INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT): A CATALYST FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the economic potentials of Information Communication Technology (ICT) as a catalyst for women empowerment in Nigeria, determining the level of economic gains enjoyed by women. It also agrees that ICT can impact positively, through extended education in the form of ICT related knowledge, on the competitiveness of female workers in a growing globalized labour market. It state that ICT can create numerous opportunities such as employment and promotion of entrepreneurship ventures for women to be self-reliant, assisting Nigerian women to have access to information so as to contribute to national development by participating in politics and good governance like their counterparts in other developed world. The paper also points out how ICT can enhance capacity building and eliminate poverty as it contributes to emerging economic and social development activities. ICT resources are used for the improvement of health-care delivery, networking and advocacy within the society. Among the challenges faced by women are gender disparity, dual roles as wives and mothers vis-a-vis the global demand for their skills which in some cases requires only operant abilities to liberate them from poverty, subjugation, and diseases. The paper in conclusion recommends empowering women through public enlightenment, specialized trainings and government policies.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have contributed greatly in the development of modern societies. However, women have not significantly benefited from these contributions comparable to men as indicated by research from U.S.A and by the European Union (EU). The worst hit region of the world are some countries in the Arab world where women are denied great deal of benefits of access to information capable of providing numerous possibilities to overcome and overturn poverty and inequality precluding women from economic development.

The advancement of ICTs has brought new opportunities for knowledge gathering for both women and men to the extent that the global community can reach individuals, families and citizens of a nation with the click of a button.

Information and Communication Technology comprise a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications, and services used to produce, process, distribute, and transform information. The

traditional technologies continue to be important for large numbers of people around the world, particularly in rural areas. However, new technologies have a vast potential for empowerment which needs to be fully exploited. Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that these technologies can be powerful instruments for advancing economic and social developments through the creation of new types of economic activity, employment opportunities, improvements in health-care delivery, and other services, and the enhancement of networking, participation, and advocacy within a society. ICT also have the potential to improve interaction between government and citizens, fostering transparency and accountability.

In the developing world like Nigeria, the issue of "girl-child" has been controversial even though the Nigerian constitution recognizes the equality of all citizens irrespective of sex, tribe, status and religion. The United Nations declaration of girl child education laid serious emphasis on women empowerment. This goal is aimed at giving women equal opportunity to job, political participation and access to more education without discrimination observed to be lacking in developing countries. In Nigeria for instance, female constitute more than half of its population and are the vast majority without basic education, and not empowered because of socio-cultural biases on the girl child (Nigeria Millennium Development Goals, 2004 report).

This biases has discriminated against women who by implications are regarded as second class citizens, referred to as the back-benchers and are sometimes out-rightly ignored in governance, leadership, employment and education avenues that can emancipate them and give them the necessary recognition to promote gender equality.

Conceptual Framework

The necessity to clarify the concept involved in this paper stems out from the fact that these concepts may have wide range of application and usage in different disciplines and circumstances. It is therefore important to consider some of the key terms in the context of this discourse to enhance a better understanding. Many scholars have given the definitions of information and communication technology in different ways.

Bayode (1996) defined Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as the acquisition, processing, storage, and dissemination of information by means of computers and other telecommunication equipment. It is also a set of activities that facilitates the capturing, storage, processing, transmission, and display of information by electronic means (World Bank, 2002). Information and Communication Technology is therefore an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing radio, television, cellular phones computer and network hardware and software and satellite systems. ICTs are often spoken of in a particular context, such as ICTs in education, health care, or libraries, the term is somewhat more common outside of the United States.

Empowerment: The term "Empowerment" means "upliftment from negative feeling of helplessness to positive feeling of self-confidence and the ability to get on with the process of living" (Pamida, 2006). Again, empowerment is the same as enablement. Giving education to a girl-child is to enable her actualize her potentials.

The Role of Girl-Child Education in Nation Building

The role of girl-child education significantly influences nation building as clearly seen by the contributions of numerous women who served in various

capacities in governance, policy formulations, implementation and professionalism. According to Haruna and Mamman (2007), educated women have now understood that they can participate in the life of their communities fully by making known their point of views, aspirations, visions, and needs; they partake to defend the rights of all people and their own rights too. Some have become speakers and members of national and state assemblies, governors, deputy governors, university lecturers, university vice chancellors, ministers, commissioners, permanent secretaries, judges, bankers, managers, doctors, pilots, director-general of parastatals, some are in the armed forces, and some Chief Justices of their countries.

Though, history recounts that women have been subjected to varying degrees of deprivation and subjugation. They have been stifled mentally, psychologically and physically by the dictates of male dominated cultures and traditions that cut across virtually all races of the world (Haruna and Mamman, 2007). In Iraq for example, culture and women are interwoven to such an extent that mathematics was considered the sole preserve of men. One rare credit granted the Saddam Hussein regime was that it forced women to go to school, to the extent that his daughter went to school. His regime led to the emergence of many female engineers and medical practitioners, especially during the Iraq/Iran war (Adeleye-Fayemi, 2004). In Nigeria the girl-child situation has also changed at minimal level from what used to operate. Ever since women found their way into virtually all male dominated activities, they have not only thrived in many instances but excelled also (Sunman, 2009).

To empower women goes beyond women alone, it requires the understanding and addressing the dynamics of power and relationships existing in different societies as it affects age, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, history and race as they relate to the women folk. Nath (2001) defined empowerment as a process of awareness and control which enable people realizing and attaining self determination. For women, empowerment emphasizes the importance of boosting their power to take control over decisions and issues that shape their lives.

The United Nation's fourth conference on women held in Beijing China in 1995 emphasized greater access to education; better health facility; poverty reduction and equitable welfare distribution among others as empowerment channels for women (Mohammed, 1996). However, earlier recommendations by UNICEF (1993) stated that "women's empowerment should address the level of basic welfare services; access to resources; conscientization, mobilization and participate and control over power". Furthermore, Nath (2001) opined that women empowerment interwoven processes of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, greater decision-making, power and control, and transformative action".

The Situation of Women Empowerment in Nigeria

Women empowerment in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized because statistics on the country has revealed women as major contributors to the economic development of the nation in the areas of agriculture, marketing and processing (2006 Census). The Federal office of statistics (1999) constructed a poverty profile indices using the income and expenditure approach, the release showed that the level of poverty in the country increased over the years from 17.7% in 1980 to 67.1% in 1996, with a higher level of poverty in the rural areas affecting mostly women. In addition, the indices of poverty and employment emanating from other sources reveal that

irrespective of the angle from which one looks at the Nigerian situation, it is evident that it is one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 1998; UNDP, 1999) the UNDP revealed that Nigeria is ranked 54th in the human poverty index, making it the 20th poorest country in the world. In 2011, Nigerian women demanded for 35% affirmative action from the government, but only 33% appointments have been given to women (*WARDC'S Computation INEC Database*, 2011).

The report above shows that gender disparity still exists. Another source says that about 7.3 million children, 60% of which are girls, are not in school (Ezek, 2008).

Since March 2004 in Nigeria, programs such as National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the Local Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (LEEDS), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP), are aimed at providing vocational skills and actualize self-reliance. Universal Basic Education and the National Policy on Education emphasized on the integration of ICT in the curriculum from primary to tertiary institutions. The training on the use of ICT education makes it possible to receive information from within and outside immediate environment. According to Chibomba (2008), ICT brings about effectiveness in information management and its distribution.

It helps in planning, record keeping development and operation in all sectors and has improved efficiency in productivity and management of various economic sectors. According to Simeh (2008), the only way of addressing the issue of gender disparity in Nigeria is the promotion of girl-child education.

ICT and Women Empowerment in Nigerian Economy

The advancement of ICT has brought new opportunities for knowledge gathering for both women and men to the extent that the global community can reach unconnected individual families and population to better understand their needs and challenges. ICT can provide unlimited opportunities for economic development and social engagement through new, innovative thinking and tools (Olaye, 2011). However, a basic assumption is that all members of our global community do benefit from the use of ICTs as observed by mobile telephony which has become the most important mode of telecommunications in developing countries, while internet access has become readily available and used for private businesses and public institutions. Nigeria is not left out of the ICT blitz because since 2001 when GSM was launched, a large number of unemployed youths, especially girls, found solace in operating tele-centres. Many of these inforprenuers are rural based. Mobile phones are so wide spread that it now accounts for over 58% of destination for world markets of produced phones (UNCTAD, Information Economy Report, 2007-2008).

ICT has proven to be increasingly used for social and economic development. Access to basic ICT infrastructure is a key to increasing possibilities and opportunities. Therefore, using Nigeria's census with an estimated growth rate of 2.4 percent, women may continue to constitute more than half (50.7%) of the population who need empowerment to enhance the country's economic viability and stability (FIDA, 1997).

Women and Access to Information and Communication Technology

Access is the central issue necessary for women who have traditionally been excluded access to vital economic empowering information. ICT opens up a direct window to the outside world for women who in the comfort of their homes and with the support of family

members can reach out, establish their own businesses and transact without any barrier. This leads to broadening of perspective, greater understanding of their current situation and eradicating the causes of poverty.

The trite expression that when you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman you educate a nation may have engendered the special attention being given to the women folk across the globe today (Simeh, 2008). Therefore, educating women via the full utilization of ICTs will also easily transient to children, stimulate socio economic development and effective parenthood.

When access to ICT by women, are directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women shall be empowered. In the U.S.A for example, workers who use ICT are paid 10-15% higher than non-computer users holding similar position (World Bank, 2009).

Benefits for women using ICTs are that they serve as labour-saving devices and these technologies supposedly liberate women, through the introduction of 'new' forms of working such as 'tele-work' (Olaye, 2011).

ICT and Education of women unlock the entrance to other elements on which socio-cultural transformation hinges. With education, women can contribute immensely through acquired knowledge and skills to the development of the nation. Robert-Okah (2006) posits that girls being mothers of the next generation should be given the best possible education so that future generations may have sound background to sustain civilization.

Women Empowerment through Entrepreneurship Education and Skills Acquisition

Mallam and Okpede (1997), described an entrepreneur as one who actually searches for change, respond to it, and exploits change as an opportunity. The entrepreneur can therefore be seen as one who establishes a business in the face of risk and uncertainty for the purpose of making profit. He/she identifies opportunities, assembles resources to capitalize on them and makes legitimate profit. The entrepreneur's role can be as an innovator who markets his innovation or product. Olaye (2011) considers an entrepreneur to be one with embedded qualities of constructive initiative, imagination, creativity, and willingness to transform challenges into opportunities.

Using ICT for small and medium enterprises has resulted to creation of numerous internet cafes, phone shops, and community radio stations. However, these small and medium enterprises are largely owned and operated by men, women can key into them with the support of government or generous Nigerians concerned with plight of women. Training women with the requisite skills improves access to information which can translate to economic empowerment, increased learning opportunities and improved market access.

Challenges of Information and Communication Technology for Women Empowerment

The role of Information and Communication Technology as a catalyst for women empowerment in Nigeria is faced with a lot of challenges that include:

- The cost of providing ICTs in Nigeria compared with other advanced countries is very exorbitant. The cost of bandwidth rates, are usually higher in Africa than they are in developed countries. As a result of these both private, public institutions, and organizations work with very limited bandwidth. This impedes the services rendered by training schools, cybercafés, business centres etc.

- The cost of basic ICT training has also been overwhelming considering the fact that computer literacy is at the core of most types of training and has positively influenced many forms of training at basic and advanced educational levels.
- Inadequate power supply, high cost of ICTs. Power supply in Nigeria is very erratic and this is a big problem in the use of ICT.

CONCLUSION

The paper revealed that application and utilization of ICT to empower women can impact positively on individuals, private and public institutions. Even though the statistical figures available on the use of ICT are based on empirical research in this respect, it is safe to argue that the level of information on ICT illiteracy in Nigeria is still high. Government should increase funding to deliver more qualitative information services to user communities in Nigeria especially in the area of empowering women. Presently the situation is very poor because ICT and libraries are the preserve of elites and the urbanized. The girl-child should be ICT empowered to measure up with her male counter parts in Nigeria. While the rural majorities are neglected, the provision of adequate ICT driven facilities can reduce poverty among women. The only way is to create awareness for a girl child to measure up with her male counterpart in the use of ICT, with government creating the enabling environment.

The Way Forward

- There should be funding for specialize trainings on the different applications and equipment of information and communication technologies targeting women empowerment in the rural and urban areas.
- Government should enforce policies to efficiently address the plight of women.
- The responsibility for women empowerment should not be left for government at the three tiers alone, Non-Governmental Organizations and agencies at local and international arenas should be encouraged to render assistance where possible.
- Complementing agencies that comprise the libraries, radios, televisions, newspapers, journals, and magazines should be encouraged to vanguard the course for women empowerment through enlightenment campaigns that emphasize on the impact of ICT and how women can drive it effectively to improve the economy.
- There should be well organized conferences, seminars, workshops to educate women on how ICT can empower them.

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