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**INFLUENCING POLICY ON INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
TO MEET WOMEN'S NEEDS IN AFRICA**

I. INTRODUCTION

As the world revels in the latest transformation into an "information society" with the development of the global electronic information superhighway, the majority of the African women continue to walk on their dirt roads as they play their vital roles in reproduction, family and community management among others. These roles are not traditionally viewed as being compatible with "modern" technological systems. But Africa's supply of the three basic constituents required for the introduction and development of the technologically intensive projects (telecommunication networks and computer systems; knowledge and skills for design, utilization, modification and adaptation of these systems; and integration of science and technology developmental objectives in national planning policies and programmes) is highly inadequate. For women to close these gaps and make use of these technological systems is even more difficult because of their unequal access to opportunities for education and training, employment and decision-making.

This brief paper introduces a discussion on some of the conceptual issues which determine whether or not African women can improve their access to and control of information and communication technologies. Recommendations are also suggested on how to improve the effective use of information technology to meet women's needs.

II. INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE AND PUBLIC POLICY FAILURE

A. Inadequate infrastructure

While Africa has 12% of the world's population, it has only 2% of its telephone line, half of which are in the largest cities. In sub-Saharan Africa, there is one telephone line for every 235 people. Installation and maintenance costs are higher than in most parts of the world while the reliability of service is quite poor. Nonetheless, there are long waiting lists of those who want telephones installed and the rate of utilization are higher than most countries. The bulk of the international traffic in Africa is routed through the former colonial countries in Europe the while the volume of interregional traffic is quite small.

With regard to computers, although statistics on the *status quo* are not available, there are indications that Africa is experiencing some serious problems with South Africa as a possible exception. Personal computers are not manufactured in Africa and as such are subject to high duties and import tariffs. This often results to the purchase price being 7 to 10 times higher than the price at the country of manufacture. Other equally important constraints include access to training, technical information, computer spare parts, repair services, unreliable electricity supplies and coping with the increasingly fast rates of obsolescence. Importing computer equipment also adds to the foreign exchange debt burden of many African countries.

The human skills and know-how component with regard to computer technology is also in short supply in Africa. The number of graduates from secondary and tertiary levels with adequate technological capabilities is way below demand. The numbers are even smaller for women technologists.

B. Ineffective public policy

The Gender Working Group set up by the UN Commission on Science and Technology to *inter alia* make recommendations on science and technology policy to national governments concluded that the link between gender, science and technology and development has been neglected. Policy makers have ignored the needs, requirements and aspirations of women when designing related policies. This is partly due to inexistence of reliable data that would assist in decision making at the conceptual level are inexistence. Another contributing factor is that women are barely represented in decision making at the local, national and international bodies that determine the policy of science and technology.

The lack of an integrated approach to policy formulation has also contributed significantly to the ineffective policies that have proven unsuccessful in the past. At the national level, policy makers in the economic and social development arena have not coordinated sufficiently with their counterparts in the science and technology sector and *vice versa*. Besides, most national governments have failed to implement adequately most of the international agreements and recommendations that have been mandated through treaties and conventions with regard to gender equity. The intergovernmental machineries have not enforced the undertakings either, nor has there been any sanctions imposed for failure to honour them.

Currently, many African nations are restructuring their telecommunications sectors using technical analysis, advice and support from the World Bank, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) etc. In this context, telecommunications policy and information society planning recognizes and actively promotes deregulation, institutional reform, consideration of rural development objectives, redefinition of universal service, tariff reform and convergence of policies for basic communication and other services. There is also increasing awareness of the need to consider requirements of different segments such as rural vs urban; residential vs business, small vs large companies etc.

Unfortunately, there is no consideration of gender-differentiated impacts in these national policy documents. African women, as a result, have to contend with inadequate access to resources and ineffective public policy in relation to their needs.

C. Meeting women's needs

Two of the most practical ways in which electronic communication can be used to meet women's needs include:

1. providing relatively inexpensive voice, data, and fax communication between geographically distant locations. This can be done on a one-to-one basis or as a link between several users e.g. by creating electronic mailing lists or bulletin boards;
2. providing access to a growing collection of information from international organizations, central governments, national government bodies, commercial information brokers, individuals, campaigning organizations, donor agencies, financial institutions, libraries, universities, research organizations etc.

A number of databases have been developed to provide the public a large source of accessible electronic information. The World Wide Web which stores documents in a searchable, graphical format is a case in point. There is also the world wide collection of gophers whose databases comprise text-based documents. Commercial databases and network providers such as CompuServe and AmericaOnLine also store large volumes of information. The Annex provides a list of organizations which are actively involved in supporting aspects of information technology for women's organizations. Only a few, however, focus specifically on Africa.

III. CHALLENGES AHEAD

A. Public policy intervention

The information technology and society policy landscape in Africa is greatly determined by national governments and the specialized agencies of the UN system, in particular the International Telecommunication Union and UNESCO. The funding agencies also play an important role not only in generating resources but also in defining the criteria against which national governments develop their policy initiatives.

Women must therefore join hands to redefine objectives of telecommunication and information sector planning so that these include gender equity. Women's needs in information and communication policy and practice should be fully taken into account. These are clearly articulated in the tenth critical area of concern of the African Platform for Action entitled "women, information, communication and the arts" which focuses on the inadequacy of information available in relation to women's needs, women's lack of access to it, and their absence in decision-making with regard to information policy etc. The Global Platform for Action also retained "increasing women's participation in and access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication" as one of the critical areas of concern. Implementation of the recommendations contained in the critical areas retained in the 2 Platforms for Action should therefore be integrated into the implementation of the other critical areas of concern.

B. Training

Given the limited number of women who have access to science and technology either as a field of study, a career or as private users, there is a kind of fear or mystery that has surrounded the technology which needs to be eliminated through appropriate training. In this context, there should be an attempt to increase the numbers and quality of the technologists available to work for and with women's organizations. It is also important to develop women-centred training methodologies that would be well suited to provide women with the necessary skills and knowledge to use and develop information and communications systems in their organizations.

Training programmes for women should be strictly based on needs assessment in terms of resources, training and information while provisions should be made for the

creation of community focal points to encourage wide access. Besides, women's multiple roles should be taken into account when designing training programmes to ensure that they have built-in flexibility to accommodate them and their special needs such as support services for child care etc.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The gender-specific nature of development is a reality that is based on the cultural and social roles that women and men play and the subsequent difference in needs and aspirations. Information technology therefore must respond to the concerns and needs of both men and women appropriately and equitably. To this end, all governments, NGOs and international partners should agree to work within the following goals:

1. To ensure basic education for all, with emphasis on scientific and technical literacy so that all women and men can effectively use science and technology effectively to meet their basic needs;
2. To ensure equal access for women and men to advanced training in science and technology and to pursue careers as technologists, scientists, engineers etc
3. To achieve gender equity within science and technology institutions including policy and decision-making bodies;
4. To revise statistics and data collection methods to ensure that gender-disaggregated statistics are systematically and regularly collected both on participation rates and on differential impact. Common methods of data collection should be ensured;
5. To ensure that the needs and aspirations of women and men are equally taken into account in the setting of research priorities and in the design, transfer, and application of new technologies;
6. To ensure that all women and men have equal access to the information and knowledge, particularly scientific and technological knowledge that they need to improve their standard of living and quality of life;

7. To recognize the local knowledge systems and their gendered nature, as a source of knowledge complementary to modern science and technology and valuable to sustain human development;
8. To develop and strictly apply ethical codes of conduct in order to provide clear boundaries of acceptable practice both in research and in application in all sectors;
9. To inject a sense of responsibility on those who have access to information technology to share their resources including skills with the less advantaged, considering the forbidding cost factor;
10. To establish a gender-balanced committee at the national level to review the national situation regarding gender, science and technology and to devise action plans and a time table for their implementation to achieve the above goals.

V. CONCLUSION

At the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women in Dakar Senegal, November 1994, ARCC was given the challenging responsibility for coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of the implementation of the African Platform for Action in consultation with existing intergovernmental organizations. In the context of the monitoring process, particularly with regard to the implementation of the critical area of concern on "women, information, communication and the arts", ARCC may wish to ensure that the policy document "Building Africa's Information Highway" to be presented to the ECA Conference of Ministers at its twenty-second meeting in May 1996, has incorporated the gender dimension adequately as recommended in the APA. The document is a proposed plan of action prepared at the request of the ECA Conference of Ministers which should guide African nations in developing their information networks and databases as established in the African Economic Community.

More specifically, ARCC as the legal mechanism to promote and monitor the effective mainstreaming of the advancement of women in all sectors, may wish to send a message to the ECA Conference of Ministers to ensure that the plan of action as proposed in the document referred to above incorporates the gender dimension.