

2<sup>ND</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON  
THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ELECTRONIC  
GOVERNANCE  
(ICEGOV2008 CAIRO)

1<sup>ST</sup> – 4<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER, 2008

# LACK OF EQUAL ACCESS TO ICTs BY WOMEN: AN E-GOVERNANCE ISSUE

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

- Sachdeva (2004) says understanding government and the process of governance is the first step in e-governance. In majority of the cases e-governance is visualized to be an IT initiative but it in reality is a governance issue. In a holistic view e-governance consists of change management, resource management, process reforms, administrative reforms, organization restructuring, information management, knowledge management, legal reforms, technology management and many more components.
- While the provision of services and information is only one aspect of improved governance, what ICTs have also done is to make possible a more transparent functioning of the government.

- Underlying the debate on accountability, governance, and transparency is the fundamental principle of a citizen's right to information.
- Increasingly, this is being recognized as an inalienable right of every human being, and many governments across the world have passed laws, whether willfully or through public pressure, that provide all citizens access to non-sensitive documents and records. Countries whose governments display greater transparency in their processes and functioning are the ones with better quality of life of their citizens.
- Correspondingly, people who do not have access to the processes and structures that define the way they lead their lives continue to be extremely vulnerable. In this context, ICTs are being recognized not as mere tools, but as weapons to make governments accountable, sensitive, and answerable to their people.

- The opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies have yet to reach a great majority of potential users in the world. We are witnessing an increased disparity between users who have the means to access information and those who do not. The major barrier to this is political will. Following that, the constraints are mostly educational, technological and financial in nature. In a world of more than six billion people, literacy rates are low in developing countries.
- Barely 2% of the world's population is linked to the Internet and most people on the planet have never made a telephone call. In the US, Internet access costs a user only 1% of average monthly income, whereas in Uganda it costs more than a month's average (per capita) income. Similar gaps persist between men and women, especially in developing countries. In China and South Africa, for example, women users comprise only 7 percent and 17 percent of users respectively.

- These statistics underline the fact that there is no sole digital divide but lots of overlapping ones: between old and young, men and women, rich and poor, urban and rural and, above all, between developed and developing nations. This paper will however, concentrate on the gender divide in ICTs.

## **2. DECLARATIONS SUPPORTING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

- In recognizing the limitations faced by women all over the world, many international conferences and other declarations have sought to promote women's use of ICT. Some of these declarations include the 1975-2000 Conferences on Women which sought to address the gender digital divide gap.
- The 1995 World Conference on Women (Beijing) delineated a strategy to promote greater access to communication by women internationally.

- The Beijing+5 Conference (2000, New York) called upon development cooperation to strengthen the capacity of women to use new technologies
- Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952); the Civil and Political Rights International Pact (1966); and the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979).
- The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), include the eradication of extreme poverty, universal access to primary education (age 7-14 years) and the promotion of gender equality as their top three objectives. All three of these involve the education of girls. In high-income countries, 95% as many girls as boys attend primary and secondary schools. But in sub-Saharan Africa the figure is just 60%.

- These international declarations are clear manifestations that there is a problem with equal access by women to ICTs which have to be addressed in order to fully realize the benefits of ICTs.

There are still key questions to be answered.

- Has Ghana emphasized gender equality to ICT access in her ICT policies?
- How many women have access to participating in the decision-making and control of ICT deployment?

### **3. KEY CHALLENGES**

- Studies indicate that fewer women are accessing and using computers and the internet compared to men. Former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), 2003, added that “there is a gender divide, with women and girls enjoying less access to information technology than men and boys.”

- A recent global data review on the access of females to ICT showed that overall; women do not have access to ICTs to the same extent as men in the vast majority of countries in the world.
- Available Ghana national-level data collected by the ITU and others indicates that, women's rates of internet use will not automatically rise in tandem with national rates of internet penetration

### **3.1 Other Challenges**

- There is a lack of consideration of the role of Women and Girls in ICTs in the planning and implementation of programmes.
- Minimal women education and skills' enhancement in ICTs are limitations in many African countries, including Ghana.
- The biological and social roles of women circumscribe their ability and opportunity to function on equal basis with men in most economic spheres.
- Women are overwhelmed in meeting local and family needs in developing countries. Hence, not linked to a global digital economy.

- Women's lack of access to family property or institutional finance make it difficult to engage in self-employment in the ICT sector such as establishment of businesses in Telecentres or cybercafés.
- The effect of discrimination against women restricts their access to the professions and jobs which would provide access to high-end ICT which have a higher gain and economic status.
- There exists is a general pay inequality between men and women due to women's inadequacy in ICT skills.

## 4. INDICATORS

- Statistics on ICT and gender, show that from anecdotal evidence, there is very little data on the gender gap in the digital divide. Very few national-level sex disaggregated statistics and indicators on ICTs have been collected. Where it is available, the data may not be reliable or comparable. However, it is clear that the numbers are small with very limited distribution.
- Women population make up over 51% of the Ghanaian population but remain barely visible in the public arena.

## **4.1 Gender Imbalance In Education**

- Discrimination against girls/women starts at an early age. Social customs often give preference to boys. Girl children often have domestic work and responsibilities that leave little time for school. Even when girls make it to school, they often drop out, because the schools do not meet their needs. The teachers, curriculum and textbooks frequently reinforce gender stereotypes.
- Female students are especially susceptible to sexual and emotional harassment. Very few females therefore, are able to continue schooling to levels that will enable them understand ICTs.

## 4.2 Gender Imbalance Statistics

- In 1987, 1 of 11 children at secondary school in Ghana was a girl – which illustrates educational gender imbalance.
- Over half (57.4%) of Ghana's population are literate; Out of the remaining %, illiterate females constitute 50.2% as 33.6% of the male illiterates.
- Although the Gov't in Ghana has reversed the discrimination policies through The Ghana ICT for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD), inequity still this exists.

- In the University of Education, Winneba, established in 1992 to become a pre-eminent Teacher Education University, an area of study where females are normally inclined to pursue, female student enrolment was 19% until 2003 when it increased to 30%. The latest figures for 2006 show that enrolment has gone up to 36%.
- Meanwhile, the percentage of females for Distance Education is 60%. Which indicates that women prefer to remain closer home to mind their families while studying instead of living in hostel facilities on campus.

- At the University of Cape Coast, only 10% of females are faculty members with female students numbering 33% of the entire student body;
- the University of Ghana, Legon has females constituting 19.9% of the student body and only 18% as faculty members.
- Finally, at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, females are 28% of the total student population, while only 9% of females are faculty members.

## 4.2 Women in Employment

- Employees with higher ICT skills gain more in income.
- Unemployment rates are lower for men than women in Ghana even though participation rates for females have increased considerably in recent years. Statistics available indicate that female-to-male unemployment ratio declined from 1.46:1 in 1992 to 1.16:1 in 1998 and to 1.06:1 in 2000, and in 2003 a marginal increase to 1.09:1.
- The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) in 2005, estimated unemployment at 10.4 percent for males aged between 20 and 24 years and 10.9 percent for females in the same age group.

- Although the gender difference is marginal, it is possible that by this age, some of the females may be preoccupied with motherhood responsibilities which may interfere with their ability to obtain formal employment.
- In the developing countries, Women earn lower income than the men as statistics in 2007 in the Sub-Saharan Africa, indicate that women earned only 15.5% of the total earned.

- Despite the concerted efforts of NGOs such as UNIFEM and AQSolutions whose vision was to create opportunities for women in the ICT industry, for more than 4 years, and until the company branched into low-skilled ICT services, there was only the ratio of 1:24 female Programmer. The 29 year old female Programmer who was educated at the country's premier University of Science and Technology, graduated as one of 21 females in a class of 150 students.

- In September 2007, female representation was only 1% of the participants of a capacity building workshop for Science and Mathematics teachers in the northern region of Ghana.
- The northern region of Ghana had its first ICT workshop for women in February 2007, organized by the Ghana Information Network and Knowledge Sharing – GINKS, a non-governmental organization advocating the use of ICTs. This conference attended by a cross-section of female traders, teachers and social workers, emphasized the marginalization of women in ICTs not to be the result of only primitive cultural beliefs

- In a draft Evaluation Report in May 2007 of the Global Teenager Project (GTP), the International Institute of Communication and Development (IICD), and Rescue Mission Ghana, in which 30 communities participated, in 2006, female representation was 1/3 of the participants. The objective of the workshop was geared towards building capacity to use ICT tools for enhanced teaching and learning and to promote cross-cultural learning through virtual networks.

## **5. EMPOWERING WOMEN WITH ICTs IN GHANA**

- On the other side of the coin, even though the ICT sector is one of the last areas to open to a gender perspective, Gender analysis has advanced substantially in recent years.
- Since the establishment of the National Council on Women and Development (NCWD) in Ghana, the national machinery for promoting gender equality, various programs and projects have been initiated to empower women in ways that support poverty reduction.

- The National ICT for Accelerated Development (ICT4D) Policy document which became a reality in 2003 is expected to guide in the implementation of developmental programmes with ICT as the facilitator. The key elements of the Policy Statement are summarized to include increase in women's access to ICTs by ensuring a gender balance and positive discrimination in favour of the girl child to create a balance in trained information technology manpower.
- To promote women's rights to expression and communication through the use of ICTs and to develop a reporting mechanism to monitor progress towards gender equality in the area of ICTs.

There is also an acknowledgement by the document that most women in Ghana are disadvantaged in the use of ICT and that,

- “.....If access to and use of these technologies is directly linked to social and economic development, then it is imperative to ensure that women and children in Ghana understand the significance of these technologies and use them. If not, they will become further marginalized from the mainstream of the country and the world. Many people may not appreciate the concern for gender and ICT in Ghana on the basis that development should deal with basic needs first. However, it is not a choice between one and the other. ICT can be an important tool in meeting the basic needs of all and can provide the access to resources lead, especially women out of poverty.”

This document shows government's admission of marginalization of women in ICTs and the willingness to address the issue to a positive end. However, critical questions requiring answers remain.

- Has the policy made any difference to Ghanaian women's access and which areas of governance does one feel the impact of women the greatest?

## **5.1 Women in Local Governance**

- In answering the questions in the last paragraph, it is important to note there is low percentage of women participation in legislation in Ghana and most African countries. Therefore, it is important to review women's participation in local governance. As statistics at the District Assembly (DA) level indicated that out of 547 female candidates that contested in 1998 election only 196 (36%) were elected and in the 2002 DA elections, 341 out of the 965 women who contested the elections were elected.
- Ofei-Aboagye (2006), has suggested that through ICTs at the local level, women could communicate and be communicated to.

- The above statistics, from another side, Indicates that, there is an increase in women participation in politics by over 80% in 2006.
- It is important to note that until 2006, women had not made up more than 10% of Assembly Members (local government representatives).
- After 50 years after of independence, Ghana still does not have an appreciable number of women in Parliament (National Legislative Assembly).
- However, there is considerable increase in the numbers of women offering themselves for the 2006 district elections .

- Even though women are assumed to be equal citizens and form 52% of the population, they are usually limited in the way they engage the political process during elections. In the 1996 parliamentary elections, out of 59 women who contested 18 (30%) were elected, constituting 9% of 200 MPs; in 2000, the number of female candidates increased to 101 but the number elected was 19 (18.8%), constituting 9.5% of 200 MPs.
- In 2004, the number of women that contested was 104, including 14 sitting MPs, out of which 25 (24%) were elected constituting 10.9% of 230 MPs.
- Come 2009, the total number of elected women MPs which currently stands at 25 may decline further as some sitting women MPs have lost their seats at the recent party constituency primaries.

- Thus Ghana lags behind countries like Uganda, South Africa and Botswana, where the number of women in parliament has increased over the years. It was hoped that after Ghana signed onto several national and international conventions such as CEDAW and Beijing Platform, the situation would improve.
- Majority of these charters and conventions signed and ratified by Ghana calls for 30% to 40 % female representation at all levels of power and governance but with such few numbers of women in the legislature, how can women contribute to the development and deployment of ICTs in their favour?

- Mawuli Dake, in an article on Ghanaian Women and the December 2008 elections reported on the Association for Women in Development (AWID) website, laments that, “...*the choices we have in the 2008 elections significantly exclude citizenry majorities like women, .....*” **Mawuli also noted that** “.... *there will be fewer women to choose from among the parliamentary candidates to represent the people. .... Despite there being more women than men in Ghana, they have never had anything close to majority in political leadership*”. Even though the numbers are increasing, the impact has been minimal because a majority of women are more concerned with basic survival.

## **6. RECOMMENDATION**

- In the developing world, more than 113 million children—nearly two thirds of girls—do not have access to a formal education. Of all students who do start school, one third drop out before the fifth grade. Again, most are girls.
- It is therefore suggested, that training methods should be gender-sensitive and designed to overcome specific barriers that prevent women from using ICTs.
- Gender-mainstreaming is another positive way of resolving this issue.

- At the GINKS workshop mentioned elsewhere in this paper, Martine Koopman, Knowledge Sharing Officer, IICD advocated FOR women in the Northern Region of Ghana to form groups and fight together for their right to access ICTs, and create a conducive environment for themselves for the use of ICTs in a safe environment in order to achieve equality and fight discrimination. The Ghanaian phenomenon is related commonly to direct discrimination due to culture.

- According to Mansell, R, “a critical aspect of working toward the visibility of gender –related information is the impact it can have on policy making at both civil society and governmental levels. Without relevant and readily accessible gender information, policy making will ignore gender concerns and become ineffective and gender-blind.” This is why gender-mainstreaming is strongly advocated for.

Nancy Hafkin, 2002, puts it thus,

- “sensitizing women’s organizations and civil society in general to the gender impact of ICT policy issues may pay greater dividends, in terms of awareness raising of a large segment of society to the social implications of technology policy.....awareness needs to be created that the impact of ICT policy is the realization of the women’s right to communicate and access productive resources for their benefit and the benefit of their families.”

- Additionally, women need not only master the technology and also conquer technophobia, but need to pursue political imbalance, bearing in mind that the essential context of policy is politics.

## 7. CONCLUSION

- Need for gender blind policy on participatory governance in Developing countries.
- Need for women empowerment and support in education and learning.
- Need for gender blind use of ICT policy.
- Women' should leverage e-Governance and citizen journalism to make themselves relevant in governance.

**Thank You For Your  
Attention !!!**