

ECA-CEA
African Centre for Women (ACW)



THEME 3

AFRICAN WOMEN AND THE INFORMATION AGE: A RARE OPPORTUNITY

- 3.1: How to make ICT policies relevant to women
- 3.2: Setting up information centres for women
- 3.3: New information technologies as tools for democratisation
- 3.4: Impact of ITCs on women's work

*On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Economic Commission for Africa, an international conference was organized under the theme “**African Women and Economic Development : Investing in Our Future**” from 28 April to 1 May 1998. It was attended by policy makers in different government sectors including heads of state and government, representatives from religious organizations, NGOs women’s groups, grassroot associations, youth, the private sector, regional subregional and intergovernmental bodies, the international community, bilateral and multilateral agencies. The aim of the conference was to engage in intensive dialogue in order to :*

- *Share experience on how public policies should equalize opportunities between women and men and redirect resources to those investments in which women’s participation would bring about the highest social returns;*
- *Draw strategic lessons from on-going efforts to implement the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action;*
- *Identify and share “good practices” in strategies and programme modalities for country level implementation of actions recommended by the conference;*
- *Forge partnerships for post-conference development and implementation of the recommended action and programmes.*

The aims of the conference were tackled through four main themes:

- 1. Developing African economies : the role of women;*
- 2. Achieving good governance : the essential participation of women;*
- 3. African women and the information age: a new window of opportunity;*
- 4. Creating opportunities for Africa’s new generation.*

While the four themes were addressed in plenaries and panel discussions, they were also broken down into a total of 22 sub-themes which were discussed in greater detail in self-selected groups. The information in this booklet summarizes the content of the issues in theme 3, the questions that guided the group discussions and the strategic actions that evolved out of the group discussions.

I hope this booklet will be useful for all those participants and organisations wishing to follow up on the proposed strategic actions.

*Joséphine Ouédraogo
Director, African Centre for Women
Economic Commission for Africa*

SUB-THEME 3.1

HOW TO MAKE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES POLICIES (ICTs) RELEVANT FOR WOMEN



ISSUES ADDRESSED

As one means of promoting sustainable development in Africa, decision-makers must facilitate people's access to information, so that solutions to problems can be locally resolved and Africa's human resources are optimally developed.

In many African countries, ICT policy-making is still at the beginning stage. In some countries, existing policies are too restrictive and therefore do not provide a conducive environment for the emergence of a dynamic and competitive information and communications sector.

This is an opportune time and a crucial moment for women to have input and for stakeholders to be sensitized to the gender dimension of ICT policy. Policy must take into account the needs of women, as well as men, at all levels – from urban professional people to rural populations. All segments of society should have access to information and have a channel for making their voices heard. ICTs, if not managed effectively have the potential to widen the gap between the sexes, young and old, urban and rural areas and so on.

Business-women stand to gain from information that ICTs can make readily available and thus enable them to penetrate non-traditional markets.

In science and technology policy-making bodies, the gender dimension, as well as links to development needs, must be ensured.

GUIDING QUESTION

Participants in the working group were guided by the following questions:

- ◆ How could women influence national policy?
- ◆ How could women help to liberalize and open up the telecommunications sector and to involve various sectors in the provision of services?

- ◆ What types of partnerships could be established to ensure that African women are represented in international decision-making?
- ◆ What specific gender parity measures should be taken?
- ◆ How could existing national, regional and international networks help in the formulation of adequate policies in development-related areas? What experiences could be identified?

STRATEGIC ACTIONS RECOMMENDED

The working group participants highlighted the following actions:

1. Women do not understand the importance and potential impact of the information revolution. The benefit they stand to reap needs to be clearly defined.
2. Policies need to address issues such as: difficulty of access, prohibitive costs, sustainability, poor essential infrastructure for ICT use
3. A large percentage of African women are illiterate. Even so they still need to product their own information and document their knowledge and experience.
4. Gender issues relevant to ICT production, use and access should be identified and found a solution.
5. Women need to be equipped to participate in ICT policy discussions through improved technical expertise, needs identification and understanding the regulatory framework.
6. Women need to be involved in all stages of incorporating a gender perspective in policy formulation (awareness raising, policy drafting, implementation and review).
7. Policies should be reviewed to ensure that they are in line with the African Information Society Initiative (AISII) proposals.
8. Governments should be encouraged to open up the ICT debate to all groups concerned.

SUB-THEME 3.2

SETTING UP INFORMATION CENTRES FOR WOMEN



ISSUES ADDRESSED

One of the major problems facing African women in the socio-economic field is the limited access to relevant information on a continuing basis about health, education, food production and process. Because women's work is often devalued by society and their activities are often restricted to the home environment, their participation in development is limited.

The information age affects all aspects of economic, social and political activity. If women had access to information and communications technologies (ICTs), their awareness of what is going on in these areas and potential input to them, could be greater, which would ultimately facilitate a more equitable socio-economic development process.

The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) stressed the need to improve women's information networks. Community information centres are places where women could acquire knowledge and share experiences. Such centres promote networking and can help strengthen women's associations.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Participants were asked to discuss the following questions:

- ◆ How could the establishment of information centres for women also permit knowledge to be generated and enhance women's own creativity and output?
- ◆ Could community information centres be the solution to eradicating illiteracy among African women?
- ◆ How could information centres be integrated into other structures that women use, such as health centres?
- ◆ Can information centres allow women to become more independent in the technological fields (training, equipment maintenance etc.) as compared to other fields?

- ◆ How could the centres be linked with similar existing structures or with other places of information and communications facilities, such as telecentres, community radio stations or radio clubs?
- ◆ How could community information centres serve as places where individuals and collective decision-making techniques are learned and knowledge management is taught in the context of a dialogue between men and women?

STRATEGIC ACTIONS RECOMMENDED

1. Community information centres would be an extension of already-existing community structures such as schools, health centres or religious establishments; however, oral tradition, computer science and multi-media capabilities need to be brought together.
2. Experience needs to be documented and built upon.
3. Information centres should be set up in disadvantaged urban and rural areas following an analysis of information needs and priorities of the community regarding areas such as health and agriculture. They should be managed using a participatory approach.
4. Participation based on a dialogue between men and women needs to be developed in order to foster social change and to alter men's perception of women.
5. Attention should be given to crosscutting applications. For example, the transmission of data generated by women at the local level would permit the inclusion of such data in national accounts and statistics.

SUB-THEME 3.3

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AS TOOLS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION



ISSUES ADDRESSED

Starting from the premise that women would increase their participation in public life and the decision-making process through a democratic form of government, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as tools for democratization was identified as an important issue on which to focus and share ideas during the conference.

Working group participants discussed how democratization would be defined. Important elements were:

- ◆ **Inclusion:** A process of governance which brings together all elements of society and incorporates their viewpoint into the decision-making. Diversity and difference of opinion in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres are welcome and seen as positive
- ◆ **Partnership:** Decisions are reached after evaluating input from all sectors of society. There is a two-way information and communication flow between the political leadership and citizens.

Emerging technologies can facilitate access to information by policy-makers as well as those who will be affected by the policies made, making possible real democracy – government by the people- through a two-way information and communication flow.

ICTs can give a voice to the traditionally voiceless, particularly women, by helping them to participate in decision-making on issues affecting their lives and the future of their country, and enabling them to advocate for accountability from governments and ensuring that commitments made are implemented.

ICTs are not neutral. They can widen the gap between those who have access to information and equipment and those who do not. They should, on the contrary, provide an excellent tool for Africans to network and work towards solving problems, such as the resolution of conflicts, which have a particularly detrimental effect on women and children on the continent.

The challenge of using ICTs to facilitate the process of democratization lies in using them to build solidarity, giving a voice to the most marginalized in society and bringing women from the domestic and private arena into the public one.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following questions guided discussion on the above issues in a working group:

- ◆ Who produces information? How do we keep ICTs from widening the gap between the owners and creators of these technologies and local communities' women in particular?
- ◆ How do we use information to empower women to decide for themselves and for their communities?
- ◆ Can ICTs enable women to understand the relationship between the local and the national realm and between the national and the global one. In preparing development plans and compiling statistics, can the State use ICTs to elicit local information?
- ◆ Can ICTs promote democratization without carrying the message of the majority?
- ◆ How can constructive debate be promoted to influence decision-making, using information as an advocacy tool? What are relevant examples from Africa?
- ◆ How could different gender relationship be inculcated in the new generation, locally and nationally?
- ◆ How can ICTs be effectively used as a tool for Africans to network in working towards resolving conflicts in Africa?
- ◆ How can experiences with information technologies be systematically documented at the national level in order to provide for networking among partners such as ministries dealing with women's affairs and civil society institutions so that various measures can be implemented for the advancement of women?

STRATEGIC ACTIONS RECOMMENDED

From the group discussion on the above issues, the following strategic actions were recommended in the context of using ICTs for democratization ensuring that:

1. ICTs are appropriate, widely available, accessible and affordable for women in Africa. Constraints are the low level of development of Africa's communication infrastructure, the low-level of awareness among women of the issue at stake and general lack of ICT skills.
2. Democratic processes, particularly in policy-making, to enable technologies to be directed towards the achievement of economic and social goals and to ensure that sustainable development is visible.
3. Collaborative action among governments, civil society and partners to achieve an equitable information society in Africa instead of relying solely on market forces is sustained.
4. Use of ICTs to help inform women so that they can make appropriate decisions that affect them and their communities. For example, women can be made aware of how the legal system and parliaments function through ICTs.
5. Use of ICTs to help women appreciate the relationship between the local and the national scene and between the national and the global bodies.
6. The need to allow access to ICT-based information through local languages is addressed.
7. Use of information as an advocacy instrument to promote constructive debate and influence policy, as well as to promote, at the community and national level, a different gender relationship within the new generation.

SUB-THEME 3.4

IMPACT OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES ON WOMEN'S WORK



Specific applications

Examples of how African women are currently using ICTs:

- ◆ Uganda's Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) uses information gathered by women parliamentarians from the Internet to address essential issues, and as input in reviewing laws enacted by parliament;
- ◆ Women's Net in South Africa is providing, training and building the capacity of policy-makers and members of civil society to influence policy-making processes so as to redress gender-based inequalities in that country. Information is provided on how to draft proposals for parliamentary committees and how bridge the gap between those who have technology and those who do not.
- ◆ The Information and Experience-sharing Project on Conflict Prevention and Resolution could be linked to the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution.

ISSUES ADDRESSED

In the economic arena, African women make a vital contribution both in food production and processing as well as in business. ICTs could widen the horizons of African women, particularly with regard to their business activities by giving them an understanding of globalization and regional integration and the impact at the national and local levels.

ICTs could also be used for the preparation of quantitative indicators, reflecting the actual economic contribution of women and which can be integrated into national accounts.

Access to information technologies would enable women to:

- ◆ Access information on what is happening in other communities would enable them to share experiences, adopt good ones, and help decision-makers to link macro-economic policy-making to grassroots initiatives.
- ◆ Access information relevant to agricultural production, processing, marketing, food transport and storage, disease control as well as environmental management.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The working group was asked to discuss the following questions:

- ◆ Are there cases in which women entrepreneurs have developed alternate networks using ICTs, based on their understanding of the phenomenon of globalization?
- ◆ How can ICTs enable women to integrate themselves more efficiently into the subregional and regional economic spheres, secure access to information regarding capital flows, the cost of raw materials and currency exchange rates?
- ◆ How can we deepen the marketing experience of business-women by enabling them to expand the markets to which women already have access and in addition, use virtual markets to sell their products and to link up with potential partners and customers?
- ◆ What types of education and training can be tailored to the needs of specific groups of women and how can ICTs provide young women a means of access to non-traditional occupation?
- ◆ How do we launch projects on South-South and North-South networking?
- ◆ Would the mastery of ICTs provide women alternative employment and how could women responsible for feeding their communities become the architects of national food self-sufficiency through ICTs?

Working group participants highlighted the following:

- ◆ The importance of documenting experiences in Africa of how ICTs can facilitate women's work
- ◆ The lack of awareness among women of the importance of the information revolution and also infrastructural limitations.
- ◆ Difficulties in regards to access, in large part due to prohibitive costs and also due to low rates of literacy among women.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS RECOMMENDED

The following strategic actions were recommended, based on the requirement for technologies to be appropriate and to allow for the building of human and organizational capacities at the local level.

group formulated the following strategic actions in response to the above issues:

1. Develop information bases to allow the sharing of initiatives, develop models that the women can discuss. The bases could be at a regional level.
2. The policies should be specific for Africa; education and training to develop the capacity of women.
3. Training should target to develop professionalism and reach the youth.
4. Develop ICTs that promote regional integration and networking.
5. Use ICTs to promote the expansion of local markets, and provide direct access for women producers to international markets and productive resources (*the virtual souk*).
6. Using lessons learnt from pilot projects, install telecentres in the more underdeveloped areas.