

Using the Focus Group Interview Method to Investigate the Bringing of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to Rural Women in Southern Africa as a Way of Bridging the Digital Divide and Gender In-Equalities

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Abstract: A proper use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by rural women in Southern Africa could assist in the bridging of the gap between genders. The accessing of information enables people to know their rights. Government policies and the establishment of infrastructure for the effective implementation of ICTs could facilitate gaining access to information and communication technologies by rural women. The aim of this study was to establish the effectiveness of the use of focus group interviews as a method of data collection.

Keywords: Women, gender research, in-equalities, information and information technologies (ICT).

1. Introduction

Worldwide, studies indicate that wherever internet has been introduced, men become the predominant users. There are, however, a few exceptions to this phenomenon. Data collected in the USA in 2002 reveals that gender differences in the use of internet are non-existent in the US (NTIA 2002). In other countries such as China, the proportion of women users in the five years rose from 1997 to 2002 by 27% to 39% (CNNIC, 2002).

Within the Southern African societies, women in rural areas are active participants in development and they carry out a triple role of production, reproduction and community work. They are in the majority nationally and their relevance to economic and political perspectives of rural community development cannot be overstated. Yet ironically, they lack influence and accountability for all these activities in which they are so heavily occupied. They are systematically denied access to land, credit extension service and technology (Moser, 1993). The subordinate position of women with regard to control over resources and decision-making is further exacerbated by legal and educational systems, the media and family planning programmes. Unlike their male counterparts, the involvement of women in institutionalized and local decision-making is limited to a few individuals and, therefore, they seldom appear in national statistical data. Such stereotypes not only hinder development thinking in general, but also further aggravate the insecurity of women in various issues. To a greater extent the marginalization of women emanates from their lack of knowledge and information. This information can be accessed through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

One of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, Zimbabwe, has just completed an e-readiness survey exercise and ICTs are a major contemporary development issue. ICT promotion has been highlighted as an important tool in ensuring that marginalized groups, particularly women are included in the development of the global information society. This exercise has more relevance now, in view of the e-readiness exercise phase in National ICT strategy formulation than ever before. However, in all the workshops carried out in the country recently, the researchers discovered that rural women were excluded in the exercise and their voices are still unheard on the issues concerning and involving them. In this study the researchers focused on the identification of the effectiveness of the use of focus group interviews as a method of collecting data for the study.

2. Methodology

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews on focus groups of women in four rural districts of Zimbabwe. The total population in the four targeted districts is sparse and was estimated at about 5 000 people at the time of the research. The sample consisted of two villages in each of the districts surveyed. The focus groups consisted of 10 members each and there were 8 groups interviewed per rural village. The total number of focus group members interviewed per village, therefore, came to 160. The total sample for the interviewees surveyed therefore, was 640 people, a 7,8% representation of the universe.

The interviewees were gathered together at workshops formally called by the researchers to gather information on women on the use of ICTs. Of the 8 focus groups in each village, two groups were interviewed at communal gatherings known as *Ilima* (where ladies meet together to do voluntary communal work to assist one another).

Data were analyzed through content analysis. The theme was used as the unit of analysis.

2.1 The questions for the interview

- Q. 1 Do you see any value in the use of information and technology communication (ICT) by women in your area?
- Q.2 What role do you play in the use of ICTs?
- Q.3 What role should you play in the use of ICTs?
- Q.4 How should you play your role in the use of ICTs?
- Q.5 Are there sufficient facilities for the use of your ICTs in your area?
- Q.6 If the answer is yes; how best can these facilities be used?
- Q.7 If No; what ought to be done to have the required facilities?
- Q.8 What effect if any, does your involvement in the use of ICTs affect you as a woman?

3. Results

An answer to the first question indicated that most women in rural areas are aware of the importance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). They value the technology that brings them closer to the rest of the world and that enables them to be in touch with others.

On the second question the theme identified was that the women in rural areas do not play any role in deciding on the use of ICTs. Men and government departments at Head Offices in towns make most decisions. Rural women do not have a say on the kind of ICT to use and when it could be used for the community.

The theme on an answer to the third and fourth questions indicated that women desire to be involved in decision making for a on what to use and when to implement such technologies. They felt disempowered, discriminated against and neglected. The country's traditional culture sets women aside as minors.

On the fifth question and the subsequent last questions; the underlying theme was that there were insufficient facilities in rural communities to enable the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). The most popular and available information and communication technology available was the transistor radio. Cellular phones were scanty and their use hardly feasible in the remotest parts of the country where there was no set up infrastructure to connect to the airwaves. There was a need for proper development in rural areas to establish an easy connection with urban areas. A need for good roads and satellite links is imminent in rural areas. Women felt left out in the decisions made for such developments.

4. Discussion

The poor, the illiterate and the marginalized, women in the rural areas of Zimbabwe have not been able to fully access and utilize information. This phenomenon has made them vulnerable to the digital divide. The limitation to information with regards to these women is further worsened by a limited infrastructure, incomplete and uncoordinated national systems, inadequate, participation of various stakeholders to develop ICTs, limited and uneven capacities to access new ICTs. This has deprived rural women of opportunities to make proper and informed decisions concerning their day-to-day activities.

According to the survey, rural women need to be taken on board and be involved in decision-making from the initial stages of the establishment of ICTs in Southern Africa. This could eventually bridge the glaring gender-inequalities.

Although infrastructure and sophisticated technology are important for the effective use of ICTs, their absence does not necessarily annihilate the use of this technology. The use of Radios and cellular phones does not need heavy investment in infrastructure. Countries differ in terms of their technological sophistication. In the case of Zimbabwe, judging by the amount of ICT available per capita in the country, it is among the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country had a population of 13 million in 2002. In 1995 Zimbabwe had 36% of the population living on less than US\$1 a day. The gross domestic product in 2002 was - R1.0. The country had 19 telephone mainlines per every 1 000 people in 2002. In 2001, Zimbabwe had 12.1 computers per 1 000 people. ICT expenditures per US\$ million was nil in 2002. Radios per 1 000 people in 2001 were 362 and television sets were 30 per 1 000 people. Information and Communication Technologies in the country are mostly concentrated in the cities which have a good infrastructure in general.(World Data Group, World Bank, 2002).

4.1 In-equalities reflected on women

The lack of access to information and communication technologies by women in Zimbabwe stems from their discrimination. Rural women in particular in Zimbabwe still suffer unprecedented inequalities in the sharing of resources compared to their male counterparts. The biggest challenge emanates from cultural beliefs about women. The latter are regarded as minors (*abesintwana*). The education of a girl child, for example, is discouraged because it is regarded as enriching the family to which the girl will be married. Compounding this problem is the lack of resources in rural schools. The facilities in some of the rural schools are so poor that sending children there is as good as sending them to a place where they will wait until they mature into adulthood after which they leave to look for jobs to fend for themselves. They come out of these schools hardly qualified for the levels at which they were studying. This establishes a vicious circle because such school leavers hardly gain the capacity to look after their future dependants.

In technologically advanced countries where there is free and easy access to information and communication technologies, women have been found to be more likely to use the internet to communicate with friends and relatives (Rice, 2004). On the other hand, Mossberger *et al* (2003) identified the influence of demographic aspects such as race, education, and income on poverty stricken African-Americans and Latinos. These subjects had less access and lower information across the genders.

Women in Zimbabwe are marginalized in decision making mostly in rural areas. Men attend village meetings without their female counterparts. Information and communication technologies because of the socio-economic deterioration of the country are generally based in urban areas.

4.2 Attempts at bridging the gender in-equalities

There are attempts by the legal policy framework in Zimbabwe to redress some of the inequalities between men and women. This is evidenced by the enactment of the Legal Age Majority Act (LAMA) and the Matrimonial Causes Act. The statutes allow women the rights to own property independently of their husbands. The anomaly however, is that while unmarried women may own property in their own names, those married under customary law are not allowed to have joint

ownership with their husbands. Impliedly, the act deprives women of their rights since most of them are married under customary law.

The involvement of various stakeholders including women's groups in efforts to bridge the gender-inequalities resulted in the enactment of The Administration of Estates Amendment Act that was implemented in October 1997. The act had the effect of removing inheritance laws that discriminated against widows. The gradual involvement of women in decision making processes has led to some improvements in redressing gender in-equalities in general in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwe Millennium Development Goals: 2004 Progress Report indicates that the participation of women in all sectors has been up to 40% for those women in senior civil service positions and about 30% for those in parliament. The goal had been to improve participation to 50:50 by the year 2005.

In primary and secondary education some progress has been made in bridging gender-inequalities mainly in urban areas. The ratios for primary enrolment in 1994 were 81,8% male and 82% female. By 2000 a gender disparity was noticeable again in primary school enrolment. It stood at 96% for males and at 90% for females. The target again according to the millennium progress report was to reach 100% by the year 2005.

Primary school completion rate in 2000, stood at 77% male and 74 female. In the same year the net secondary school enrolment rate was noted at 42% male whilst that of females stood at 40%. On the other hand the secondary school completion rate stood at 82% male and at 73% for women. Again, the target was to reach 100% by 2015 for both sexes. One of the main reasons for female scholars having a lower completion rate is that some generally get pregnant whilst attending school and thus discontinue for a while to bear children.

Even though currently the country has serious economic problems, it aims at eliminating gender inequalities by 2015. It is worthy noting however, that despite all these good efforts and intentions by the country to bridge the gender in-equalities in information and communication technologies, economic hardships in the country hinder the necessary progress. Most rural areas, for example, have inadequate infrastructure required to make headway in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Cultural beliefs that are often rampant in rural areas are also an obstacle to progress. The slowness in diffusing negative cultural values emanates from the infrastructural inadequacies of the country. Information does not disseminate as quickly as one would want where the infrastructure is not developed. Information provides the knowledge of rights. There is therefore, a disparity of infrastructural development in rural areas and urban areas of Zimbabwe thus resulting in differences in the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

There is assistance also from international organisations in the country's efforts to bridge the gender in-equalities in ICT. The United Nations Development fund for Women (UNIFEM) has membership in a Zimbabwean committee dealing with an ICT policy. Women in business have also established connections with UNIFEM to ensure gender in-equalities in ICT are eliminated. Zimbabwe in collaboration with e-Knowledge in Southern Africa (EKOWISA) an organization with membership consisting of businesswomen, policymakers and the private sector has set itself to support women to deal with gender in-equalities in the region. EKOWISA focuses on gender mainstreaming in ICTs and is the biggest women's organisation in Southern Africa. (Zimbabwe Millennium Development Goals: 2004 Progress Report)

5. Recommendations for the development of ICTs in rural areas

The Southern African countries, Zimbabwe in particular, could maintain and strengthen the relations that already exist with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). UNIFEM has supported ICT policies for various countries including Zambia and Zimbabwe. The fund already supports NEPAD. Other ongoing projects include the support for health programmes such as HIV/AIDS. Specific projects by individual countries or collective submissions of countries as regions of Southern Africa could be made to the UNIFEM to target women in rural areas for

accessing information and communication technologies. Basic infrastructure such as boosters for radio networks and the use of cellular phones could be set up in rural areas.

Academic institutions of higher learning could forge research partnership relationships with relevant government departments to identify problems that need solutions. Research aimed at solving problems of women in rural areas could then be handled and the information disseminated to the benefit of these women.

Awareness campaigns could be launched in rural areas to inform both men and women in rural areas about the rights of women.

Government policies giving incentives to organisations that invest in areas that have fewer infrastructures could be established. For example, corporate taxes could be cut for those companies that invest in semi-urban areas closest to rural areas. This could lead to a gradual build up of ICTs. Women in rural areas would thus gain access to information and communication technologies.

6. Conclusion

Through the use of the focus group interview research methodology, it has been discovered that the gender-inequalities in the use of information and communication technologies in rural areas of Zimbabwe emanate largely from cultural challenges. Despite several legislations aimed at eliminating discrimination against women, in most rural areas of the country women are still regarded as minors. Women are excluded from decision-making forums. Government policies supporting women empowerment need further dissemination to all the parts of the country. Affirmative action programmes to advance women economically and politically ought to be emphasized. Women could also intensify campaigns for the advocacy of the recognition of their basic rights. The collaboration of women with organisations such as UNIFEM that are already in existence could enhance the furtherance of gender sensitivity. Once government policies addressing the inclusion of women into decision-making for a are in place and cultural stereotypes about women have been diffused, the urgency to develop infrastructure to access information and communication technologies across genders would follow suit.

Information and communication technologies are vital for the uplifting of standards of living for all. There is therefore, a need for organisations to facilitate the accessibility of ICTs by all.

The research methodology used for collecting data for this study has been effective. It is however, important to note that the methodology could have the following limitations:

- In focus groups, the views of the most domineering individuals within the group are the ones that tend to be taken.
- In some cases the understanding of the language used by the researcher may not be equally familiar to all participants thus presenting the problem of a limitation of the views of the respondents.
- Some individuals who might have good ideas might be too shy to express such views in public.

The limitations stated above, however, are very likely to have been minimized in this project because focus groups were many. Interviewing many focus groups could have had the tendency of providing corroborated data that resulted in achieving objectivity.

Focus group interviews as a research method for data collection are, therefore, recommended for researchers aiming at getting various views within the same target group. They are economical in the use of time for both the researcher and the participants.

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