

# THE ICT PROCESS AND THE GENDER COMPONENT

Dr. N. Dlodlo  
National University of Science and Technology  
Box AC 939  
Ascot  
Bulawayo  
E-mail: [ndlodlo@nust.ac.zw](mailto:ndlodlo@nust.ac.zw)  
Tel: +263-9-282842/ 289456

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The challenges posed by the emergence of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and the major global flows in knowledge and information were the foundation of the Zimbabwean Government's need for not only the formulation of an ICT national policy, but also an acknowledgement by Government of new technologies. The Zimbabwe ICT vision in the making is a vision for accelerating the pace at which the country can use knowledge and ICTs in its quest for development [1]

According to the Honourable Minister of State for Science and Technology Development, Dr. O. Muchena, the Government's Vision on ICT is, "The establishment, Development and Implementation of a Comprehensive, Forward Looking and Sustainable Policy Framework and e-strategies adapted to the specific requirements of the different communities in our society". [2]

A policy is a "deliberate course of action carefully selected to meet clearly defined objectives within a specific time frame. The quest for formulating an ICT national policy and strategy represents a policy thrust by Zimbabwe to harness the power and promise of new technology in order to increase economic performance, equitable income distribution and efficiency of delivery of services.

The National ICT strategy should ideally have broad objectives including [1]:

- Promoting and supporting the orderly and sustainable development of ICTs
- Establishing national structures to ensure proper implementation of ICT policies including guidelines for ICT development
- Embarking on an extensive educational and training programme to provide adequate supply of qualified ICT personnel and knowledge workers
- Establishing institutional mechanisms and procedures for determining sectoral application priorities; and ensuring provision and maintenance of infrastructural facilities necessary for ICT development such as reliable supply of electricity and telecommunications

With respect to gender issues, the overall aim of an ICT policy is to arrive at one that will encourage girls and women to use and develop ICT and ensuring equitable access to ICTs and the benefits they can offer

According to [3], “Fewer women than men in Africa, as elsewhere, specialize in the Sciences and Engineering. Moreover if women seem to be “fearful” of technology or reluctant to experiment with new technologies, then it is usually interpreted as a “female” problem” rather than as a reflection of the inappropriate design of the technologies, or the aura of male dominance surrounding their use, or both. Thus if women have not been active participants in the development and use of new technologies, then it is assumed this has been as a result of (1) their own choices or (2) the fact that they have been slow to recognize the importance of a particular technology.

To a large extent, this traditional pattern of male and female attitudes towards technologies is replicating itself in the development of the new ICTs. Until the ICT policy arena is itself engendered, it will be difficult to improve access for women and girls to the revolutionary tools of information and communication technology. [3]

Gender issues in ICT policy fall into two categories:

- Gender in aspects of access and use of ICTs
- Gender into topics that arise in the ICT policy

## ***2. NUST APPROACH TO THE ICT STRATEGY PROCESS***

The ICT project, undertaken with NUST as the consultants, aims at creating a sustainable knowledge economy in Zimbabwe through the effective use of Information and Communications Technologies, by developing a coherent National ICT strategy. The project hopes to achieve this by undertaking e-readiness surveys, conducting awareness campaigns for the general population resulting in identifying national priorities on ICT, which will form the basis of the National ICT strategy

The E-readiness survey is a diagnostic process that will among other things examine the status of ICT in Zimbabwe, the policies and regulatory frameworks that govern the use of ICT, infrastructure, human resources and financial capacities. This is meant to establish the level of the digital divide, between rural and urban, and public and private sectors.

Workshops have so far been carried out in 8 sites in the country for data collection purposes. Representatives of industry, civil service and civic organizations were invited to participate in brainstorming sessions. The diagnostic survey addresses all sectors of the economy such as e-commerce, e-education, e-governance, e-health, e-commerce, e-agriculture, e-mining, e-manufacturing. Although special attention was to be paid on the specially marginalized groups of society, i.e. gender, youth, disabled, the rural and urban divide in relation to ICT, the women were underrepresented, forming only about 10% of the participants in total. The fact that UNIFEM has organized this workshop is a step in the right direction towards input into the ICT strategy by women. Data was/is also being collected through sector-specific questionnaires, telephone interviews and document sampling.

The e-period activities will mount awareness within the public through electronic and print media, panel discussions and exhibitions using existing facilities to link institutions in the different sectors such as education, health, commerce, etc. As women we must then say how we would like to see this period handled in order to touch a wider community of women.

The final phase of the ICT project will be the preparation and finalization of the ICT strategy document.

How then can women participate in this ICT process for their views to be heard?

### **3. GENDER IN ASPECTS OF ACCESS TO ICTs**

The gender issue reveals itself in many aspects of our day-to-day lives. But what is it today in a women's life that can change as a result of ICT?

#### **3.1 Illiteracy**

In most sub-Saharan countries 70% of adult women are illiterate. Without basic literacy there is no access to more and higher education, much less to ICTs. The challenge of illiteracy must be overcome before women can benefit from ICT. Women have less time to learn because of heavy domestic chores. It would be interesting to find out how this average is distributed in Sub-Saharan Africa and its relationship with access to ICTs. How then can this illiteracy be gotten rid of in order for women to have access to ICT?

There is illiteracy, literacy and functional literacy. The numbers of those women with functional literacy is smaller than those with literacy. Someone with Grade 7 may take a little longer to learn how to use an ICT, for instance. What strategies can then be used to reduce illiteracy.

#### **3.2 Poverty**

Poverty and lack of economic power is borne much by women than men. As a result women have much less access to disposable income for expenditure related to ICT. But what really is this poverty, and what is its relationship to ICT? Not all women that you classify as educated today, and who do not fall into the group of those that are called "poor" use ICT today. People, including women generally do not spend money on ICT today. What is the problem behind this?

#### **3.3 Relevancy**

The major barrier to the use of ICT by women is its lack of relevancy in their lives. Unless the content delivered by ICTs has a direct impact on women's lives, then ICTs are irrelevant to them. Only when women's lives require them to use ICTs would women see the practical and immediate benefits.

There are many areas to which ICTs can be applied by women. For example, “How can ICTs improve marketing skills and market access to Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) which are populated by women?” How can ICTs be used for networking in the fight against gender-related violence?

In the health sector in South Africa, for example, 61% of the professionals are women. Therefore since this is an ICT-intensive area, more women have access to ICT than men.

Infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas. If choices of technologies are made that have an urban bias and high cost few women would have access.

### **3.4 Telephone service:**

Provision of telephone services to rural areas, brings the benefits of employment generations and improved social services and farming practices. This can result in the following:

- Reduced migration to urban areas, owing to improved possibilities for small business
- Improved access to health extension services (telemedicine with remote diagnosis and treatment)
- Increased access to market and price information
- Improved educational services, including distance learning
- Gender-sensitive relevant information can be disseminated

But the truth is that telephone services are expensive for the ordinary women. More information is needed on the telephone infrastructure in place in Zimbabwe and how these are in individual sub-Saharan countries.

### **3.5 Radio and TV access**

In Africa, the radio is often cited as the medium most accessible to rural women. About 60% of women in Zimbabwe listen to the radio. An insignificant percentage of women has access to television. This is only a percentage of urban women, or those that live in electrified areas. The problem is that the radio is not interactive. For accelerated communication there has to be a link through the telephone.

### **3.6 Access to computers and the Internet:**

Overall, 5% of the African population has access to computers. Of these, only 0.1% have access to the Internet. Internet connectivity is available only within urban, while majority of women reside in rural areas. Simply, by being in the majority in rural areas, women have a small chance of accessing new technologies. The Internet is also linked to literacy, which is what has to be overcome. The Internet technology is foreign, with English being the predominant language. What then can we do to ensure women have access to the Internet?

### **3.7 Communications infrastructure**

Lack of communications infrastructure that allows for the use of new ICTs is a problem, with the problem being more severe in rural areas. Traffic congestion on the networks due to low bandwidth, results in the slow processing of data. Women in research are most affected by this. But how many of these women do we have and how many of them contribute to the development of ICT?

### **3.8 Electricity access**

In Zimbabwean rural areas only clinics, hospitals, shops and half the schools are connected to the National Electricity Grid, and yet 80% of the population live in rural areas. Therefore more women are disadvantaged. ICT and electricity go hand-in-hand. What is the relationship between access to electricity and access to ICTs by women? What alternative sources of energy should we propose as women to alleviate the problems that women face?

### **3.9 Financial resources**

Women are less-likely than men to own radios and TV, or to access them when they want. When it involves paying for information access, such as at rural information centres, women are less-likely to have disposable income. Illiterate women do not get to train into specific trades for income-generation. It would be interesting to find out the percentage of women in technical jobs. The importance of going through training programmes is that women get the opportunity to rub shoulders with ICTs. But fewer women get to that level. They tend to pursue “female careers”. What can we do to convince women and girls to take up careers that are considered “male”?

Inflation has resulted in costs that are not affordable are a barrier to women’s access to ICT. Acquiring the equipment has significant cost components. Access to the Internet is through an Internet Service provider, or through an Internet café is expensive who charge for their services at market rates. High telephone charges inhibit users from going on-line. What effect has this got on women’s access to ICT?

### **3.10 Social and cultural aspects**

Women tend to have less access than men to those ICT facilities that exist. Frequently, rural information centres are located in places that women may not be comfortable frequenting

### **3.11 Studying or using IT**

Men greatly outnumber women in education. At the Zimbabwe Open University, for instance, women are a third of the male population. At NUST women form 22% of the student population. Throughout the world there are problems in attracting young women

to science and technology. Many hold views that girls and women cannot think scientifically. What can be done to encourage a healthy gendered distribution in science and technology education?

### **3.12 Education and skills training**

Absence of educational training is a disadvantage for women. The information economy demands technological literacy. Women in developing countries are less-likely to have the requisite education and knowledge. Given limited access to schooling, women are less-likely than men to have ICT skills.

### **3.13 Licencing**

If fees for telecommunications, ISPs and mobile services are high, they will be passed on to users, limiting the affordability to women and the poor. Can reducing licencing fees make ICTs more accessible to women?

### **3.14 Research and development**

Are there incentives directed at encouraging women in ICT research and innovation?

### **3.15 Regulatory Framework**

A flexible regulatory framework, would open opportunities that allow women to participate in ICT business.

## ***4. BENEFITS OF ICT FOR WOMEN***

### **4.1 Influencing public opinion on gender equality**

Through ICT enabled information channels including radio, telephone, television and the internet awareness of gender equality issues can be raised and enhanced.

### **4.2 Increasing economic opportunities for women**

Women have been limited from participation in many forms of economic life. ICT helps entrepreneurs reduce transaction costs and increase market coverage.

### **4.3 ICT for women's education**

ICT can be used to provide women with useful information. Radio, television broadcasting, audio and video cassettes are used as supplements to print materials in traditional education. But now newer technologies such as audio and video conferencing, internet and e-mail are taking over.

### **4.4 Enhancing women to know their rights and participate in decision-making**

Women remain vastly under-represented in national and local assemblies. ICT has a potential to empowering women by enabling them to participate in public discussions

## ***5. Recommendations for ensuring women's inclusion in ICT policies***

- Train women in non-traditional fields and develop role models for women
- Include ICT training in education projects for girls and women
- Train women at community centres so that they become community intermediaries
- Improve girls and women's education in Africa

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- [1] National Economic Consultative Forum One Day Dialogue, St. Lucia Park, Harare, 10 October 2003
- [2] Keynote address, NECF One Day Dialogue, St. Lucia Park, Harare, 10 October 2003
- [3] African Information Society-gender Working Group. 1999. Engendering ICT policy: guidelines for action.