

Statistics reveal that 32.9% of Edo State populations are young adults aged 10-24 years, with about 1:1 male/female ratio (National Population Census, 1991). Data shows that 83% of the adolescents (10-20 years) are in school, while 17% of them are out of school (Okonofua, Kapiga, & Osuji, 2000). School enrollment for girls is significantly less than for boys, and there is a high dropout rate between the ages of 16 and 19 years, mostly among females (Ministry of Education, Edo State).

This survey was conducted to assess women's access to and beneficial usage of ICTs in Benin City, an urban area of Edo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

1. To clearly document the ratio of male-to-female access to ICTs in Benin City.
2. To identify the age and status of female ICT users in Benin City.
3. To identify the purpose of ICT usage among women in the area.
4. To use the data generated to advocate for women's involvement in ICT.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 3,000 in-school and out-of-school female youth aged 15-30 years will be involved in the survey. Information will be obtained using a questionnaire instrument containing open and close-ended questions.

The questionnaire adopted was divided into three sections—namely, A, B and C—comprising demographic status of the interviewees; previous knowl-

edge about ICTs and perceptions of the interviewees on the significance of ICTs to women and actions to be taken in increasing women's access to ICTs, respectively. Also, a table was developed to determine the ratio of male/female access to Internet service in the urban areas of Edo State. The data generated will be analyzed and a detailed report written.

CONCLUSION

We are currently in the process of administering the questionnaires in the three local government areas of the state. By the end of September, the results will be collated, analyzed and processed for a final report.

At the end of the project, the results obtained from the questionnaire should enable us to identify and document the ratio of male/female access to ICTs in the urban area of the state; the age range and status of ICTs users among women; the common types of ICTs, as well as the purpose of ICT usage among women in an urban area of Edo State, Nigeria.

This, we believe, will build our capacity to advocate for women involvement in ICT policy development in the state, as well as to identify active programs or policies in the promotion of ICTs in Edo State.

In addition, we desire scaling up the project by replicating the research study in other parts of the country, particularly each of the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, because of the significant regional, cultural and religious diversity that exist in the country. This will empower us to have a clear survey of women's access to ICTs in Nigeria.

However, it will further facilitate to develop strategized programs and policies that will increase women's access to ICTs in Nigeria, thereby reducing all forms of gender discriminations in the areas of educational levels, access to good health services, employment opportunities and economic resources in the country.

Conclusively, ICT has been identified as one important tool that has the potential of catalyzing the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015, provided it is well implemented and funded.

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