



## Women and ICTs in Africa

By Carlyn Hambuba

### Abstract

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an effective instrument for increasing choices for women, for multifaceted empowerment. They are enabling mechanisms for achieving specific goals. In this case, ICTs can be great mechanisms for expanding knowledge and access to information among different categories of women especially rural women, and can enhance their abilities to negotiate for their resource share and participation.

### Key words

digital divide, gender and ICTs, community radio

## Women and ICTs in Africa

During the 2007 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), world leaders committed to turning the digital divide into a digital opportunity for all. They also agreed on a set of targets for improving access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), to be achieved by 2015 at the latest.

When we talk about ICTs we refer to 'a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information.' These technologies include computers, the Internet, broadcasting technologies (radio and television), and telephony (fixed and mobile). In the last 20 years we have witnessed a revolution in the continent regarding ICTs in how we communicate,

share information, collaborate on different initiatives in- country and across borders and how information is generated, stored, retrieved and transmitted.

We have seen a proliferation of media houses and the democratisation of information including that, which is in the custody of the governments in Africa. Most developing countries in Africa are fast in catching up with higher income countries in terms of the use of and access to mobile phones and Internet usage and broadband. Many hard to reach areas are now easily accessible. The major hindrance in the use of ICTs in Africa is the inconsistent power supply, even in larger economies like that of Nigeria. The limited availability of consistently collected data and poor

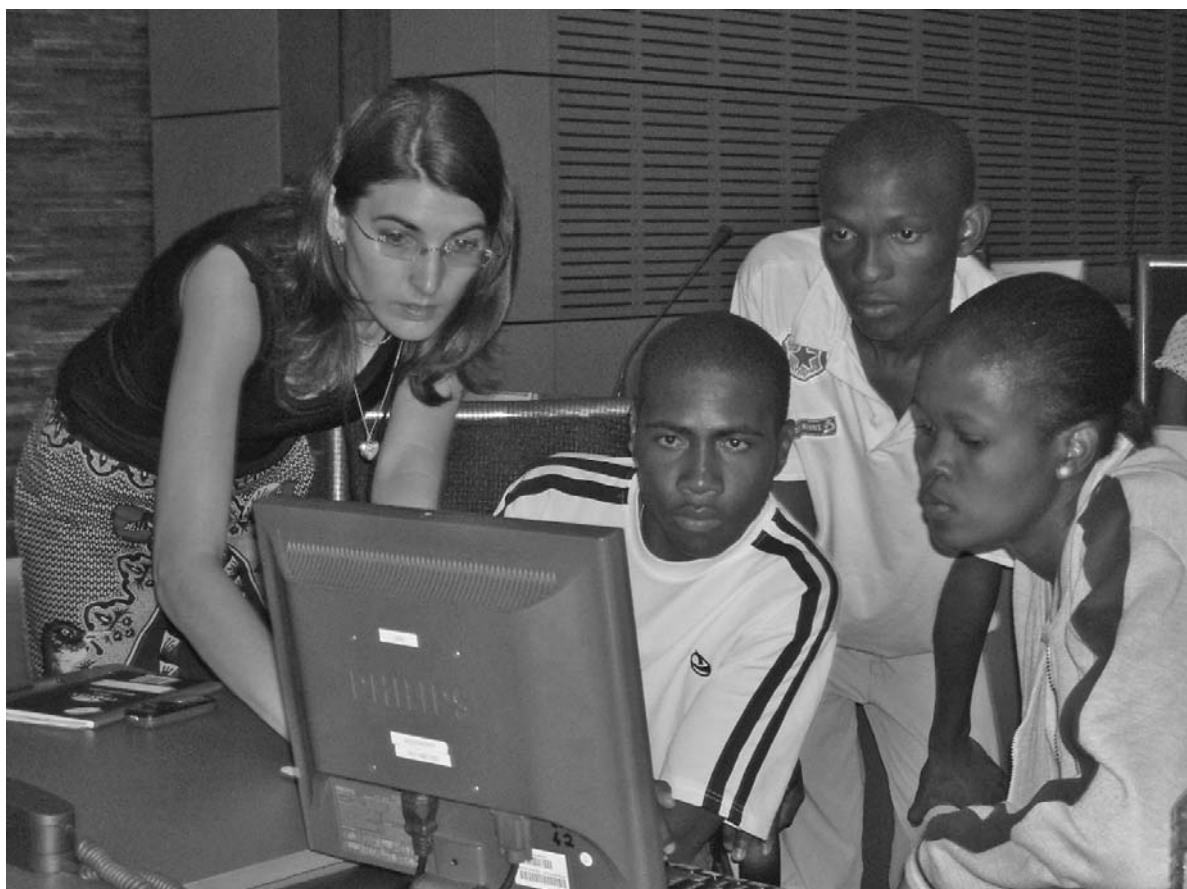
financing of national statistics institutions makes it difficult to assess and ascertain the actual coverage of access to ICTs.

However, several countries in Africa have undertaken surveys, mainly as part of the general household surveys, to ascertain levels of accessibility. Different media houses have also undertaken mini-surveys to ascertain the most appropriate ways of meeting the information needs of different communities and interest groups. For example, in Uganda the survey conducted by the Uganda Media Women's Association in the late 1990s before the organisation set up the Mama FM Radio station was useful in establishing the levels of access women have to radios in different communities (urban, semi-urban and rural communities), determining the interests and information needs of different categories of women and how best to involve the different stakeholders in developing and broadcasting their programmes.

### Current status/trends

Despite the revolutionary progress made in Africa in the ICT sector, ICT accessibility for women in Africa is still a big challenge. The majority of women in Africa still live in poverty making access to ICTs such as the Internet, and mobile short text messaging (SMS) a matter of hard choice. Due to financial constraints and limited economic power, most African women face the dilemma of choosing whether to spend their money on use of ICTs or to buy food for their families and meet other very basic needs of survival. The unequal power relations between men and women that contribute to differential access, participation and treatment of men and women in the Information Society is in most cases over looked in the various interventions that have made over the years.'

For instance, the great majority of women have no buying power, no access to modern means of



Tonya Graham assisting on online chat about gender violence hosted by Gender Links

Photo: Cindy Dzanya

communication and are further excluded from the mainstream of ICT development on account of certain challenges that impede their integration into the Information Society. Such challenges include low literacy levels and education, the language barrier, time constraint due to multiple roles of women in their public and private lives, the time consuming activities in the care economy, the cost of accessing ICTs, certain social and cultural norms that prohibit women from using public access points and the urban bias in connectivity (Balakrishnan 2002).

### Women and ICTs in Africa

ICTs can be instruments of empowering different categories of women with technological information and skills for political, economic and social participation, and to achieve sustainable food security and livelihood. It is clear that ICTs offer enormous potential for transforming the lives of women in developing countries. They can provide access to training and market information that can help women's businesses succeed, and they offer a direct and more inexpensive means of communication for women's organisations that enable them to share knowledge on a quick and collective basis.

However, they alone cannot bring about lasting change. They need to be coupled with responsive legislative and policy frameworks and changes in people's attitudes about the potential they have to transform their lives. ICTs can be effective tools to expand knowledge among different categories of women and can enhance their abilities to negotiate for their rights and enable them to effectively participate in their governance. The Geneva Declaration of Principles of 2003 also acknowledges women as important stakeholders in the information society and it states, 'We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the information society. But, to date women still lag behind in access and participation in the ICT sector.'

ICTs are increasingly being used in democracy work to strengthen solidarity, increase communication among



Super Connected!

Photo: Gender Links

organisations and individual activists, share information quickly and mobilise effectively. In particular, the introduction of ICTs in developing countries, especially throughout Africa, has sparked growth in the use of short message service (SMS) technology on mobile phones and the use of the Internet by individuals in different communities, including in remote or hard to reach rural areas.

Projects launched by Google and Fahamu have provided Internet and mobile phone use in remote areas of Africa, enabling towns to become more informed about events that affect and impact their lives. For example, the UmNyango Project, launched by Fahamu, distributes mobile phones throughout rural communities in Africa so men and women can report human rights violations on a regular basis. Moreover, investments in ICT development in Africa are slowly leveling the global playing field and enabling people to become more active politically.

### Case study: Rural women reporting: the power of community media

By Deborah Walter

*'This workshop taught me to be responsible. It also taught me to be patient with people. When coming here I had so many unresolved issues but when interviewing some people I found I was healed. I also learned how to approach people, how to do a radio programme, edit scripts, which I had no clue about.'*

In a three-part project initiated by FAHAMU Networks for Social Justice and in collaboration with local partners, CMFD Productions worked with rural women in South Africa, Kenya, and Sierra Leone to produce radio/ podcast programmes about women's rights, especially related to rural women. In each of the participatory workshops women, mostly from rural communities, identified *their* priority issues, learned basic journalistic skills, conducted interviews, and produced on-site radio programmes. Community radio stations and groups received copies of the programmes, and Pambazuka, an online initiative of Fahamu, disseminated the programmes through their podcast service. In each of the three countries, participants worked together to interview sources using digital recorders and produce radio programming on diverse issues, such as women's inheritance rights, HIV/ AIDS, early marriage, elections, and access to health care. The collective voices from the three countries show that in many cases rural women all over the continent face similar obstacles when it comes to accessing health and rights. Yet, these programmes also very clearly show that given the opportunity everyone, even people who have never held a microphone or conducted interviews, who may not be literate, or be considered to be 'experts,' have a voice and the abilities to make it heard. In doing so, the process not only empowers the individual, but also provides a unique perspective in the media on the world we live in. This project was created to both produce programmes that actually speak to the issues that these women face, and also empower those who participated through learning new skills and new confidence in finding a way to make their voices heard.

*'Now I can be able to write a story. I would like to have another workshop like this so we can improve our skills and knowledge, in that way we can go to our community to pass the knowledge that we get. I enjoyed this workshop a lot because now I know I can be a journalist if I want to, and that is another opportunity.'*



### The story of Thandiwe Zondi

Thandiwe Zondi was married to a chief by force when she was a young girl. When he died mysteriously in 1990, her husband's family refused to allow her access to his body, claiming they did not know the chief was married. A young male relative who was to inherit the chieftainship evicted Thandiwe, heavily pregnant with her 6th child, and her five little daughters from their home. When she tried to resist the eviction, he sent a group of former Kwa-Zulu police heavily armed with guns to intimidate her.

Thandiwe went back to her parent's home. When her father died a year later, her brother tried to evict her, claiming that he was the sole heir. The Director of Rural Women's Movement (RWM) saw Thandiwe's story in the local newspaper and went to look for her in a remote rural area. Thandiwe became a member of RWM, allowing her saga to be used as a living example. Thandiwe's story was written up in submissions to parliament and in articles in the newspaper, discussed on radio and TV shows, and circulated to sister organisations at home and internationally. Thandiwe cannot seek compensation through the courts because she was evicted prior to the 1996 Interim Constitution that would have allowed her to take legal action. RWM has a number of similar cases that cannot go to court because the crimes were committed before 1996.

During the workshop, Thandiwe Zondi produced a 5-minute feature on evictions, in which she interviewed a traditional leader, a police officer, and a representative from The Commission of Gender Equality, asking tough questions on the practice and how it could be allowed. Thandiwe's daughter, Sne Zondi, created a feature on forced marriage.

ICTs in the form of community radio provides an important opportunity for rural communities, especially women. This project shows that there are unique perspectives and stories from engaging with rural women, and this is not just empowerment, but also good journalism. It also shows that there are creative ways to create a presence for communities such as rural women on the internet, through such mediums as oral communication, as demonstrated by the use of the radio programmes for online podcasts. Community radio provides an ideal medium for this, because of its accessibility to local communities. Linking radio with new technologies, where appropriate, can also enhance voices. Evidence from the three training programmes conducted by FAHAMU Networks for Social Justice and in collaboration with local partners, CMFD Productions suggests that longer-term engagement with community would have significant impact.



Thandiwe Zondi, right, with Sizani Ngubane

There is also evidence on how women are successfully using ICTs in their work, such as in Uganda where the Uganda's Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) uses information gathered by women parliamentarians from the Internet to address critical issues to their constituents, and as input in reviewing laws enacted by parliament. In South Africa Women's Net is providing, training and building the capacity of policy-makers and members of civil society to influence policy-making processes to redress gender-based inequalities in that country. Information is provided on how to draft proposals for parliamentary committees and how to bridge the gap between those who have technology and those who do not. Many women's rights organisations are using ICTs to contribute to the reduction of all forms of violence against women and girls through their prevention, urgent response and treatment initiatives.<sup>2</sup>

However, women's participation and access to ICTs

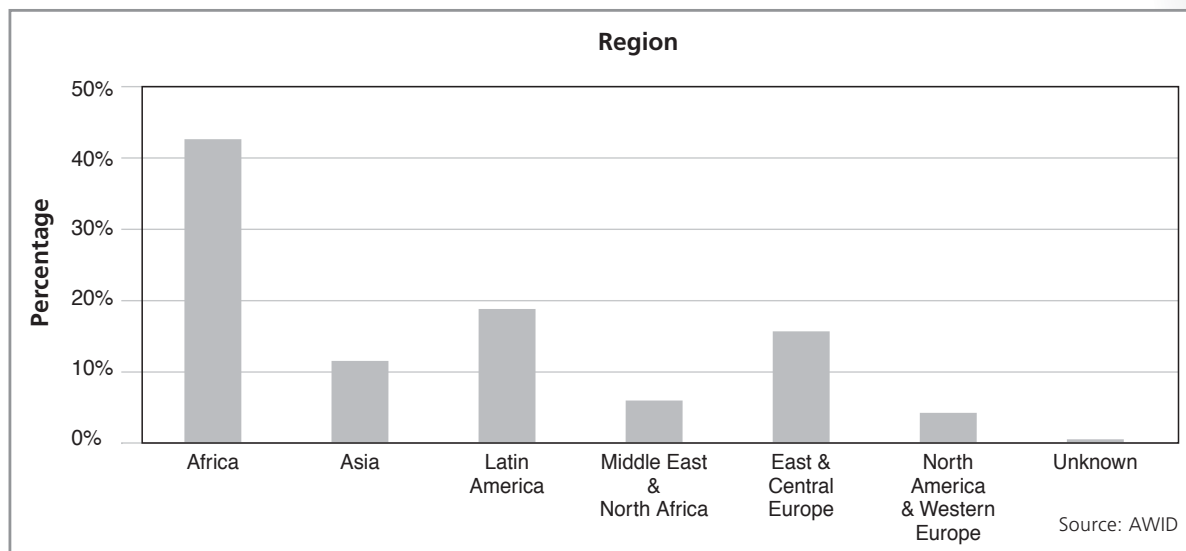
in Africa is restricted, and ensuring that the policies that guide their use are gender-responsive remains a challenge. This is mainly attributed to low levels of literacy, limited technological access, know-how and the often inadequate infrastructure and high cost of connectivity in developing nations. Insufficient legislative and policy frameworks to enable free access to information prevent many women from taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by ICTs.<sup>3</sup> Based on AWID's most recent survey results (2006), of the 958 women's organisations that responded, only 161 mentioned to work on ICTs, accounting for 17% of the sample.

The regional distribution of these organisations is as follows: 43% based in Africa, 12% based in Asia, 19% based in Latin America and the Caribbean, 6% in the Middle East and North of Africa, 16% in Central/Eastern Europe and 4% in North America and Western Europe. The graph below illustrates these percentages:



ICTs are valuable tools, Sakina Mohamed at a Taking Stock event during Sixteen Days of Activism

Photo Colleen Lowe Morna



In Africa ICTs are mostly views as a commodity which is controlled, sold and bought, rather than a tool to harness development. This is also hampered by lack of free access to information in many African countries. Many countries still do not have modern laws and regulations that support free access to information. In countries where such laws exist very little has been done to increase access to ICTs that support broad-based sharing of technologies, information, and knowledge, and promote respect for human rights and freedoms.

From the graphical representation shown above, it is clear that many women’s organisations in Africa have not sufficiently explored the potential of ICTs in enhancing there work.

A number of issues of concern have been identified relating to women and ICTs in Africa

- Increasing levels of Poverty in some communities
- The use of ICTs for sabotage activities that affects the work of human rights defenders including those promoting the rights of women
- Increased exposure to pornography which has led to some households to limit access to computer and internet for their children
- Lack of ICTs skills limit usage among women
- The fast changing technology and the costs involved makes it difficult to respond appropriately to the

ICTs needs of women in a timely and efficient manner

- Cultural inhibitions and control over women in some communities
- The costs involved
- The differing levels of development – increasing the gap between the rich and the poor in terms of information access
- Lack of and/or poor implementation of government policies and legislation where it exists, that would benefit women in their struggles to realise, protect and demand for their rights

### Internet governance

The internet governance discussion gained momentum during the WSIS 2003 Geneva, and also WSIS 2005 in Tunis. A Working Group established after a United Nations-initiated World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) defined Internet governance in its June 2005 report as: *the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet.*

With the increasing sophisticated forms of ICTs including access to broadband infrastructure, understanding and addressing Internet policy issues



Journalist Zenilda Vulola of Angola's Radio Ecclesia using internet for investigative research

Photo: Deborah Walter

has become a critical issue in Africa. The growing awareness of the Internet's major social and economic impact in both developed and developing countries has brought the question of Internet Governance.<sup>4</sup> The debate on issues relating to the governance of the Internet and on the policy and decision making process that are governing and shaping the development and allocations of its resources, technologies and related systems is no doubt an outcome of the growing importance of the social, economic, cultural and the political role of the Internet. The question of who owns or governs the Internet; who are the key decision-makers as per the issues governing the Internet; which aspects of the Internet to govern and by whom; the role of specific international bodies and governments and civil society in determining the rules governing the operations of the Internet including issues relating to the allocation of its resources can all be seen within the context of the growing importance of the Internet.

In many African countries, the citizenry do not fully understand how Freedom of expression relates to internet governance. A number of African have enshrined freedom of expression and human rights in their constitution. The majority of the African countries addressing the freedom of expression and human rights issues view them as issues within the context of constitutional rights of their citizens rather than as Internet Governance public policy issues. In many countries, measures taken to secure internet in terms of security and to curb crime have lead to violation of freedom of expression, which is guaranteed in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of human rights and also in the WSIS Declaration of Principles.

### Recommendations

ICTS have the potential to help address issues facing women and provide opportunities to build the capacity and potential of women to improve their quality of



Chatting about gender in cyberspace

Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

life. However, there is a need to understand how to harness these technologies of the benefit of women. There are a number of key areas of possible action.

#### *Governments*

- Use of ICTs to help inform women so that they can make appropriate and informed decisions that affect them, their families and communities. For example, government can increase awareness among women on how the legal system and parliaments function and how they can effectively engage in their decision making process through use of ICTs.
- Governments to invest in the use of ICTs for storage and easy retrieval of data and information in institutions that are responsible for processing land titles, trading licenses, birth and death and other legal documents that affect women's rights to own, control and have access to development resources.
- Support the use of ICTs in education (formal and informal) and literacy programmes to build ICT skills among young and adult learners and increase awareness about the opportunities for development using ICTs.
- Support girls and women to take courses that are relevant for employment in the ICTs sector at higher education levels.
- Formulate policies that encourage women to use ICTs within the household, in their businesses and also make ICTs affordable for women.
- Invest in ICTs for development and also allocate money from national budget to build women's capacity to use ICTs in advancing themselves.
- Strengthen monitoring of implementation for policies and guidelines on ICTs at different levels and in all sectors.
- Regularly review ICTs indicators to assess use and contribution to the goals of poverty eradication at national and regional level.

- Promote the use of ICTs to increase understanding, knowledge sharing and action on HIV/AIDS, other preventable diseases that are the main causes of maternal and child morbidity and mortality as a gender and human rights issue.

#### *African Union*

- Develop ICTs policies that are specific to Africa which promote regional integration and networking among African countries.
- Take more concrete steps towards the creation of an enabling ICT environment for women in Africa.

#### *Civil Society*

- CSOs need to document best practice stories how women's participation in development processes at various levels has been enhanced by use of ICTs and how usage has improved their lives.
- The digital divides at various levels need to be seen as opportunities for further engagement on ICTs with women.
- Build capacity for collection of vital data which inform policy formulation and implementation.
- Partner more with the ICTs industries (public and private) to support women's access to vital information, knowledge, skills, and opportunities for development.
- Seek to strengthen the practical and technical skills of women entrepreneurs that women organisations work with through basic training on the Internet, e-commerce, international trade, business management and gender issues.

#### **Conclusion**

By addressing challenges and seizing opportunities, ICTS can be harnessed to benefit women in various spheres – education, health, rights, etc. The can be important tools, when put to good use, can make a big difference not only in the lives of individual women, but also to communities and countries, as the efficacy of individuals improves their contributions to society. Empowering women through ICTs is another peace of the puzzle towards human development and a rights-based Africa.

#### **References**

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#### **Writers Bio**

Carlyn Hambuba is a Development Communication Specialist currently working for the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) in Nairobi-Kenya as a Communications Officer. Prior to joining FEMNET, she worked for CARE International Zambia as Communication and Advocacy Coordinator. She has also worked in the media in Zambia and contributed stories to international magazines, blogs and websites such as The Women's Enews, EIS Africa, and The Environment Times.

#### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncc.gov.ng/ITUWorkshop/itu-arpm/women.html>
- <sup>2</sup> Unifem
- <sup>3</sup> Where is the money for Women's rights in ICTs?
- <sup>4</sup> Opening the Internet Governance Forum debate in Africa working paper August 2006