

# THE ROLE OF INFORMATION IN ENHANCING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses the vital role information can play in enhancing the status of women in developing countries. It highlights the critical contributions of Information Communication Technology (ICT) towards the up-liftment of the status of women in developing countries. The paper implores every woman to acquire technological skills and knowledge necessary for maximal utilization of the provision of ICT.*

*The paper goes ahead to encourage women and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) in Nigeria to build a network to access local, national and global information. One of the ways this can be guaranteed is for women to take advantage of the numerous benefits of ICT, especially the Internet. The paper also calls on governments to increase access to education for women and the girl-child.*

**KEY WORDS:** Information, Information Communication Technology; Women's Status; and Developing Countries.

## INTRODUCTION:

Information is an essential resource for individual growth and for survival. Thus, there is often the need for individuals to obtain timely and relevant information. An informed mind is an enriched mind and if one is not informed he will be deformed. Every rational person needs some form of information for his /her day-to-day existence and well - being.

The emergence of computer, telecommunications networks and powerful new expert systems has revolutionized every aspect of the social, political and economic life of men and women. With Information Communication Technology women all over the world now have fresh choices and opportunities at their disposal. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is a boon that offers women opportunity to achieve



their dreams and aspirations. As a technology, it is more friendly, democratic and participatory for women than the hitherto traditional media (television, radio and the press).

It also provides increased opportunities for women to have access to education, information and knowledge.

### WHAT IS INFORMATION?

A web search on the definition of information gave approximately thirty – three (33) definitions, ranging from the very simple, to the very technical. Below are fifteen (15) out of the thirty-three definitions of information and the web addresses where they are found:

- a message received and understood.
- data: a collection of facts from which conclusion may be drawn; "statistical data".
- knowledge acquired through study or experience or instruction.
- formal accusation of a crime.  
[wordnet.Princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnet.Princeton.edu/perl/webwn)
- the result of processing, manipulating and organizing data in a way that adds to the knowledge of the person receiving it.
- data the internal auditor obtains during an audit to provide a sound basis for audit findings and recommendations. Information should be sufficient, competent, relevant, and useful.  
[www.indiana.edu/~iuaudit/glossary.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~iuaudit/glossary.html)
- a measure of how surprising something is. [xray.bmc.uu.se/~kenth/bioinfo/glossary.html](http://xray.bmc.uu.se/~kenth/bioinfo/glossary.html)
- organized data which is understood to have significance and meaning. [www.christlinks.com/glossary2.html](http://www.christlinks.com/glossary2.html)
- data that have been processed and presented in a form suitable for human interpretation, often with the purpose of revealing trends or patterns. [www.cdu.edu/~ischmitt/1351/glossary.htm](http://www.cdu.edu/~ischmitt/1351/glossary.htm)
- organized data that has been arranged for better comprehension or understanding. What is one person's information can become another person's data.  
[home.earthlink.net/~ddstuhlman/defin1.htm](http://home.earthlink.net/~ddstuhlman/defin1.htm)
- facts, concepts, or instructions; any sort of knowledge or supposition which can be communicated. [cedar.web.cern.ch/](http://cedar.web.cern.ch/)



[CEDAR/glossary.html](http://CEDAR/glossary.html)

○ message used as the basis for decision -making. [www.pbs.org/weta/myjourneyhome/teachers/glossary.html](http://www.pbs.org/weta/myjourneyhome/teachers/glossary.html)

○ data explicitly described in the manuscripts.

[www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/manuscripts/glossary/](http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/manuscripts/glossary/)

○ any communication or representation of knowledge such as facts, data, or opinions in any medium or form, including textual, numerical, graphic, cartographic, narrative, or audiovisual forms.

[www.gils.net/gilsappb.html](http://www.gils.net/gilsappb.html)

○ information is a term with many meanings depending on context, but is as a rule closely related to such concepts as meaning, knowledge, instruction, communication, representation, and mental stimulus. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/information](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/information)

## INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Information Communication Technology, according to Hamelink (1997), encompasses all those technologies that enable the handling of Information and facilitates different forms of communication among human actors, between human beings and electronic systems and among electronic systems.

This includes all communication devices or applications such as radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network, hardware and software, satellite systems as well as the various services and applications associated with them like video conferencing, teleconferencing etc. Hamelink categorized these technologies into five, namely:

Ø Capturing technologies

Ø Storage "

Ø Processing "

Ø Communication "

Ø Display "

**CAPTURING TECHNOLOGY:** are input devices that collect and convert information into digital form such as keyboards, bar code readers, Image scanners etc.

**STORAGE TECHNOLOGY:** are variety of devices used to store, and retrieve information in digital form. e.g. floppy disks, flash disks, CDRoms etc.



**PROCESSING TECHNOLOGY:** are the systems and application software e.g. Ms Word, Excel that are required for performance of digital ICT.

**COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY:** are devices, methods and networks to transmit information in digital form. These include local area networks (LANs), wide area networks (WANs) such as the Internet, modems, and electronic bulletin boards, cellular phones, fax machines etc.

**DISPLAY TECHNOLOGY:** are variety of output devices for the display of digitized information, e.g computer screens, digital television sets with automatic picture adjustment, printers, digital videodiscs etc.

### **WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

Reports and statistics paint a depressing picture of the social, political and economic conditions of women in developing countries in general and Nigeria in particular. Health statistics recently show that maternal death rate in Nigeria is high. The global report indicates that Nigeria ranks second in the list of countries with high maternal deaths. (Anaele 2003). In South West Nigeria, maternal mortality rate was 165 per 100,000 live births while in the North East it was 1,549 per 100,000 live births. This is about one of the highest in the world (Grange 2004).

Women should have the right to enjoy life and health to the fullest. Health here is not limited to the physical aspect alone, it also refers to good mental health. The enjoyment of good health by women would increase their productivity in all aspects of public and private life. In the developing nations, women's health problems are often ignored. Most developing countries do not have enough health centers equipped to handle problems related to female reproductive health. Both men and women should have access to family planning in order to be able to make informed decisions about how many children they intend to have and how to space them (Beijing 1995).

In the same vein, statistics on education reveals a high level of illiteracy among women. Sani, (2001) revealed that in 1996 the total literacy rate among men and women in Nigeria was 56.1 % and 41.2% respectively. A gap of about 15 %. Although, statistics has shown that the ratio of girl



child education to boy child education has been improving since 2003, statistics according to a World Bank report showed that in the year 2003, 82% of girl children were in both Primary and Secondary school but this has increased tremendously to 84% as at 2004 (World Bank Group Report 2004).

Education is a necessity and an essential tool for enhancing the status of women in developing countries. An educational system that does not discriminate between boys and girls or men and women benefits everyone. Access to the highest qualifications is necessary for women, if they are to act as agents of change.

The Nigerian experience shows that politically, men dominate the arena of power while women are only used to achieve men's political aspirations. This reflects in the number of women representation in executive and legislative positions. But now in Nigeria the power imbalances that impede the progress of women politically is gradually becoming a thing of the past. Women now hold important posts in the government of this nation. Some of them are: Dr. Mrs Obiageli Ezekwesili – Minister for Education, Mrs Oluremi Oyo – Special Adviser to the President on Media matters, Senator Florence Ita-Giwa - Special Adviser to the President on National Assembly matters, Mrs Esther Nenadi Usman – Minister for Finance, Chief Mrs Erelu Olusola Obada – Osun State Deputy Governor, Alhaja Salimatu Badru – Ogun State Deputy Governor; –Mrs Halima Alao – Minister of State for Health; Mrs Inna Maryam Ciroma – Minister for Women Affairs; and Mrs Abike Dabiri -Senator Representing Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State etc. The equal participation of women and men in decision-making will go a long way in enhancing the status of women.

Ironically, majority of women in Nigeria are poor with no access to land and credit facilities yet they contribute about 60 % of the nation's food produce and constitute about 70% of the rural agricultural workforce. (Balogun 2004). The above situation forms the basis for the clamor and agitation for women to form organizations that will enhance their status.

Documents in this regard include: the Mexico Plan of Action 1975, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies 1985, Ratification of the Convention of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993; and, the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for



Action 1995. All these women organization sensitize their members themselves about the role of ICT in their day to day activities, of course, the sensitization of women by these Non governmental Organizations (NGOs) has a multiplier effect.

Nigeria, like all other countries in the world has ratified various international conventions and human right protocols. This has resulted in the establishment of the National Council of Women Society (NCWS), Ministry of Women Affairs and the establishment of women societies and several NGOs like: Women Centre for Peace and Development (WOPED), Centre for Adolescent Research Education and Sexuality (CARES) all of which are to carry out women agenda locally and nationally. The Association of Women Librarian in Nigeria (AWLIN) as an arm of the Nigeria Library Association, (NLA) Oyo State Chapter has a role to play to advance, develop and empower women through Information Communication Technology (ICT).

#### **WHY ARE WOMEN STILL SO FEW IN ICT?**

From my observation, women in the developing countries, especially Nigeria, are just beginning to use ICT; we are still in a tiny minority of ICT users. The evidence that women are using ICT for their development concerns is scarce. However, it is important to ensure that women's participation in ICT be appropriate on their situation, perspectives and concerns.

Women should try to overcome illiteracy. In Nigeria according to UNESCO estimates, the rate of adult literacy in 1995 averaged 42.9%. For males, it was 32.7% and for female 42 % Mabawonku, (2001). This implies that women have limited access to education, which is one of the most important tools used to enhance the status of women in developing counties; therefore modalities for improved education and training for women and girls should be put in place.

The Internet and its technology continue to intimidate many women, and some of them consider it an area best left to the men. This is because, in most schools the girl child and women are encouraged to pursue careers relating to roles like catering, teaching, sewing, secretarial studies etc. Only a few are in engineering, computer systems administration, medicine and so on. Therefore, most women have no knowledge and skills to utilize



information and communication channels, but for them to benefit from the new technology, they require training in computer and internet literacy. Women Action, (2000), Otiye-Igduzor, (2003).

Women 's lack of time, influences the form and content of ICT. Most women will not perceive the benefits of ICT, nor will they be able to use them to their full potential, unless they can see an immediate benefit or result of participation in ICT, Olorunda & Oyelude, (2003).

A personal experience with other gender electronic fora indicates that, women generally do not have the same time or patience for chat, philosophical discussion and generalized networking, instead they want hard, factual data.

In the same vein, most rural communities where a majority of Nigerian women reside lack information and telecommunication facilities. Where such are available they are not easily accessible due to poor road networks. Also, the high cost of computer equipment and connections as well as erratic electricity supply further worsen the situation.

Nwankwo, (1996) stressed that studies indicated that women read much less than men. Their relatively lower readership makes them less knowledgeable about what is going on in the public and private sectors and the world around them. This invariably makes them feel incompetent and inadequate about commenting on issues that affect them but now through online teaching and learning women can acquire skills and attain the highest levels of education from their homes. Omekwu, (2001) noted that information and communication technology have created a completely new world of learning and teaching via computer-based teleconferencing, web school, web teachers, online learning modules and courses. These provide unlimited opportunities for women education and development.

### **ENHANCING THE STATUS OF WOMEN THROUGH INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)**

It is a well-known fact that women enhancement through ICT has become a focal issue internationally. This has resulted in the organization of several international and local conference, workshops and seminars e.g. Australian Technology Network and Women's Executive



Development, Conference 11-18 April, 2006. (See Appendix 1 for more conferences).

The explosion of electronic communication among women around the world in the run-up to the Beijing conference is an example of the use of ICT by women as a tool for information dissemination, communication and organization. World Wide Web (WWW) sites set up to disseminate information on the Conference saw one hundred and fifty-eight thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two (158,722) requests for information before the conference alone. Huyer,(1997). E-mail distribution took place through listservs Beijing 95 and Beijing+5 Conference, electronic conference set up by the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), and the International Women's Tribune Center Newsletter, Globalnet, encouraged communication and information – sharing among hundreds of thousands of women around the world. Omeku, (2001) writes that Internet provides a lot of information on job opportunities through web-based job agencies that match job seekers curricular vitae with employment vacancies. For example, South Korean women are now seeking employment outside their homes and are also making their presence felt in the traditionally male-dominated world of business, particularly in the area of Information Communication Technology (Women Action 2000).

Supporting the above view, Nwokolo,(2004) observed that women are now defecting from jobs that take them away from their family to set up their own business as a result of wide opportunities created by the internet. There are now female consultants, website designers and many more who use the web for businesses. And for those who are still in public sector employment, Internet and e-mail has made it possible for them to work from their homes. Also, physical offices are being replaced by digital or virtual ones via teleconferencing. This makes it possible for a woman to live in New York and be working in California, hence face-to-face communication is becoming less-imperative.

Aside from strengthening women's voice, ICT can benefit women in other ways such as:

- Facilitating participation among women in different sectors and in different regions.
- Providing the information that women need to improve their own well-being and that of their families, and to more efficiently fulfill



their tripple roles.

- Allowing the exchange of views, opinions and news that might not be possible in other media under government censorship and control.
- Protect people, for example, under the apartheid regime, the reporters of Africa Information Afrique (AIA) in South Africa (many of whom were women) used modems and computers to transmit news reports out of the country.
- Having an immense impact on virtually all aspects of our lives. The rapid progress of these technologies opens completely new opportunities to attain higher levels of development.
- Contributing to the sustenance of production and consumption patterns and reduce traditional barriers, providing an opportunity for all to access local and global markets in more equitable manner.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, women in the developing countries, especially Nigeria, will need, for instance, to leapfrog into modern ICT if they are to stay relevant in the present day world. Women should be encouraged and even induced to join women groups and associations such as the Association of Women Librarians in Nigeria (AWLIN). They should equally endeavour to even join the nla – online – forum, and support networking, so that information can be disseminated centrally and flow to individual members.

In order to facilitate access for women from other classes and sectors, ICT will need to be located in local institutions to which women have open and equal access, such as health centers, women's NGO libraries, churches, mosques etc. For example, placing Internet access in a local health center will facilitate women's access to the health information they need for themselves and their children (Women Action, 2000). When women are familiar with the benefits of ICT, they are quick to use them. With Information Communication Technology women can attain the highest level of education and they can have flexible job arrangements, which can allow them to work from home and have less busy work schedules.

Women, government and non-governmental agencies should come together as a team to formulate policies and programmes that are geared



towards enhancing the status of women.

Women should no longer sit on the fence and watch things happen. They should come out and speak out their minds on issues that affect them e.g. The world's first ever Mothers summit which was held from Sunday, May 14 to Tuesday May 16, 2006 in Abuja was a good example of women speaking out their mind.

In addition, women non – governmental organizations in Nigeria should build a network that will give access to information on local, national and global issues so as to enhance their performance.

The Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) should rise up to the task and consolidate its pioneer effort at networking by launching a website and getting women going once more on positive paths.

Government should enhance information flow among women by organizing conferences, workshops, symposia and seminars.

Government should equally provide adequate information and telecommunication infrastructure in both rural and urban areas.



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