

Profile

Claiming Cyberspace: Communication and Networking for Social Change and Women's Empowerment

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“Women in Africa are marginalised, geographically dispersed and lacking in access to the process of governance. To achieve political emancipation women need to acquire the skills to enable them to access, publish and propagate issues, opinions and experiences from their own perspectives. Emancipation is a political process that requires organising, strategising, accessing information, lobbying and advocacy. ICTs offer networking, creating peer support, campaigning and sharing information – spaces that women can control and use for their own interests.” (Anriette Esterhuysen, Executive Director, Association for Progressive Communications [1])

The global context

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) [2] and the Internet [3] offer vast, new and unprecedented opportunities for human development and empowerment, in areas ranging from education and the environment to health care and business. But they are also among the key contributing factors to social and economic disparities between different groups in society.

Many civil society activists, gender workers and academics believe that the Internet has become a powerful and widespread communication platform, while at the same time acknowledging that it is subject to increasing commercialisation, corporate ownership and control. ICTs are part of the globalisation process – a process that takes place on unequal terms, and which often increases social and economic inequality between and within countries. But the Internet and related tools can also be used for resistance, social mobilisation and development when they are in the hands of people and organisations working for freedom and justice. [4]

Access to ICTs is typically divided along traditional lines of development, resulting in unequal access. This has become known as the “digital divide” or “digital exclusion”. This divide is often characterised by high levels of access to technologies (including the Internet) in developed countries, while the technological infrastructure required for access in less developed nations is at a very low level, because of poverty, lack of investment and resources, lack of literacy and low levels of education.

Women are in at the deepest end of this “digital divide”. The gender divide is one of the most significant inequalities to be amplified by the digital revolution, and cuts across all social and income groups. Throughout the world, women face serious challenges – economic, social and cultural obstacles that limit or prevent their access to, use of, and benefits from ICTs.

The African context

The “digital divide” is still at its most extreme in Africa. Access to technological facilities usually taken for granted in the developed world is limited, with comparatively few on the continent having access to a television or fixed-line telephone, much less a computer or the Internet. In spite of the widespread sharing of media that takes place in Africa (for example, ten or more people may read the same newspaper or share an Internet account, and a whole village may use a single telephone line or crowd around a television set at night), sub-Saharan Africa is slipping behind even when compared to South Asia, the other least developed region. [5] And the gap between Africa and developed countries remains vast.

It is critical that gender activists take this African reality into account when using ICTs for women's empowerment on the continent. In order to use ICTs strategically and effectively, we must first understand the access constraints faced by women. We need to consider creative, innovative and relevant usages of ICTs, which speak to the access and resource challenges faced by women. This might mean repackaging information, using radio to interface with the World Wide Web, and using mobile phones rather than e-mail for campaigns.

ICTs as mobilising tools for the women's movement

ICTs can be used as powerful mobilising tools for social action. With the development of computer-based communication and information exchange, women's organisations from around the world have been able to widen the scope and impact of their work and to strengthen networking capacities. The Internet provides cheaper and more efficient communication and information exchange opportunities. Women are able to link their computer networks with indigenous and non-electronic communication systems such as newsletters, radio and theatre, providing and creating new and challenging opportunities for information-sharing.

As the amount of relevant electronic information grows, women are recognising the necessity of learning and obtaining the appropriate tools to access and manage this information, so that they too can take part in the electronic exchange of information. But, as is the case with all ICTs, computer networks were not developed with women's needs in mind, nor were they intended to service women from all around the globe.

As women have become more active in ICTs, they have become more aware of the different impacts of ICTs. With the spread of ICTs came a new category of "have-nots", the so-called "information-poor" communities and countries. Many organisations and volunteers have responded by becoming involved in the so-called repackaging and translation of electronic information for the non-connected majority of women: from the Internet to radio, e-mail to fax, and so on. This is particularly significant in African and other developing country contexts, where the telecommunications infrastructure is poor or lacking, and "older" forms of communication are still relied upon.

However, women are using their limited access to ICTs and related resources creatively and innovatively. Here are some inspiring examples:

- Women'sNet, a website built by a team of South African women's organisations, offers a timely and reliable gender information resource with locally produced content. [6]
- Stories on, for example, the sexual abuse of women during the war in Northern Uganda are collected, recorded and played on radio stations. Then they are repackaged and posted to the World Wide Web and linked to African-wide and global organisations dealing with violence against women. These in turn are used to lobby governments, and are presented at forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in order to bring about policy change. [7]
- A Senegalese woman, unable to find local data on the number of women Ministers in African governments, contacted the international APC women's network through its mailing list. A woman in Geneva with access to UN agency information faxed the relevant details to Senegal. Her colleague was able to use this information to support advocacy concerning women's participation in African governments.
- A women's resource centre in Zimbabwe makes information from the Internet available in their documentation centre and to the beneficiaries of their rural libraries programme.

- A South African woman, working on a campaign for women's reproductive and health rights, posted a message to a mailing list concerning campaigns in other African countries. Women from two other African countries responded with information on legislation that could help the advocacy campaign in South Africa.
- A woman from Nicaragua prints out information from the Internet and shares it with women who are market vendors or who work in community kitchens.
- People opposed to Women Abuse, a South African NGO, led a "Stop Rape" campaign backed by other anti-violence and women's organisations. They sent out a petition via e-mail and, within a matter of hours, had signatories from as far afield as Cuba. [8]

The role of the Association for Progressive Communication's Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP)

APC WNSP is an international network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of ICTs, including the Internet. We believe in and promote the construction of information and communication societies that are people-centered, inclusive and equitable. Our approach to gender and ICT work involves an understanding of power relations in society. This includes an awareness of the unequal power relations between women and men, North and South, rich and poor, urban and rural, connected and unconnected. Our work involves actively transforming these relations of inequality, while remaining fully aware that ICTs can be used to either exacerbate or transform unequal power relations. Part of this recognition includes an awareness of the limitations of ICTs: that in and of themselves, ICTs cannot create gender equality, or end poverty. However, they can be tools for social action and positive change.

We number over 100 women from more than 35 countries. Included are individuals, women's groups and organisations, all working in the field of gender and ICT, and actively supporting women's networking. Members are specialists in areas such as training, information facilitation, technical work and policy issues. Many work on a voluntary basis, and are mostly experienced network users rather than formally trained ICT experts. We come from different backgrounds and target different areas: among us are activists on issues such as housing, environmental protection and women's health; we are librarians, journalists, web developers, trainers, technicians and user support providers. Some of us are independent activists, and some are members of women's organisations.

APC WNSP is a networked organisation that reflects the motivations and interests of all participants. It is inclusive, accessible and pragmatic. The programme operates through a system of minimal administration and co-ordination, combined with maximum output in activities, in an open, secure, and respectful online environment where all participants can work and meet. The programme works primarily in an online world. Using a combination of e-mail, mailing lists and real-time text and voice "chat", we are able to co-ordinate, develop action plans, implement activities, support and mentor one another, while maintaining and strengthening our organisational and personal relationships. We also meet face-to-face whenever opportunities present themselves (at national, regional or international workshops and conferences, for example) or through explicitly funded workshops and meetings of the programme.

APC WNSP promotes the strategic use of ICTs to enhance the effectiveness of the work of the women's movement, in initiatives such as those described above, and many more. Our staff and members are directly involved in different issues within the women's movement, which gives us access and enables us to gauge how ICTs can best be used as mobilising tools. APC WNSP is aware that in order to make ICTs work for all women, we need to take a

proactive position on important issues such as network access, user-friendly interfaces, relevant content, gender-sensitive training and policy. This forms the heart of our work.

APC WNSP's herstory

APC WNSP emerged in 1993 in response to several convergent needs and demands within the women's movement. These demands arose most significantly through the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (UNWCW), and the rapid development of international communications technologies. A global initiative was developed to facilitate access to and use of computer communications for women organising around the UNWCW. An APC WNSP-led team of 40 women, representing 25 countries and speaking 18 languages, worked together to provide and manage a computer networking facility to provide Internet access, information services, training and user support to the women participating in the conference. This triggered the growth of regional networks, as women went back to their home countries and began promoting the use of Internet tools.

APC WNSP is thus an international network that strives to respond to the needs of national and regional networks by developing activities and projects that respond to regionally defined priorities. It has active regional networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and there are increasing signs of activity in Central and Eastern Europe. These national and regional networks are one of the great strengths of APC WNSP.

For nearly 14 years, APC WNSP has worked around the globe to bring the use of information and communication to under-served women and communities as a tool for women's empowerment, gender equality and social transformation. "Our strategy is to get women central, active and visible in all walks of technology. We want to see women everywhere," says Karen Banks, who has co-ordinated APC WNSP for ten years. "We don't want it to be a surprise to see a woman running a wireless shop, fixing a personal computer, or leading a campaign to break with the telecom monopoly in her country." [9]

Some of APC WNSP's activities

Lobbying and advocacy on gender and ICT policy issues

A critical area of gender and ICT activism for APC WNSP is lobbying for greater gender inclusivity in ICT policy processes and legislation. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a United Nations-driven multi-stakeholder process that acknowledges that while the digital revolution has extended the frontiers of the global village, the vast majority of the world remains outside of this unfolding phenomenon. It aims to bridge the digital divide through negotiating with governments a Declaration of Principles and a Plan of Action, and ensuring that ICTs contribute to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals. [10]

The WSIS process has accelerated activity around ICT policy, including within civil society. The WNSP and regional networks hosted a global networking for change and empowerment Forum to catalyse a Gender and ICT Advocacy Movement. The Forum was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2004 and provided a space where APC WNSP could consolidate the growing gender and ICT advocacy network and focus greater attention on the need to locate gender issues at the centre of all ICT policy and practice processes. [11] In March 2005, APC WNSP went on to launch a gender and ICT policy portal at the international Commission on the Status of Women meeting. [12]

Evaluating how ICTs work for women [13]

APC-WNSP believes that it is vital, especially in developing countries, to remain aware that ICTs can be used in ways that replicate or perpetuate gender stereotypes and biases, as mentioned above. Gender evaluation methodologies can and should be used to investigate

whether ICTs are being used in ways that change gender biases and roles, rather than simply reproducing and replicating existing ones.

In 1997, APC WNSP began an evaluation of its own research activities, as a contribution to the Global Knowledge conference held in Toronto. The idea was to contribute to the development of a generic ICT audit tool designed to reveal more about the role and impact of ICTs on development projects.

APC WNSP saw that more comprehensive tools and criteria were needed when evaluating the role and use of ICTs from a gender perspective. Women also want to see good examples of what can be done with ICTs. This initiative led to the development of the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM), an innovative gender analysis tool produced by APC WNSP for practitioners who share a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in ICTs. In Africa, GEM has been tested by Women'sNet, South Africa; Fantsuam Foundation, Nigeria; Women of Uganda Network; FEMNET, Kenya; Isis-WICCE, Uganda; and AMARC Africa. GEM provides a means for determining whether ICTs are really improving women's lives and gender relations, as well as promoting positive change at the individual, institutional, community and broader social levels. The free downloadable guide is available online at <http://www.apcwomen.org/gem>.

The growth of APC-Africa-Women

APC-Africa-Women (AAW) is one of the strongest of the regional networks associated with APC WNSP, and has 70 members. These include organisations and individuals, both Anglophone and Francophone, all of which work empowering African women's organisations to access and use ICTs for equality and development. AAW is the African regional network of APC WNSP, but it also operates within its own context and responds to the needs of local communities. To this extent, it operates both collectively and autonomously in the network structure. This is quite typical of the nature of the relationship between the national, regional and international "rings" of APC WNSP.

Since its first official activity in 1996, AAW has succeeded in raising African women's awareness of ICTs and broadening the strategic use of ICTs by women in important social justice and development processes. All of its activities are implemented with network members and strategic partners.

Working with women in Africa and all over the world, AAW focuses on African women's empowerment through:

- providing information to women about gender and ICTs, as well as tools and resources that facilitate women's access to critical information;
- providing regional support to women's organisations through developing networking capacity by using ICTs strategically;
- lobbying and advocating around gender and ICT policy at a regional and global level, including media-related global meetings and via partnerships with civil society organisations;
- delivering ICT training to African women's organisations, networks and initiatives;
- conducting research in the area of gender and ICTs;
- participating in regional and global events, and with our global partner APC WNSP, providing information dissemination services, running Internet caf  s and providing ICT training.

AAW's goals are:

- to promote the consideration and incorporation of gender in ICT policy-making bodies and forums;
- to initiate and implement research activities in the field of gender and ICT;
- to advance the body of knowledge, understanding and skills in the field of gender and ICTs by implementing training activities;
- to facilitate access to information resources in the field of gender and ICT;
- to create and sustain a forum in which African women and women's organisations can discuss issues of common concern and develop common actions towards meeting the other goals.

APC-Africa-Women's work in using ICTs for women's empowerment and gender justice

As a network, we raise funds to implement projects, working closely with our members, our global sister network and strategic partners. Our activities are closely tied to the needs of our members and the women's movement, and respond to the rapidly innovating and changing ICT environment. We have strong reciprocal working relationships with other developing nations in South America, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe and the Pacific.

What follows are brief descriptions of some of our recent activities, undertaken in Africa and globally as part of our sister network APC WNSP.

Women's Electronic Network Training – WENT [14]

The use of ICTs by African women's NGOs is steadily increasing. Not only are there more users, there are also more women and organisations that see the important contribution ICTs can make to their efforts. While this is an encouraging trend, there is also a need for training in the effective and strategic use of computers and the Internet. AAW also recognises the need for a safe, women-led environment that enables women to engage with the technologies.

The WENT Africa 2003 training workshop was held to build the capacities of women and their organisations to utilise new ICTs in social development work and policy advocacy. A total of 24 women participated in the WENT Africa 2003 workshop. These participants were women whose organisations play or will play a significant role in promoting the use of ICTs to enhance women's roles and capacity in social and policy advocacy, as well as to strengthen women's organisations and networks in Africa. WENT Africa 2003 used the Asia and Pacific Women's Electronic Network Training Workshop as a model and source of methodology. The Asian WENT has proved to be a highly popular and successful methodology, with workshops being held annually since 1999. We also saw this as a potentially beneficial South-South partnership and skills-sharing exercise.

In response to a need expressed by women's organisations in Africa, WENT Africa 2005 will focus on the digitisation of content. Women's organisations in Africa have been producing information in various formats (print, audio and visual) for years, and there is a need to digitise and make this valuable information available to a wider audience in an organised, easily accessible and adaptable way. A second and equally important motivation is to contribute towards changing the Northern-centred and male-dominated content of the Internet. Given the shocking statistics on the multiple forms of violence against women in Africa, the focus of the content selected for digitisation will be material on violence against women.

Free and Open Source Software (FOSS)

There is a strong and growing interest in Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) in response to the dominance of proprietary software developers, their exorbitant rates, lack of transparency and absence of any real transformative approach to ICTs for development. As speakers at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva, December 2003, said during a panel on “Free and Open Source Software: The potential power and possibilities for women’s organisations and networks”:

It’s all about women creating their own space and their own rules (Maria Suarez, FIRE, Costa Rica);

It’s about fighting ‘techno-colonialism’ (Alice Munyua, FEMNET).

AAW member Women’sNet hosted the Southern African Development Community FOSS camp for women [15] in August 2004. The workshop was held in response to the need to stimulate awareness and adoption of FOSS solutions among women’s organisations in the region, and to deepen understanding and skills among women technicians in providing technical support in the adoption and use of FOSS. It was also an opportunity to explore the different practical and strategic needs of women and men, counter the domination of the FOSS environment by men from the North and insert a women’s agenda into the FOSS movement.

The workshop built awareness of and demonstrated the potential of Free and Open Source Solutions (FOSS) in the non-profit sector, specifically women’s organisations. With the exception of certain Internet-related tools, open source software is not yet widely used in Africa, and there have been no initiatives aimed specifically at using open sources to support women’s organisations and networks. In order to realise the potential of open source software, it is necessary to raise awareness of open source tools at a variety of levels, provide easy access to open source tools, develop skills among end-users, ensure the ongoing development of support and training materials, develop capacity for planning and decision-making around implementing open source solutions, including an awareness of factors such as total cost of ownership.

Women at the camp spliced cables, partitioned hard drives, developed technology plans and shared stories of activism. The glue that held participants together was a commitment to gender equality and an involvement in the women’s movement, and the belief that using ICTs strategically in their work enabled more effective advocacy and networking. [16]

Information facilitation

According to Thembile Phute, of the Southern Africa Research and Document Centre, Harare: “What we are lacking as women, even those with access to ICTs, is the capacity to process and effectively disseminate the information which is at hand. There is a need for women in gender institutions and information management to be developed to be able to effectively manage the gender information process so that it reaches our sisters and brothers in the bundu.” [17]

One of the goals of AAW and its sister organisations is the facilitation of information for the women’s movement, using ICTs as one tool to achieve this. We make visible and accessible information on gender and ICTs through mailing lists, online discussions and via websites. We currently facilitate the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN), [18] host various mailing lists and from time-to-time, facilitate online e-consultations.

The majority of women in Africa are non-literate and live in rural areas. Rural areas are the most under-served in terms of telecommunications infrastructure. In recognition of this, AAW, in partnership with Women'sNet and the FAO/DIMITRA project, hosted an electronic consultation on "ICTs for the advancement of rural women's empowerment: strategies, platforms, tools and training." This was done in order to increase the number of voices in the workshop on advancing rural women's empowerment and widen the space for dialogue and sharing of experiences, information and resources. [19]

AAW also hosts Pula, an e-newsletter on women and ICTs in Africa. Pula aims to promote and profile the work and activities of women's ICT initiatives in Africa and to act as a communicative tool to link women to each other and to initiatives and opportunities. [20] Pula includes regular columns on gender and ICT policy, profiles of ICT champions, stories from the field, as well as resources, news and opportunities.

Research on women, gender and ICTs

AAW's research work has focused on understanding women's needs and perspectives in relation to ICTs. We use participatory research methodologies that are inclusive, empowering, respectful and action-oriented, with the goal of making women's realities, voices, experiences and wisdom visible and central in debates and decisions that affect their lives. In 2000, AAW, in partnership with FEMNET (African Women's Development and Communication Network), undertook research as part of a holistic programme of activities related to the Beijing +5 process, both in Africa and internationally. This resulted in the publication of *Net Gains: African Women take stock of Information and Communication Technologies*, which was compiled by Colleen Lowe Morna and Zohra Khan of Gender Links. [21]

In April 2004, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) catalysed the idea of hosting a pan-African workshop to develop an agenda and plan of action for an innovative gender and ICT research project. AAW was invited to co-host the event. The aim of the workshop was to develop a research project, involving a multi-country study in Africa, to measure the increased participation in the ICT sectors, by women in particular, since the introduction of cellular services, telecentres and other service opportunities. In 2005, a two-year project called the Gender Research in Africa on ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) has begun to explore the ways in which women in Africa use ICTs to empower themselves. The project comprises 15 sub-projects, reflecting 14 research sites in 12 countries, and one meta-research sub-project. The overall project aims to contribute to the debates focusing on women empowerment and ICTs through finding its own understandings of what "empowerment" and "gender" may mean in the African ICT context. The lessons learnt will be shared with policymakers and educators. Capacity-building is a important vital focus of the overall project. Researchers will be given the opportunity to develop research capacity as well as capacity to use ICTs effectively.

Conclusion

APC-Africa-Women continues to grow as a network and to be informed by our members' needs and the priorities of the women's movement. Our overarching goal of empowering African women's organisations to access and use ICTs for equality, development and gender justice means that we have to be involved in and aware of local, regional and global debates concerning women's empowerment, as well as those concerning ICTs for development and poverty reduction.

Integrating ICTs into the Millennium Development Goals, influencing the Beijing Platform for Action through the strategic application of ICTs, and following and influencing the NEPAD e-Africa commission to ensure greater inclusion of women are some of the areas in which we

will work in the coming years.

Meanwhile we continue to watch developing technologies such as VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), mobile telephones and wireless technologies, and will continue to become more active in these areas.

For more information on APC-Africa-Women, e-mail Africa@apcafricawomen.org or visit www.apcafricawomen.org.

“We are not afraid anymore of witch-hunts and the curses that rain down on feminists. If being powerful and knowledgeable is being a witch, then let every woman be a witch.” [22]

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<http://web.uct.ac.za/org/agi/pubs/getcon1.htm>

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http://www.webopedia.com/DidYouKnow/Internet/2002/Web_vs_Internet.asp

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<http://www.apcwomen.org/netsupport/sync/sync.html>

Footnotes

[1] Cited in Net Gains: African Women take stock of Information and Communication Technologies. <http://www.apcafricawomen.org/netgains.htm>

[2] ICTs are technologies and tools that people use to share, distribute, gather information, and to communicate with one another, one on one, or in groups, through the use of computers and interconnected computer networks. They are forms of media that utilise both telecommunication and computer technologies to transmit information.

[3] The Internet is a massive network of networks. It connects millions of computers together globally, forming a network in which any computer can communicate with any other computer, as long as they are both connected to the Internet. Information that travels over the Internet does so via a variety of languages known as protocols. It is a public resource and is not owned by one particular individual, organisation or government. Being connected

to the Internet allows you to participate in a global give-and-take of information. The Internet offers users a number of services, two of the most popular being e-mail and the World Wide Web (WWW).

[4] <http://rights.apc.org/charter.shtml>

[5] The Global Information Technology Report 2002-2003.

[6] <http://www.womensnet.org.za>

[7] <http://www.genderawards.net/winners/wicce.shtml>

[8] <http://web.uct.ac.za/org/agi/pubs/getcon1.htm>

[9] Karen Banks recently received the Anita Borg award for social impact on technology, and APC WNSP was recognised for their commitment to changing the world for women and technology. http://www.apcwomen.org/eng_index.html

[10] <http://www.itu.int/wsis/basic/why.html>

[11] <http://www.apcwomen.org/rio/index.htm>

[12] <http://www.genderIT.org>

[13] <http://www.apcwomen.org/gem>

[14] http://www.apcafricawomen.org/went_report.htm

[15] <http://www.womensnet.org.za/FOSS/Index.html>

[16] <http://www.apc.org/english/news/index.shtml?x=26360>

[17] Net Gains. <http://www.apcafricawomen.org/netgains.htm>

[18] <http://womensnet.org.za/links/gainbroch.htm>

[19] http://womensnet.org.za/dimitra_conference/econsulation.htm

[20] <http://www.apcafricawomen.org/pula.htm>

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[22] From the APC electronic newsgroup <gen.women>, posted by asta.unih at oln.comlink.apc.org, May 1992. Let Every Woman Be A Witch: Feminism and Third World Development by Kamla Bhasin, India.

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