

**NET GAINS:  
AFRICAN WOMEN TAKE STOCK OF  
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES**

**A joint research project of APC - Africa - Women and FEMNET  
compiled by Colleen Lowe Morna and Zohra Khan,  
Gender Links  
June 2000**

I am a fan of the web and convinced of its vitality. Africa and the whole of the Third World must seize this tool in order not to lose time or power, and keep pace with the global rhythm of the modern world. We can have access to these new technologies, through our own efforts, and through international solidarity. It is a matter of political will. In Mauritania, there is a surge of ICTs but it is still expensive and very limited in some fields and in some socio-economic classes. I will soon open a site about Mauritanian women.”

- **Fatma Mint Elkory, Bibliotheque de l'Universite' de Nouakchott, Mauritania**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the product of participatory research. Forty-two women from sixteen countries in east, west, north and southern Africa (see *Annex A*) gave generously of their time to fill out the questionnaire either in writing or in interviews. An additional ten men and women (see *Annex C*) were interviewed on their specific areas of work. The book also draws extensively on the discussions that took place over a three month period among the 130 participants of the electronic mailing list on gender and information technology on the *Flamme* website created by the APC-Africa-Women and FEMNET for the sharing of information and stimulating debate around the Sixth Africa Regional Conference on Women and the Beijing Plus Five Review. The research was guided by a reference group comprising Anriette Esterhuysen, Executive Director of SANGONet; Sarita Ranchod, Project Manager of Women'sNet; Sara Longwe, Chairperson of FEMNET; Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director of FEMNET; Jenny Radloff of the African Gender Institute; Mercy Wambui of the Economic Commission for Africa; Marie Helene Mottin Sylla of Environment and Development in the Third World; Karen Banks of the Association of Progressive Communication's Women Networks Support Programme and Dorothy Okello, a Ugandan currently studying ICTs at Mc Gill University in Canada. Rosemary Okello- Orlale, of the Nairobi-based African Women and Child Feature Service conducted interviews in, and contributed valuable insights from East Africa. Fatma Alloo contributed an article on African women and ICTs contained in Chapter One of the report. Colleen Lowe Morna, and Zohra Khan, both of Gender Links, a Southern African organization specializing in gender, media and development, conducted the literature and web search; the bulk of the interviews and compiled this report. Charlotte Mfasoni did the translations of the French questionnaires. Kubeshnie Govender edited the report. Judy Seidman did the illustrations and the cover design. The cloth on the cover is a Shoowa cloth; a style of cloth historically designed by women in the Congo basin area, woven in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. C & R Business Systems printed the report. Our special thanks to Shadrach Nakeli for working under tight deadlines to make this report available for Beijing + 5.

## FOREWORD

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africa is in the throes of major social, economic and political transformation. When I am asked if there is hope at the end of it all, two bright spots spring to mind. One is gender equality and the human energy that this could unleash for Africa. The other is the immense possibilities opened by information technology: a tool that is becoming cheaper, that is far more accessible than any we have ever had; that could wipe out ignorance and give a new meaning to governance and participation.

It gives me great pleasure to write a foreword to this seminal piece of research that in effect brings together these two great pillars of hope for Africa's future.

If Africa is at the periphery of the information revolution, it follows that because of where women are located in our society they are currently in the "margins of the margin" of this development. Conversely, if African women could harness ICTs, they could surely become a tool for their emancipation and indeed for the emancipation of Africa as a whole.

There are six reasons why the ECA believes that information technology is central to poverty reduction, which in turn is central to the empowerment of women:

- ICTs provide the most cost-effective way of serving remote, rural areas without the huge infrastructure costs of traditional landlines. The capacity to acquire and communicate knowledge is the foundation of development. If development depends on empowering people and communities to take control of their own lives, access to information through improved communications is an essential component of growth.
- The application of ICTs to improving social services is enormous. Basic education could be vastly improved (for example, through teacher training and reaching unserved populations). The World Health Organisation (WHO) claims "40% of health is exchanging information." Many of the problems of health prevention relate to poor communications and limited access to information. ICTs are of enormous value in the control of epidemics and contagious diseases.
- Participation in the information economy and the development of e-businesses itself offers many possibilities for wealth creation particularly for small and micro enterprises.
- ICTs have the potential to improve the ability of marginalized groups to participate in governance across the spectrum – from local, to national, to global where the voice of the South, and especially of women, is still far too weak.

- The *bottom line* is that there is no longer a choice: we live in a global village. There are great risks associated with globalisation and information technology. But the greatest risk of all is to pretend they don't exist!

There is a story about a Dutch journalist travelling in rural Kenya with her laptop, and showing women how to log onto the Internet to get the latest coffee prices. They were fascinated. But they were also angered to learn that what they got paid was a mere fraction of what their coffee was selling for at the auctions in London.

Imagine if they logged onto a Starbucks website and found out how much an espresso costs in Manhattan! The information would be a powerful tool for lobbying for a more just global order. But on its own, it could simply breed an even greater sense of powerlessness. This is why ICTs cannot exist in a vacuum. They must be part of a wider campaign for a more just world order in which every individual, from North and South, male and female, has both the opportunity and the means to realize their potential.

It is significant that this research is being launched at the five- year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women at the United Nations headquarters. African women and, might I add, African men committed to true social justice, know the ends we want. We have greater access to the means and need to make sure that this access is far more universal than it currently is. We also need to make the means serve the ends. May the dawn of the new millennium inspire us to achieve both the means and the end- the full emancipation of the women of Africa!

**KY Amoako**  
**Executive Secretary**  
**Economic Commission for Africa**  
**June 2000**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“There are wide gaps between research and action. There is insufficient research, but a lot of discourse about women, ICTs and communication. African women have their own special needs regarding technology and communication, because they are women in the developing world, and in Africa specifically. So specific and endogenous research on African women and ICTs must be carried out.”- Awatef Ketiti, Tunisia, in the Flamme electronic discussion on African women and ICTs*

### **Context**

Great opportunity or greater divide? In the last decade, the information revolution has taken the world by gale force, leaving the industrial revolution looking like a gentle breeze in comparison. The figures on telecommunications in Africa are well known: there are more phone lines in New York than in the whole of Africa; and 70 percent of these are in South Africa alone. Is the information revolution really a priority for the continent, when there are far more immediate challenges of poverty and malnutrition to confront? What relevance do information and communication technologies (ICTs) have to poor rural women whose most immediate priorities are food, shelter and basic health for their families?

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), which houses the secretariat for the African Information Society Initiative, and is a leading think tank on development issues, argues that information and communication technologies are indeed central to poverty reduction, which itself is key to the empowerment of women (see foreword by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, K.Y Amoako).

The Association of Progressive Communicators (APC)-Women-Africa and FEMNET that commissioned this research, working with organizations like the ECA, have played a key role in ensuring that the gender dimensions of ICTs on the continent are brought to the

fore. These range from illiteracy and the absence of women from the scientific and technological fields to the way in which these technologies are applied which can either increase the alienation and disempowerment of women, or become a force for advancing gender equality.

The research forms part of a holistic APC-Africa-Women and FEMNET programme of activities related to the Beijing+5 process in Africa and internationally. More information about this process can be accessed at <http://flamme.org>. The APC Women's Networking Support Programme is involved in similar activities at the international level (<http://www.gn.apc.org/apcwomen/projects/womenaction.html>).

In the build-up to the 1995 conference the APC Women's Networking Support Programme surveyed over seven hundred women's groups by email to identify women's electronic networking needs and opportunities around the world. The research report, entitled "Global Networking for Change: Experiences from the APC Women's Programme", can be accessed at <http://community.web.net/apcwomen/apctoc.htm>. Some of the respondents were from Africa.

The research builds on the original global research conducted by Ellen Kole with the assistance of Dorothy Kabagaju Okello entitled "African Women Speak Out on the Internet", (see <http://flamme.org/documents/apcresearch.htm>). The report presents the research results of an electronic survey in Africa into the information and communication needs among women's organizations and women from other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The study was undertaken jointly by the APC-Africa-Women programme and Women Action, a global communications network for lobbying and the exchange information about Beijing Plus Five.

### **What are ICTs?**

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a broad description for the technologies, systems, services and tools that enable information storage, retrieval, communication and dissemination. This includes an extremely broad range of tools whose convergence is opening many possibilities for communication that do not involve the same kind of infrastructure support as in the past. For the purposes of this research we concentrate on Internet based tools, although in Chapter 4 reference is made to radio and other potential interphases with the Internet. The Internet is the world's largest computer network. It is a network of computer networks and is a public resource. The Internet allows people to participate in a global exchange of information.

Internet based tools include:

**Email** is a cheap fast and private electronic postal service that allows one to communicate locally and globally. It is possible to communicate privately with one person or to join a public mailing list.

**Mailing lists** are subject- focused discussion groups that occur via email distributions. They allow any number of people with email to communicate amongst one another. It is an automatic message-sending programme that stores a list of all email addresses of people wanting to participate in a particular discussion. Each discussion has its own email address and participants can subscribe or unsubscribe at any time.

**World Wide Web (WWW)** is like a huge electronic centre or library. It provides instant access to millions of information resources around the world. WWW can include text, sound, images, voice and moving pictures.

**Information infrastructure** is defined as the means by which ICT applications are made available. These include telecommunication facilities, the Internet, broadcast networks, computers, software and Local Area Networks (LANs).

**Info structure** refers to the management and processing of information such that it is put to the most strategic possible uses.

### **Objectives**

After five years of intensive post Beijing online activity, and dramatic changes in telecommunications infrastructure and policy in Africa, the purpose of this research was to assess what the actual impact of these changes are on women and the work for gender equality in Africa. Specifically, the research sought to:

- ❑ Review and report on changes in the status of African women's organisations (with a focus on women's non-governmental organisations) access to and use of ICTs in the five years since Chapter J of the Beijing Platform for Action was declared.
- ❑ Gather together existing resources that contain analysis and data with regard to women and ICTs in Africa.



- Establish how the apparent increased access to, and use of, ICTs have affected women's organisations, and the people that work in them with particular reference to:
  - Local, national, regional and international networking with like-minded institutions;
  - Lobbying activities;
  - Accessing resources, including donor funding;
  - Internal information sharing and decision-making;
  - Relationships with organisations target constituencies;
  - Relationships with government;
  - Access to regional governance bodies, e.g. the UN Economic Commission for Africa;
  - Learning, and knowledge development;
  - Repackaging and re-distribution of information;
  - Learning and inspiration of the experiences of others accessed online;
  - Proportional allocation of time to activities (e.g. workshops, report writing, research, etc.);
  - Individual sense of empowerment and mobility (e.g. applying for jobs, contracts, scholarships etc.);
  - Achieving organisational goals;
  - The ability of organizations to make strategic interventions at local, national, regional and international levels;
  - Interpersonal and professional relationships;
  
- Assess usage and content development with regard to:
  - Online discussion forums dealing with women/gender issues in Africa
  - Web sites dealing with women/gender issues in Africa
  - African women's organisations using email
  - African women's organisations using the Web.

## **Methodology**

The findings are based on a number of inputs:

- A questionnaire that was sent out to organizations and individuals across the continent through Flamme (a website and electronic discussion forum created by APC-Africa-Women and FEMNET to galvanize debate around the Beijing Plus Five Review); Women'sNet (a joint project of SANGONet and the

Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa); Femmes Afrique (a project of ENDA-SYNFEV in Senegal); the Gender in Africa Information Network (GAIN) as well as various channels around the Global Knowledge Conference II, Bamako 2000 and the preparatory conference for the Beijing Plus Five conference in New York in March 2000. A full list of those who responded to the questionnaire is attached at **Annex A**. They comprise a total of forty-one women as follows: eleven from East Africa; nineteen from Southern Africa; eight were from West Africa; one was from North Africa; and two from the Diaspora. Twenty-seven of the participants represented national NGOs; three represented regional NGOs; three were consultants; eight from academic institutions and one from government. Twenty-three of the questionnaires were responded to electronically. Eighteen took the form of face- to- face interviews. The full questionnaire is attached at **Annex B**.

- Further interviews were conducted with ten men and women (see **Annex C**) who are engaged in specific projects or initiatives concerning gender and ICTs in Africa. These included a number of officials at the Economic Commission on Africa.
- The research draws heavily on an electronic discussion that took place over three months on gender and ICTs in Africa on the Flamme Website, facilitated by Jennifer Radloff of the African Gender Institute in South Africa and Marie Helene Mottin- Sylla of ENDA- SYNFEV in Senegal.
- A scanning of numerous Africa specific websites on gender-related issues.
- An extensive literature search (see bibliography at the end of the report).

### **Structure**

*Chapter one, Introduction*, of the report provides an overview of information technology in Africa and the challenges this is posing; the gender dimensions of information technology; as well as gender and information technology as they relate to Africa.

*Chapter two, ICTs, People and Organisations*, examines personal experiences of information technology; the impact and uses of ICTs within women's organizations in Africa; training and support needs.

*Chapter three, ICTs as a Tool for Furthering Gender Equality*, explores the ways in which ICTs are being applied as a tool for advancing gender equality on the continent.

*Chapter four, Content Creation*, provides an overview of content development by African women for the Internet.

*Chapter five, Outreach*, covers the issue of how to extend ICTs to women who do not have access to them; and how to ensure that these ICTs become a tool for poverty reduction.

*Chapter six, Recommendations*, is a summary of policy recommendations for improving access to ICTs by African women and for using ICTs as a tool for advancing gender equality. It includes a matrix and checklist for engendering ICT policy in Africa; starting from ensuring gender parity in ICT and technological fields of study; to ensuring that these technologies are accessible and applicable to *all* African women.

### **Key findings**

Among the key findings of the research are:

#### The potential of ICTs

- Respondents were unanimous in their view that ICTs offer immense possibilities for reducing poverty; improving governance and advancing gender equality in Africa - provided they are made more accessible and consciously applied towards the achievement of these objectives.

#### Access and connectivity

- While access to ICTs is becoming standard among NGOs concerned with gender issues in Africa, this is still far from universal, especially among Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and in countries where access to ICTs is recent and limited. Two of the 41 organisations interviewed had no access to ICTs on their premises. Both of these were in West Africa.
- While many organisations were first introduced to ICTs by NGO networks such as Greenet, SANGONet, ENDA, MANGO or UN agencies particularly in the days when Internet access was through FIDO, many have now shifted to commercial Internet Service Providers (ISPs). This is an interesting comment

on the increasing availability, cost competitiveness and efficiency the private sector provides in Africa.

- In general, ICTs among African women's organizations are used mostly for communication with other NGOs, funders, regional and international organizations. Except for the few countries in higher density usage areas such as South Africa, Uganda and Senegal (see map in Chapter One) in country communication using ICTs is still severely restricted. Thus, umbrella NGOs at national level can still only communicate with a tiny fraction of their members using ICTs, and regional NGOs are restricted to using ICTs for members in the capital cities of countries. The patchiness of connectivity and of an ICT culture within organisations also makes it difficult for NGOs to form sectoral networks - even in countries with a relatively high degree of access like South Africa. The "chain is as weak as its weakest link"- until there is greater connectivity and an ICT culture within African women's organisations, the ability to network effectively using ICTs is restricted.
- Communications between government departments and NGOs using ICTs is especially limited as few government departments either have access to, or are regular users of ICTs. This is worrying, given the much-touted use of ICTs for improving governance. The limited interaction between governments and NGOs via ICTs in capital cities means such interaction is virtually non-existent outside capital cities.
- The degree of access within organizations varies considerably. In the better-resourced organizations, individuals have their own terminal and email address. But in many NGOs there is still only one computer and modem; limiting access and the ability to gain greater ease with the technologies through "tinkering", considerably.
- With the exception of South Africa, African women in the Diaspora, consultants and self-employed women, the majority of African women only have access to ICTs at work rather than at home.
- Not surprisingly, the use of ICTs by the majority of those polled is confined to work. The only women who said that they used ICTs for pleasure or relaxation were from South Africa or the Diaspora.

### Personal experiences of ICTs

- Slightly less than half of those interviewed first encountered ICTs after 1995 and are therefore relatively recent users of the technology. Some were first introduced to ICTs by the APC at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.
- The majority of those interviewed had not received formal training or had received only minimal training. Some complained of gender insensitivity in the training. Invariably, those who feel most comfortable with ICTs have had a friend, reliable service provider or partner who provide ongoing support. This suggests that more attention needs to be paid both to gender sensitivity in the design of training; but also to more innovative forms of adult training; such as mentorship.
- A clear generational gap was detected and commented upon in the interviews. Older women conveyed a sense of alienation and frustration with the new technologies- especially in countries where frequent technical problems add to the sense of disempowerment. Far more attention needs to be paid to issues of age, as well as gender, in the design of training.
- Those who have now had exposure to and are comfortable with ICTs were effusive in their praises of the difference it has made to them personally, the most common response being that ICTs have “ended my isolation and made me feel part of the bigger world.” For some women, knowledge of, and facility with ICTs have enhanced their status within their organizations. This is especially true for the almost all female secretarial profession (one respondent described secretaries as an “endangered species” as these posts are upgraded to “administrative” and “programme” assistants) and librarians, whose status many described as being enhanced by their exposure to facility with ICTs.

### ICTs and organizations

- The most commonly cited advantage of ICTs in organizations is in cutting the costs of communication. But very few organizations had actually done a costing of this advantage or consciously sought to maximize it: for example in setting down rules on the use of different forms of communication and ensuring proper training for all members of the organization.

- Often, the full range of ICT application has barely been explored. As one respondent commented, in many organizations the use of ICTs has “barely gone beyond their word processing potential”.
- Use is still largely confined to email. Even then, the interactive applications of email are limited: for example, very few mentioned using email for conferencing. The World Wide Web was described by many as frustrating and inaccessible- often due to technical problems and high costs of access; but also lack of training and knowledge.
- Some respondents commented on how ICTs are helping to increase transparency and flatten hierarchies within their organizations. But in other cases ICTs appear to be sharpening hierarchical distinctions between those who have access to and can use ICTs and those who do not.
- In general, insufficient thought has been given to the organizational applications of ICTs. They are largely viewed as a cheap and speedy way of disseminating and receiving information; rather than a tool for improving transparency; governance; networking; lobbying and advocacy in a systematic and strategic way.
- The gender dimensions of ICTs and work have barely been explored. For example, there was no mention in the responses to questionnaires or electronic discussion group of the possibilities for tele-work, flexi-time and work from home arrangements that would assist women in coping with their dual home and work responsibilities.

#### Applications of ICTs for advancing gender equality

- Examples and case studies were found in the research of applications of ICTs in all the twelve critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action in Africa.
- The majority of these were in preparations and lobbying around the five year review; and in women’s rights campaigns such as around religious restrictions; violence against women; reproductive rights etc.
- A worrying feature of these campaigns is the lack of clearly stated objectives, co-ordination and follow up. Thus while many organizations could list campaigns that they have been involved in or petitions they have signed, they were often unaware of the outcome of these efforts. The follow through from

campaigns around a particular incident and event, to strategic campaigns around corrective legal or policy actions that would prevent such incidents from recurring, is especially weak.

- There is much discussion, and some noteworthy examples, of direct applications of ICTs to the economic empowerment of women, including electronic trade and small ICT-related businesses. However, there is huge scope for growth and cross-fertilization of ideas in this area.
- Several respondents highlighted the need for the more effective applications of ICTs in the campaign against HIV/AIDS.
- The use of ICTs in peace campaigns led by women is especially weak, as access is woefully limited in countries suffering from civil strife. However, experience from elsewhere (Eastern Europe, for example) shows how effective a tool ICTs could be in women's peace movements. This suggests that targeted programmes to provide access and training to women in situations of conflict would be especially strategic.
- Gender, democracy and governance were highlighted as a potential area of application that requires far more exploration. Uses so far have been limited to assisting women parliamentarians in accessing research for their work. The possibilities for women in remote areas to link up with parliamentarians and local councillors via Internet and of women parliamentarians championing access by women, who presently do not have access to ICTs, have not been fully explored.

#### Outreach

- Many women's organizations repackage information they receive and share it with constituents who do not have access to ICTs.
- There are a number of different experiments around Africa for providing ICT access to remote areas through what are commonly referred to as telecenters (for which there are up to 36 models- see Chapter Six). There are ongoing debates as to the most desirable approach- ranging from fully privatised, to fully subsidized services and a number of options in between. Although it is quite common for women to manage these facilities, given their traditionally more active role than men in community service provision, gender considerations have seldom been built into the design or evaluation of the facilities- even by

- progressive organizations. Emerging evidence suggests that the facilities are more patronized by men than women. Targeted campaigns for increasing access by women are rare; and simple considerations like the times when training is held, and the value of women only classes are only beginning to emerge. Age considerations have also not been factored into the functioning of these facilities.
- A related issue is the most conducive physical location for telecentres- stand-alone or existing institutions. The Schools Net project that aims eventually to link up schools around Africa, offers the promise of a next generation of ICT users. Again, however, there are concerns about the lack of a conscious effort to integrate gender considerations into policy, implementation and evaluation of these projects; and the generational issues referred to above. The possibility of using clinics- a community facility at which women often spend hours waiting for service- to house such facilities is mentioned but still largely unexplored.
  - Illiteracy remains one of the most glaring impediments to outreach efforts and is especially pertinent in the case of women who constitute the majority of those who are illiterate in Africa. Yet to date there seem to be few projects that link extension of ICT services to existing or potential literacy programmes.
  - Lack of basic infrastructure such as telephone lines and electricity are major practical barriers to outreach efforts in many rural areas of Africa. There are some interesting pilot projects for using alternative technologies- such as radio connectivity and solar generated electricity. The World Space initiative for transmitting and retrieving information in multi-media forms offers exciting new possibilities. Far more research needs to be carried out on appropriate and cost effective technologies for extending ICTs to remote areas, with the active involvement of women's NGOs.
  - Inter phasing ICTs with other forms of communication technology is another approach that offers considerable possibilities for increasing access. There are some innovative examples of women's NGOs acting as information brokers between ICTs and community radio. Such approaches warrant further study.

#### Policy

- In general, a major weakness of approaches to outreach at present is that they exist as isolated initiatives without addressing or engaging in critical policy issues. With the exception of a few NGOs that work specifically in this field or in



the communications arena, none of the NGOs polled were involved in policy debates- although many indicated a desire to do so. This is a critical area for follow up, since as long as governments have restrictive telecommunications policies and do not subscribe to the principle of universal access or of access to information as a basic human right, existing projects will not be sustainable or replicable. Opening up access to information is an area in which governments, and particularly autocratic governments, have traditionally been reticent. It follows that challenging government policy in this area is a critical function of NGOs that are serious about playing a watchdog role, promoting good, fair, open and transparent governance.

### Content

- The search of African generated websites, while by no means exhaustive, showed the growing number of organizations that are putting out useful information on gender issues using the Internet. There is still considerable scope, however, for more inter active use of ICTs.
- The research raised an interesting debate and discussion around the differences between information and knowledge and- at an even higher scale of information processing- wisdom. The latter is an area where African women, and especially older African women, because of their life experiences, are living repositories of much from which the world could learn. Far more research needs to be done on linking ICTs to oral traditions and on using ICTs as a vehicle for transmitting not just information- but knowledge and wisdom.

The final chapter of the report brings together these various findings in a forward looking action agenda that emphasizes the need for far greater consciousness on the gender dimensions of ICTs on the one hand; and on the potential value and applications for advancing gender equality on the other.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

*"It can be no accident that there is today no wealthy developed country that is information poor and no information rich country that is poor and under-developed"*

**Mahathir Mohamed, former Prime Minister of Malaysia**

*"As Africa enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is need to enter the information and technology superhighway because at the moment we are threatened with a new and dangerous form of information poverty that could further widen the gap in economic status and competitiveness."* **Rosemary Okello-Orlale, African Women and Child Feature Service, Kenya**

*"Women in Africa are marginalized, 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 organizing, strategizing, 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, Director, SANGONet, South Africa**

*March 2000:* a meeting of the African caucus at the crammed offices of the International Women's Tribune Centre in New York, scene of many gatherings at the Preparatory Committee meeting for Beijing Plus Five. A woman from Nigeria raised her hand to say that she had been surfing the net and had updated information on the violent clashes in Kaduna State that had declared sharia law. The offices of Abantu for Development, a pan African women's organization, had been attacked, and a member of its staff, in hiding, was being sought. Aisha Imam, based in Nigeria, but soon to join the meeting in New York had put out an alert call on the Internet because of the implications of this for Moslem women in Nigeria. Participants were urgently requested to add their names to a petition. All present agreed they would.

Then there was the matter of the floods in Mozambique. Another participant said she

had just read on the Net that a woman had given birth in a tree, saved only by a South African helicopter that happened to be passing by. The incident was but one example of the gender dimensions of natural disasters. The international community had been slow to respond. All the women gathered were in New York, at UN headquarters. What could be done? A press statement from the African Women's Caucus, it was suggested. Urgently. And it must be sent out all over the world- via email.

Five years since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, when ICTs were just beginning to be a feature of our lives, they are, as this meeting so poignantly illustrated, becoming a fact of life, with very practical applications for African women's NGOs engaged in life and death lobbying and advocacy campaigns.

How have we come this far- in so short a time? This chapter provides a quick scan of Africa and the information revolution; gender and the information revolution; and then brings these together in a final section on African women and the information revolution.

### **Africa and the information revolution**

To quote the background document for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) 1999 consultative conference on the *"Opportunities and Challenges of Information Technology"*: "The combination of low cost personal computers and telecommunications infrastructure with the use of an open non propriety protocol called the TCP/IP has created the Internet, which is already connecting 150 million users world wide- a growth rate faster than the television or radio was adopted..."

Undoubtedly IT has been the greatest change agent this century and promises to play that role even more dramatically in the next millennium. IT is changing every aspect of human life, communications, trade, manufacturing, services, culture, entertainment, education, research, national defence and global security. These developments are revolutionizing the way societies interact, how they set their national and human development agendas, conduct their business and compete in the international market."

The numbers for Africa would be depressing, if it were not for the fact that the technology is so flexible and advancing at such a rapid pace that Africa need not play

catch up- it can actually leapfrog many of the stages in the information revolution.

These are the raw facts:

- Africa has two percent of the world's phone lines and twelve percent of the population. Fifty percent (and in some cases as high as eighty to ninety percent) of the phone lines are in capital cities, where only ten percent of the population lives.
- Teledensity (telephone lines per one hundred inhabitants) is 0.5 in sub Saharan African countries (excluding South Africa), compared to 4.5 in emerging economies and 52.6 percent in industrialized countries.
- The cost of renting a phone connection in Africa averages twenty percent of income per capita, compared to a world average of nine percent and only one percent in high- income countries.
- Line growth is about eight percent a year, half that of other developing counties.
- Cellular telephone services now comprise about twenty percent of the phones on the continent (outside South Africa) and are available in forty-two countries. In South Africa cellular phones have outstripped all predictions, covering seventy percent of the population. Most of these can also be used for access to Internet, but at high cost.
- Estimates of the number of African Internet users range from eight hundred thousand to one million (out of a total population of some eight hundred million.) About seven hundred thousand of these are in South Africa, leaving one hundred thousand among the seven hundred and fifty million people outside South Africa. This works out at one African Internet user for every five thousand people, compared to the world average of one user for every forty people, and one in every four to six people in North America and Europe.
- Because most Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are concentrated in capital cities, it is a long distance call to the Internet for most of the (predominantly rural) public. There are a few exceptions, such as Malawi, Mauritius and Zimbabwe, which provide local access across the whole country as a result of conscious government policy.
- Currently, because of the cost of a low volume, a full Internet account in Africa ranges from \$25 to \$150 per month when using the lowest priced services in each country for ten hours a month. By comparison, 20 hours of Internet access

in the US costs \$29 (including phone and provider fees). The large variations in costs in Africa reflect the immaturity of the markets.

On the other hand:

- The climate of democracy, change and liberalization in many African countries is providing a more conducive environment for rapid advances in the information and communications revolution on the continent.
- Internet connectivity in Africa has increased by what the ECA calls “leaps and bounds” from four countries connected in 1995 to forty-nine out of fifty-four countries connected in 1998 (see map on Internet Connectivity and Net Density in Africa). Twelve African countries are considered to have an active and mature market, led by South Africa, which in terms of number of Internet nodes ranks among the world’s top twenty countries.
- A number of telecommunication initiatives have been announced that are likely to substantially improve the Internet infrastructure. These include AT&T’s Africa One which aims to put a optical fibre necklace around the entire continent; the SAFE project between the South African and Malaysian Telkom which will lay a fibre cable between South Africa and Malaysia; a west Africa coastal fibre cable being discussed between various countries in that region; and plans within the East African Co-operation for a high speed digital backbone between the capital cities of its member countries.
- Because of the high cost and low international bandwidth available in many African countries, increasing attention has been drawn to the possibility of using satellites for Internet services using very small aperture terminals (VSATs). However regulatory barriers have stymied attempts to use this technology—except in Mozambique, Tanzania and Zambia, where telecommunication markets have substantially relaxed. The recent availability of KU bands improves the potential for VSAT. Within the decade, other satellite-based communications are being planned and these are expected to radically improve access to the most remote parts of the sub continent.
- The continent is now covered by digital satellite broadcasts from the US-based start up company, owned by an Ethiopian, called World Space. Various African and European broadcasters have signed up to provide content. Data services are also available. These include transmission of web pages, e-mail and graphics.

The ability to download data and access the Internet at high speed through these systems needs to be supported in rural areas.

- Private sector growth in Internet service provision is growing rapidly. SITA, the airline co-operative, has by far the largest network in Africa. Africa Online is a close second, with operations in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Mali and Cote d'Ivoire. Other international Internet suppliers include AT&T; BT; Global One/Sprint; UUNET/AlterNet, MCI, NSN, BBN, Teleglobe, Verio and France Telecom/FCR.
- The bulk of service providers are small businesses, often started by technicians who learned their skills at universities.
- Privately run public access points such as kiosks and cyber cafés are mushrooming in Africa. These are especially prolific in Senegal, where they are becoming an add on to the 7000 commercially run public phone points, that employ over 10 000 people.
- Universities in most African countries have email connectivity at a minimum and about thirteen countries have universities with full Internet connectivity.
- There is growing interest in other forms of public access including community phone shops; schools; police stations and clinics that can share the cost of equipment access with a larger number of users.

Amid this whirlwind of technological changes and advances, a more philosophical debate has been raging in the continent. A background paper titled "*Democratizing Access to the Information Society*" for the African Development Forum organized by the ECA in 1999 focusing on information technology notes: "Awareness raising is important because some African intellectuals and policy makers question the potential of ICTs on a continent where people can neither read nor write and are consequently wary of the possible harmful effects. This assertion has been backed up with claims that clean water, roads, provision of primary health care and schools are far more important for improving poor people's lives than providing them computers and access to data networks. It is also felt that the information available through networks produced in the North spread western culture and values, which threaten the survival of local culture."

The paper argues that telecommunications infrastructure is just as important as roads. It

reduces the need for people to travel, freeing time for other pursuits, and helps to break isolation. Costs of doing business are reduced. Lives that may otherwise be lost are saved through good communications during disasters. And the new ICTs provide the possibility of providing access in a relatively short space of time to remote communities. As the World Bank states in a paper titled *“Increasing Internet Connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Issues, Options and World Bank Group Role”*: “ Countries that are able to seize the opportunities these technologies present will be able to leapfrog into the future, even though they lack a developed communications infrastructure today. In fact countries with little existing communications infrastructure have less need to deal with vested interests in old technologies and can proceed directly to the use of the wireless technologies and fibre. The key will be visionary leadership and the ability to mobilize nations around an attractive and realizable vision of their citizens future.”

The ADF background document concedes that radio remains by far the most important means of communication in Africa, with print media and the Internet lagging far behind. But the paper notes “the advantage of the new technology such as the Internet over older technologies such as radio, newspapers and video is that it is the first media tool that allows for users to send, receive, narrowcast and broadcast their own information, making it a natural democratising tool.”

A conference on “Global Connectivity for Africa, Issues and Options” hosted by the ECA in 1998 identified a range of applications for the technologies in Africa. These include: electronic commerce (placing orders, making payments etc); governance (electronic service delivery, one stop information services, keeping records etc); tourism promotion; transport (co-ordination of the movement of goods and people); education (e.g. distance learning); health (such as telemedicine and tracking diseases); social (e.g. linking with family in the Diaspora); agriculture (extension services; conveying prices etc) and environmental and natural resource management (for example monitoring environmental change and eco tourism promotion.)

**BOX: Landmarks in the African Information Technology Revolution**

- In the early nineties a few universities and NGOs provided Internet access. They included MANGO in Zimbabwe; SANGONet in South Africa, ENDA in Senegal and the Environmental Liaison Centre- a network of more than 900

NGOs and CBOs in over 100 countries.

- Since 1979 the ECA had been working to launch the Pan African Development Information System (PADIS) to promote information management and exchange systems in Africa.
- In May 1995, the ECA conference of ministers mandated the ECA to work towards building Africa's "information highway". As part of the ECA's restructuring, the Development Information Services Division (DISD) was created in 1997.
- A high level working group of African experts assembled by the ECA and endorsed by its ministers conceived the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) for which the ECA serves as secretariat.
- In 1997, the ECA established the African Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC) attached to the AISI. The committee, which comprises public, private, NGO and academic experts, guides the ECA's information and communication programmes.
- June 1997 witnessed the first Global Knowledge Conference in Toronto, Canada, with Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni a keynote speaker.
- In May 1998 the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) sponsored the Africa Telcom 98 meeting in Johannesburg at which they adopted the "African Connection" document described by South Africa's then Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, Jay Naidoo, as a "road map" to launch Africa into the information age. Naidoo subsequently drove through Africa in a highly publicized "Africa Connection" campaign.
- In June 1998, the Global Connectivity Conference, convened by the ECA in partnership with other international organizations like the World Bank, International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and African Development Bank, and the World Space Corporation, brought together 400 stakeholders to discuss improved access to national networks, lower prices for international calls, and the broadening of access to information.
- In October 1999 the ECA convened the African Development Forum on the challenges of ICTs in Africa.
- In February 2000, President Alpha Omar Konare of Mali and Guy-Livier Segond (Canton of Geneva) co-hosted Bamako 2000 organised by the ANAIS network of NGOs in French speaking West Africa. The conference, which included an



exhibition of innovations, adopted the Bamako 2000 Declaration and plan of action for ICTs in participating countries.

- In March 2000 the Global Knowledge II was held in Kuala Lumpur.

There are a wide variety of donor- supported initiatives for improving ICT access and usage in Africa. These include the “Harnessing Information Technology for Development” project under the UN Secretary General’s System Wide Initiative on Africa; the commerce- oriented Trade Point initiatives of UNCTAD, which has made Africa the priority for the next two years; the multi-donor InfoDev being established by the World Bank, including the African Virtual University Project; and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Internet Initiative for Africa (IIA). In 1997, The Canadian-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC) launched the Acacia Initiative with pilot projects in Senegal, South Africa, Mozambique and Uganda focusing on community access to ICTs. The ECA, IDRC and Carnegie Corporation are supporting the development of National Information and Communication Infrastructure (NICI’s) in a number of African countries.

While the telecommunications sector is still dominated by state run monopolies, an increasing number of countries are restructuring the sector and putting in place regulatory frameworks for telecommunications and development. According to the ITU, on average, the level of liberalization of the telecommunications sector in Africa is ahead of Asia and behind Latin America.

The ECA reports that three quarters of African countries have taken the first essential step in the process of restructuring: separating postal functions from telecommunications and corporatising the national operator as nominally independent from government. Thirteen countries have partially privatised their national telecom operators, and fifteen more intend to do so. Ten countries have established independent regulators.

There are considerable differences in policy environments between African countries. This is illustrated in the stark differences between neighbouring countries like Uganda, which has taken a progressive stance on ICTs, and Kenya, where the telecommunications environment is still stifling. Edith Ofwona Adera, Programme Officer

for the IDRC in Kenya recalls that when the Acacia initiative was launched in 1997. Uganda offered a much better environment for ICT development than Kenya. “Museveni is a strong supporter of ICTs. Liberalisation is encouraged. All out efforts have been made to roll out infrastructure in the rural areas and bring down prices.”

Suzanne Drouilh who has been involved in efforts by the East African Inetnet Association to modify the Kenyan telecommunications act because it gives the government a monopoly and reflects little thought to universal access says: “We can’t do very much unless the policies are changed and we have a better environment. The Internet requires an open mind and flexibility. That is the exact opposite of how most bureaucracies work.”

In general, far more flexibility is called for in the telecommunications policies of African governments if they are to take full benefit of ICTs. Issues of universal access; adopting specific telecom infrastructure roll out targets and alternative technologies are a pressing priority (see Chapter Five, on outreach). Related issues that will be touched on throughout the report, and especially in the recommendations include reducing costs relating to ICTs; encouraging the growth of software and hardware ICT industries in Africa; improving human resource capacity in the ICT sector; and promoting freer access to information. All these need to be placed in the context of a clear vision for Africa and ICT strategies to achieve the vision must place special emphasis on ensuring access to marginalized groups- especially women; who constitute over half of Africa’s eight million people.

## **Gender and information technology**

*“In ICTs all the gender inequalities are confronted in microcosm- women’s higher level of illiteracy, their socialization, their lack of exposure to and fears of technology.”*  
- Mercy Wambui, Communications Team, Economic Commission for Africa.

There are a number of dimensions, and a growing body of literature, on gender and ICTs. These are briefly summarized here:

- ***The invisibility of women’s contribution:*** As pointed out in the APC Women’s Survey cited in the Executive Summary, as in so many other fields, the

contribution of women to ICTs is hidden. The task of feminist scholars has therefore been to “uncover and recover the women hidden from history” in this area.

- **Illiteracy and schools enrolment:** 63.9 percent of women in developing countries are illiterate- far higher than the percentage for men. Only 39 percent of girls are enrolled in schools in these countries; compared to 50.4 percent of boys.
- **The absence of women from science and technology:** The world over, females are under- represented in the scientific, mathematical, engineering, computing and information technology fields of study. “Engendering ICT Policy- Guidelines for Action”, a booklet produced by the Africa Information Society Gender Working Group points out that the diversity of ICTs means that many services and industries are involved. While many women work in the sector, they occupy lower level jobs. Many women are found working in libraries. But men dominate the technology components of libraries. Even in the USA, women comprise 7.8 percent of the professional personnel working in science and computer engineering facilities.
- **Attitudes:** As a result of their socialization, women and girls tend to find technology intimidating and alienating and therefore to suffer from “techno phobia”.
- **Training:** This is often alienating and not customized to women’s needs. Inappropriate training for women in ICTs is compounded by what Hacker (1989, 1990) and Turkle (1984,1988) call the “culture of technology” which “valorises the adventurer”. Studies suggest that women prefer to learn through an orderly routine in which they understand the reason for each step, whereas men have been encouraged to learn through experimentation, trial and error. Men are socialized to tinker whereas women are socialized to avoid taking risks.
- **Access:** In a paper on “Gender, Justice and Information Technologies” presented to the Commission on the Status of Women in March (year?), Gillian Marcelle, chairperson of the AISI Gender Working Group, notes that women’s use of ICTs is not equal to their share of the population as illustrated in the following figures on use by women of ICT goods and services: thirty-eight percent in the USA; twenty-five percent in Brazil; seventeen percent in Japan and South Africa; sixteen percent in Russia; seven percent in China and four percent in the Arab states. It is significant that use of the Internet among women in the

- USA has increased from ten percent just a few years ago to almost forty percent now. It is difficult to assess whether this trend will be replicated in other industrialized countries- let alone in developing countries. Marcelle comments that: “in developing countries women will face additional barriers of lack of income, lack of time and lack of training all of which restrict levels of usage.”
- **Decision making:** Marcelle notes that decision making in ICTs includes the boards and senior management of private ICT companies; senior management and advisors of policy and regulatory bodies like the ITU and World Trade Organisation (WTO); technical standards setting organizations; professional organizations like internet societies; national policy and regulatory institutions; line ministries responsible for ICTs and international development agencies. Marcelle comments that: “women are under-represented in all these decision making structures in the ICT sector, and this has negative implications for the negotiation and redistribution of power.” For example, in the period 1997-2000, she notes that only 8 percent of delegates, 7 percent of rapporteurs and 4 percent of chairpersons at ITU meetings have been women. In the electronic discussion on gender and ICTs carried out on Flamme as part of this research one participant noted: “there are very few women at the top of major corporate or technology infrastructures. And until we have some visible and meaningful representations in places where decisions are made, little progress will be made in accommodating women’s views and issues.”
  - **Globalisation:** Marcelle comments in the paper cited earlier that “globalisation produces winners and losers. When women’s businesses are positioned among the winners, the effects of globalisation on gender equality might be positive, and conversely if women’s businesses are among the losers, the changes in market functioning may be disadvantageous for the objectives of gender justice.”
  - **Content:** Writing on “ICT Access and the Gender Divide” in TechKnowlogia (March/April 2000) Mary Fontaine found in a web search 200 000 sites related to women and gender. However a mere fraction of these came from developing countries.
  - **Negative portrayal of women:** Cyber sex, which feeds on the objectification of women’s bodies, pornography and child pornography are among the fastest growing and most lucrative dimensions on the Internet. Much as ICTs have the potential to be put to use in advancing gender equality they also have the

- capacity to destroy many of the fragile gains.
- **Homophobia:** In her interview for this research, Phumi Mtetwa, Project Manager of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies AIDS Law Project and National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality spoke of her frequent encounters with homophobia on the Internet, and the various campaigns she has been involved in to stem views on the Net that find free reign on the Net yet fly in the face of human rights conventions.
  - **Values:** A growing body of literature, arguing that western technology embodies patriarchal values, is promoting women's greater humanism, pacifism, nurturance and spiritual development in a new vision for technology that would incorporate these values.

At the global level, there have been various efforts to increase the access of women to ICTs. Getting gender issues placed on the table of ICT policy making has been gaining momentum. The APC Africa Women's Programme has its origins in preparations for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and went into high gear in the run up to the Beijing conference in 1995 where APC provided training in the use of ICTs. This was the first encounter for many gender activists with ICTs. Several went back to their homes as pioneers of the new technologies.

This programme aims to equip women's groups in Africa, Asia and Latin America with the necessary training, technology and information to facilitate local; regional and international communication as well as empower women through ICTs. The programme is credited with facilitating women's access to and use of Internet across the globe and through this to have advanced women's networking.

Chapter J of the Beijing Platform for Action states that: "during the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communications network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults." One of the strategic objectives is to "increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision making in and through the media and new technologies of communication."

These excerpts show the relatively narrow focus at the time on ICTs as they relate to

information, the media and expression. As Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director of FEMNET comments, at the prepcom for Beijing Plus Five in March this year: “new information and communication technologies (NICTs) were noted as an emerging issue; in other words, as they were not prevalent at the time the Beijing Platform for Action was formulated, this document does not address them adequately. Thus the outcomes documents deal with NICTs primarily as an emerging issue rather than a media issue.” The subsequent debates reveal a far more holistic view of ICTs and their potential applications for advancing gender equality.

Women Action 2000 is a collation of women’s groups around the globe that has coordinated information and discussion around Beijing Plus Five. Important links were made between the Women’s Forum at Global Knowledge II and the UN Commission on the Status of Women meeting taking place in New York in advance of the preparatory committee meeting for the Beijing Plus Five Review. The Women’s Forum report, referred to again in the last chapter of this book, made a range of recommendations with two specific objectives: to ensure a gender perspective in the formulation of projects that may have a differential impact on women and men and to facilitate the formulation of projects that are primarily geared to the economic and social needs of women. There is an increasing focus, captured in the article below by Fatma Alloo, a journalist from Zanzibar, on how to use the Internet to empower women.

**BOX: Can The Internet Empower Women?  
by Fatma M. Alloo**

Globalisation is an old phenomenon, as old as history itself. People have always experienced movements, originally from food-deficit to food surplus areas. These gathered pace with developments in science and technology and the global technology and the global movement of capital in search of markets and raw materials in the early 20th century. Globalisation of capital was led by one section of the population while others continue to resist. Those with resources were termed the ‘Third World’ and those exploiting the resources, the ‘First World’ language was used as a tool of disempowerment.

With the end of the Cold War, the 1990s are witnessing the total triumph of capitalism. Capital now seeks to cross national boundaries in the name of liberalisation. And Africa has encountered the cold wind of liberalization blowing from the North. One party states are giving way to democracy -imposed as conditionality by donors who claim to aid us. Because this movement was not ingrained within our communities, it has had devastating effects. States began to crumble as they had very little room to deviate

from a policy framework that favours economic growth over social development and forces states to open up their markets to foreign competition.

As this trend continues the state increasingly becomes unable to protect the well being of the majority of their populations or their natural environments. This can be illustrated by stark media images of human suffering and helplessness, stirring feelings of anger. We watch human masses being shuttled around as state dictators and international policy makers play their games.

As we grapple with this there is also the other reality of hi-tech development where "yuppie" culture is the norm and the 'haves' have moved from the industrial to the information age. Computer technology is bringing the global village into our rooms. And it is here to stay. It is open and creates information anarchism. We could develop the attitude that it is too complicated and try to stay well clear, or we could master its use as a tool of empowerment. The issue here, of course, is whether the Internet provides just another conveyor belt for northern commercial ideology? But we can also produce our own reality on the web and use it to build a viable network globally. Over the years we have seen how the women's movement has impacted at global level on issues of environment, population, social development, human rights, environment protection, structural adjustment policies and their effect on social sectors, and so on.

We have to create a women's 'cyber-culture' where we interact and produce our analysis and reality and feed it to the global community instead of allowing ourselves to be sponges or victims. Women's networks should use the worldwide web to create our news and views. In India, environment groups have employed the internet for instant response's to statements made by world leaders- for example on the biodiversity convention or on how North Sea fisheries policy affects the fishing industry in the India Ocean.

Macro-policies that used to take time to reach the South can now be put on the Internet and transmitted globally at the touch of a button. Thus we are now in an era in which policy makers could be facing a harder time if those in the global community who are committed to positive change became more organised in Africa. This 'cyber-culture' has not yet had a major impact, as very few women's organisations have invested in it or realised its potential. Latin America and Asia are far more advanced in this respect and use it to empower groups they work with.

I have not detailed the negative and frightening aspects of the Internet, such as the fact that extreme right wing organisation are subtly using it to promote their own ideology and movements. Adverts selling women on the web will continue to violate women's human rights. The fact is that the Internet which was originally created by the US military to operate even after nuclear attack, defeats most attempts to censor it. If a message comes across an obstacle the system will look for an alternative route until it is delivered. Thus the system's anarchical nature is a double- edged sword.

We realise as women that if we shun the Internet, we stand to be further marginalized. But if we continue the struggle to create a global village that is strong and committed, then slowly but surely we can tackle the wrongs and violations that women continue to suffer. The 'inhabitant's' of this village - people's movements who believe in a just society, a donor community which supports people's empowerment and various

solidarity groups are duty bound to ensure that this new technology remains accessible, and that it is used to remove or reduce historically created inequalities.

**FATMA MOHAMED ALLOO**, from Zanzibar, is the founder of the Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA). She is currently working as a development and media consultant and is an active member of DAWN (Developing Alternatives of Women's Network).

## **African women and information technology**

*"Women in continental Africa are far more likely to walk on dirt track than to surf along the electronic superhighway"*- Gillian Marcelle, Chairperson of the AISI Gender Working Group.

Despite the enormous obstacles confronting African women both because of their sex and Africa's position in the global scheme of things (what some writers have referred to as "global apartheid"), a gender and ICT movement is rapidly growing across the continent. The fact that in a relatively short space of time this research elicited forty-two responses to a lengthy and detailed questionnaire from all parts of the continent, and mainly through electronic communication, is testimony to that fact. The more visionary approach of African women to ICTs is reflected in the African Platform for Action take on this issue as compared to Chapter J of the Beijing Platform for Action cited earlier. The African Platform for Action states: "information is one of the strongest tools for empowerment!"

### **BOX: Thumbs up by African Women to ICTs**

African women polled in this research were unanimous in their view that ICTs offer enormous potential for advancing gender equality. The following is a sampling of responses to the "overall assessment" category of the questionnaire:

"ICTs are often one of the few tools that are easily accessible to women who may be marginalized by the processes and decisions that shape their lives" – (name)  
ABANTU for Development, Kenya.

"The African woman could greatly benefit professionally, intellectually and socio-economically from ICTs.... in the sense that she can make all contacts, collect and



exchange information as need be; participate in many events, discussions, share experiences, set up projects, and all this from afar and sometimes without having to leave her home. I recommend that efforts be made to allow women the access to ICTs, offering initiation sessions to these technologies, but especially offering partial utilization to certain categories of the populations, particularly women. The question of the respect of our cultural specificities by the introduction and the utilization of ICTs is in my view worthy debating” -

Fatma Mint Elkory, Bibliotheque de l'Universite de Nouakchott, Mauritania

“ICTs offer the possibility of social, cultural and economic take off as well as in many other domains of gender equality. One of the principal causes of under development is ignorance and lack of knowledge. We all know that one who holds knowledge holds power. Very soon Africa will have no excuse for lagging behind. Because it will have the whole world in its hand, knowledge tools that do not require expensive infrastructure. Women should take advantage of this tool that will enrich them in knowledge, conscience, and strengthen their solidarity” -

Awatef Ketiti, Research and Information Centre for Women, Tunisia

“I think we still have a long way to go in advancing gender equality in mainstream use of ICTs. The possibilities are endless and the potential for how gender equality can be revolutionized is exciting. The challenge, obviously, is in delivery. ICTs can democratise access to influence and power, and the potential here, for balancing the gender equality scale, is as yet untapped” -

Samantha Fleming, IDASA and the South African Institute for Distance Educators, South Africa

“In essence, ICTs have the potential to empower women.”

Zavuga Goretti, Council for Economic Empowerment of Women, Uganda

It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to mention all the African women’s NGOs involved in ICTs. The following section highlights a few that form part of regional and continent- wide initiatives focusing specifically on promoting women’s access to ICTs in Africa, as well as piloting initiatives for their application in advancing gender equality.

***The African Information Society Gender Working Group*** brings together African women's NGOs working in the policy arena of ICTs. It aims to ensure that African women participate fully in the development of an information society and share equitably in the benefits. It is seeking partnership arrangements with the ITU Gender Task Force and with the ECA's African Information Society Initiative.

***APC-Africa-Women*** is a network of individual women and women's organizations focusing on African women's empowerment by: developing and disseminating information; providing regional support, lobbying and advocating around gender and ICT policy, delivering ICT training and conducting research in the area of gender and ICTs.

**There are three focal points of APC-Africa-Women:**

***The ECA:*** At continental level, the ECA, which has a strong focus on gender equality and on ICTs, has played an important role in ensuring that gender issues have a hearing in policy debates. Nancy Hafkin of the ECA DSID notes: "the ECA stood for democratisation of use of ICTs. We realized that we could not do anything if we were lap top carrying, jet setting elite. If we were talking democratisation we couldn't do that without talking about women. It has from the start been a very deliberate point of focus."

In May 1998, the ECA devoted its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration to the theme "African Women and Economic Development- Investing in Our Future". In the run up to this Marie Helene Mottin Sylla of ENDA-SYNFEV in Senegal facilitated an electronic discussion on women and economic empowerment. One of the six themes of the conference was "African Women and the Information Age: A Rare Opportunity". Sub themes focused on how to make ICT policies relevant to women; setting up information centres for women; new information technologies as tools for democratisation and the impact of ICTs on women's work.

The ADF in 1999 on Globalisation and the Information Society included a gender working group, whose report was critical of the lack of gender analysis in most presentations and emphasized the need for gender disaggregated baseline research. Other recommendations included that ICT policies take into account the differences between men and women on issues such as income, access, education and decision

making; and that women be represented at all levels of decision making with regard to ICTs. The report noted that overall the panels at the conference consisted of thirty five percent women and sixty five percent men, while participants comprised thirty percent women and seventy percent men. ICTs featured strongly at the sixth Africa Regional Conference on Women. APC-Africa-Women facilitated ICT training for women in the wings of this conference and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations.

**Women'sNet** is an internet-based women's communication and advocacy project that was initiated jointly by SANGONet and the Commission on Gender Equality in South Africa. It has been designed to enable the South African women's movement to harness the enormous potential for advancing women's struggles through the use of information and communication technologies. The project assists South African women in meeting each other, find people, share information and resources and discuss issues for their social activism.

Women'sNet Project Manager Sarita Ranchod says: "Women'sNet aims to create a women's space in cyberspace – acknowledging that ICTs to date have been a male domain."

Women'sNet targets historically disadvantaged women. Its main areas of activity are to create information resources relevant to South African women (violence against women, women and governance, women and democracy, women and human rights). The project also provides training and capacity building to improve African women's usage of ICTs for their specific needs and purposes. These could include advocacy, mobilisation, research or lobbying. In so doing, Women'sNet aims to create strategic links between projects and organisations working around women's issues, creating a space for women's voices and facilitating the dissemination of information in different formats making them accessible to women who may not have access to internet facilities.

Its programme areas, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter five on applications of ICTs for advancing gender equality, include:

- A provincial training programme
- Women and elections project
- Community radio

- HIV and AIDS
- Beijing Plus Five in Africa
- Women and Human Rights

**ENDA-SYNFEV:** ENDA, and its team SYNFEV, is based in Senegal, which in communication terms is for West Africa what South Africa is to Southern Africa. Rabia Abdelkrim-Chikh of ENDA Tiers Monde says: “ENDA-TM, although not an organization of women by women, works with women and through its teams deals with issues that concern women and the girl child for ENDA’s mission is to support research on alternative development at all levels... Its main objective is poverty reduction for a better environment and genuine (effective) citizenship. Priority is given to grass root actions but some are concerned with the international level (convention on drought, Lome) and support women in international conferences (social summit, Beijing). ENDA works in partnership with grassroots organizations in which women constitute the vast majority due to their dynamic force in the poverty reduction process.”

The Synergie Genre et Development (SYNFEV) launched the “communication for women” programme of ENDA soon after the Beijing Plus Five conference. According to Marie Helene Mottin Sylla who coordinates the project, the conference highlighted the frustration of getting information on such a major international event in any language other than English: “We wanted to provide information to francophone African women that did not get information at the right time and in their language. We created networks and actions, within and beyond sub-regional level, in their respective fields of belonging. We provided training, whose documents are put on the website to create a multiplier effect; we exchanged skills in the fields of products, strategies and methodologies.”

SYNFEV, with the support of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) convened a ground-breaking training workshop on electronic communication for women from fifteen French speaking West African countries in 1996. It has provided on site assistance for electronic communications for women in Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Cote d’Ivoire and Cameroon. Further support has come through La Francophonie, the grouping of French speaking countries, that is seeking to increase the presence of French content on the Internet

The project has established a website and electronic discussion group called “Femmes Afrique” with 45 members. The number of visits to the website has increased from 4500 per week to 6000 per week. Mail pours in from all over Francophone Africa, even though women in these countries still have problems with access; and the web is especially expensive and time consuming

According to Mottin Sylla, SYNFEV and Femmes Afrique are “greatly indebted to Women’sNet in South Africa” which has provided “technical help and ideas on women and ICTs.” Highlights of activities that SYNFEV have engaged in include:

- 1997: Participation in APC-Africa Meeting and the workshop on building of the Women'sNet web site (South Africa), and member of the Women'sNet Information Strategy Initiative
- 1997: Building up of the APC-Africa-Women networks (APC-Femmes-Afrique)
- 1998: Training workshop “Solidarity electronic campaign for women in French speaking African countries, partnership ENDA-SYNFEV and WLUML AME (workshop held in Dakar for the French-speaking and in Lagos for English-speaking).
- 1998: Starting up of “Solidarity” electronic list (bilingual)
- 1998: Participation in GAIN workshop on “ICTs for gender justice” and member of GAIN working group
- 1998: Nominated 25<sup>th</sup> top award for women on the Internet
- 1998: AFR-FEM list at the ECA 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary
- 1999: Project on “Infoways for women in the French-speaking Africa”, with a website ‘famafrique’, a link newsletter ‘La toile d’elles’ (Their canvas) and a francophone watchtower activity
- 1999: Beijing + 5 Project for the 6<sup>th</sup> Regional Conference on Women (flame web site, flame list, research, technical training)
- 1999: Participation in worldwide WomenAction 2000 network
- 2000: Training workshop ‘Our voice on the Internet’ (Nos voix sur Internet) for the women organizations in French-speaking African countries, and creation of ‘Nos voix’ (our voices), a mutual technical assistance list

The women’s caucus at Bamako 2000- one of five theme groups- reflected the much higher degree of networking among women in Francophone Africa. The conference

yielded strong political support for ICTs as well as closer collaboration between civil society and governments.

Abdelkrim-Chikh who co-organised the theme group on women and information societies comments that getting gender equality accepted as a principle in the Bamako Declaration was a major achievement. “During that period, we had posters distributed worldwide in fifty eight countries whose slogan was ‘Together, women and men, let’s build a citizen’s canvas’ ...However, it is important to have, in addition to collective access, spaces reserved for women, to push and strengthen women’s capacities.”

## CHAPTER TWO: ICTs PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS

“A computer is like a person. If you don’t take time to make friends with it, it will never be friendly with you. It will behave wildly. You have to take time to know it; show some patience for the new technology. It’s not like a typewriter where you can just bang in a command. There is so much more to know about a computer. But when you are familiar with it, and with the Internet, your whole world opens up. The Net is like a free zone for women. A place where you can have control, say what you want.”- **Rosemary Orlale-Okello, African Women and Child Feature Service, Kenya**

### Personal encounters with ICTs

ICTs are first and foremost a matter of personal encounter. The extent to which women are at ease with the new technologies will influence the nature and effectiveness of application within organizations; and through organizations on the broader objectives of achieving gender justice. The analysis of the questionnaires in the research shows, in a nutshell, that most African users are relatively recent users of ICTs; the predominant usage is email and access is mostly at work. While there is scope for more systematic and deeper training and for ongoing support, those women polled expressed a sense of huge personal empowerment since they have “been connected”.

### *How recent is ICT usage among African women?*

**Table one**

REGION	PRE 1995		1995-1998		POST 98 TO PRESENT	
	NOS	%	NOS	%	NOS	%
EAST AFRICA	3/8	37.5	2/8	25	3/8	37.5
SOUTHERN AFRICA	10/16	62	4/16	25	2/16	12.5
WEST AFRICA	2/5	40	2/5	40	1/5	20
DIASPORA	2/2	100	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	17/31	54	7/31	22	6/31	19

The above table, recording the responses of the thirty one women who answered to the question of when they started using ICTs, shows that approximately half did so before 1995; and the remainder since then. There are, however, regional differences, and these correspond closely to the degree of accessibility of ICTs in the regions concerned. Thus

62 percent of the Southern African respondents, and all those from the Diaspora who completed the questionnaire, encountered ICTs prior to 1995. In contrast, approximately one third of East African respondents experienced ICTs before 1995, and a similar percentage have only had access to ICTs since 1998.

**BOX: A Veteran of the African gender and ICT Struggle**

In Zulu, Mercy Wambui would be called one of the *amavulindlela* – or one of those who opened the door- for African women and ICTs. The essence of calm and collection, it is hard to imagine that the Kenyan activist, who now works with the communication team at the ECA, once secretly broke the law by sending data files across a phone line in Kenya when it was still illegal to do so! What's more, that this happened less than a decade ago.

Wambui's first encounter with ICTs happened just before the Rio Earth summit in 1992, while she was working with EcoNews Africa, a Nairobi-based environmental NGO. She met with Karen Banks of the APC's Women Networks Support Programme. APC helped to link EcoNews up through a FIDO node. Despite training by the Environmental Liaison Centre International in Nairobi, Wambui recalls, "it was awful ... there were so many commands and they were daunting. But I used to trouble shoot and experiment a lot. We did not have full access to internet- just electronic mail and discussion groups. I used to download these and circulate them. We repackaged material for our constituents and fed their views back" (see also Chapter Three, on ICT applications).

Access was expensive. Because Wambui spent much time figuring out the system at home, becoming a regular Internet user cost her dearly. It could even have cost her going to jail, because at the time a rigid and archaic regulatory framework did not permit data transfer over a phone line. Ironically, once the daughter of the Minister of Communications, on holiday from a UK university and working on her thesis, asked Wambui to come and assist her with technical problems she was experiencing in transferring a draft to her supervisor using a PC and modem. It turned out that the minister's phone line was not working (a regular problem in Nairobi). And the minister had never heard of the Internet- until Wambui explained it.



EcoNews work, she says “eventually led us into the policy area because we realized that until Kenya had a more enabling telecommunications environment we were banging our heads against the wall. We were able to download the South African telecommunication’s white paper that had put more thought to such issues as universal access. We used that as a lobbying tool.”

Wambui is convinced that more African women NGOs need to get involved in ICT policy issues: “I am not a technical expert, but as an African woman I know what I want. At the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ECA we tried to stress that women must sit at the policy table whether they understand the technical details or not. Women need to articulate their needs; technicians can worry about the rest. We must stop piggybacking policy onto other things, and start making it a matter of roll call.”

**Where do women have access?**

**Table 2**

REGION	WORK ONLY	%	HOME AND WORK	%
EAST AFRICA	7/9	77	2/9	23
SOUTHERN AFRICA	10/18	55	8/18	45
WEST AFRICA	4/4	100	0/4	0
DIASPORA	0/2	0	2/2	100
TOTAL	21/33	64	12/33	36

The above table shows that of the majority of African women polled (sixty-four percent) only have access to ICTs at work. Again, however, there are regional differences that correspond closely to the ease of access to ICTs in the regions concerned. A fairly high percentage of Southern African women (forty five percent) had access both at home and work; and the majority of these were in South Africa. Both the women from the Diaspora who responded to the questionnaire had access at home and work. In contrast, only twenty percent of the East African women, and none of the West African women who responded to this question had access in both places. Buhle Mbambo of the University of Botswana commented: “just as well it is not at home. In this way I get a break!”

**Box: ICTs Open the Door to Home Work – Ask Sara Longwe!**

Having access to ICTs at home can revolutionise the way we work and our work possibilities. Three of those who responded to the questionnaires were gender consultants for whom having access to ICTs at home is crucial to their work.

One of the three is Sara Longwe, author of the well-known Longwe Framework on Women's Empowerment, and Chairperson of FEMNET. She first came into contact with ICTs in the late 1980s, following contacts made by Karen Banks of the APC's Women Networks Support Programme with Regina Shikakata, a librarian at the University of Zambia, and one of the doyens of gender and ICT in Africa. Both members of the Zambian Association of Research and Development (ZARD), Shikakata mentored Longwe who is today an avid user of the Net (check the Flamme website: there is at least a message a day from Longwe to other African sisters!)

In the days of FIDO, access was frustrating and unreliable. Now Longwe's service provider is ZAMNET, the university ISP that is commonly used by Zambian NGOs. She also has a web-based address to access email when she is away from home. A technical "friend" provides one on one back up and has helped her to do more trouble shooting on her own such that the number of call outs is going down.

"I connect to email daily, anytime, when I think of something I just go to my computer," Longwe says. "It's like my writing pad. If it's an urgent matter, I send straight away; if not I store it. But either way, I go to it as soon as I have a thought. I only send a fax if it is a contract I need to sign. Otherwise all my transactions are by email. This has cut down my overheads considerably. As a small home-based business, I need to be constantly in touch with colleagues as well as the rest of the world. But I also need to be wary of people dropping by unannounced and making it impossible for me to work. With ICTs you are more in control of who you talk to. Working from home also means your work can be a family affair. The kids get involved, they see what you are doing, and they become curious."

"As someone involved in a considerable amount of research, I find the web indispensable. My partner and I recently conducted a study for the African Leadership

Forum on African women in decision- making. We were able to access all the most recent statistics we needed from the various UN websites, and we “sub contracted” our daughter to do the searches, which can be quite time consuming.

“ICTs have widened my horizons. But I don’t think we as African women have yet realized their full potential. For example, we haven’t started using ICTs for conferencing, like we talk to each other on the phone. We are not in that mode yet. We need to do more than send messages on the Net. We need to brainstorming on it!”

### ***How do African women use ICTs***

The vast majority of African women with access to ICTs use these for work purposes. Even then, usage is overwhelmingly email, and to some degree electronic discussion groups. Access to the web was invariably described as frustrating and costly- a factor that again correlated closely to the general state of telecommunications in the countries concerned.

However, there were exceptions to this general pattern of usage and barriers experienced as captured in some of the comments drawn from the questionnaires below:

- “I use the web frequently to access massive information on what women are doing to make their cause successful. The information also enables me to follow new developments all over the world. For example, when I participated in the Global Knowledge (GII) Conference in Malaysia, I downloaded all the information from their website. In fact, we are now designing our own website, through which we will tell people about our ICT project.” – Zavuga Goretti, Council for Economic Empowerment, Uganda
- “You learn a lot from the Internet, at your own convenience. It is a very relaxing way to learn. You can even listen to music at the same time. As a national of Sierra Leone working in Kenya, I use the Internet to get information from the BBC and CNN about what is happening in my home country, since I do not have access to satellite TV” - Battu Jambawani, World Federation of Methodist and Unity Church Women, Kenya
- “I love teleshopping- ordering books from Amazon.com for instance and of course Internet banking” - Shafika Isaacs, IDRC, South Africa.

- I use the World Wide Web all the time, at work and at home, to obtain tips on baby care, just for fun. This however is because I'm here in Canada and cost/access are not an issue. Back in Uganda, my WWW access was very limited, and I only used it for work- Dorothy Okello, Mc Gill University, Canada.

***Are women personally inhibited by ICTs?***

As the comments below show, the majority of women polled are at ease with, or at least are determined to master ICTs. However, this was often linked to training (see final section of this chapter) and there were important generational issues that arose in the interviews. The following is a sampling of the general response to the question:

- “Absolutely not! I felt wow! If that is where the world is going, then go girl!” - Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, Director, Akina Mama wa Africa, UK.
- “I feel a sense of fascination, not fear”- Jane Mumbi Kiano, National Council of Women, Kenya.
- “No, never for any stereotypical reasons around women and their relationship with tools. Driving a car, changing a flat tyre, repairing machines have taught me that there is nothing too big for women to overcome!”- Rabia Abdelkrim-Chikh, ENDA, Senegal.
- “I was terrified to begin with. But I began my career with Inter Press Service as a journalist and I simply had to know how to use ICTs. I went on a training course to SANGONet and that helped a lot. Yes, I suppose I'm still inhibited, but I have learned a lot. There's a lot I don't know- E commerce for example is Greek to me. But I have a better idea where to go for the answers”- Lynette Matimba, Wildaf, Zimbabwe.
- “I am now a convert!” - Matseliso Moshoeshe Chadzingwa, University of Lesotho and University of Natal.
- “I have always seen ICTs as a challenge rather than a threat. I've had concerns at times, for example over issues of privacy. But you only become alienated if you don't have or acquire the skills”- Phumi Mtetwa, National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, South Africa
- “ICTs fascinate me because I believe they can help me to blossom professionally and psychologically”- Fatma Mint Elkory, library of the University of Nouakchott, Mauritania.

### ***Generational issues***

Two of those interviewed were older women who reflected the discomfort and sense of alienation experienced by older women in the whirlwind of the information revolution. As Inonge Wina, Chair of the Co-ordinating Committee for Gender and Development in Zambia put it: "I find in Zambia a real generational gap in the use of the new technologies. My generation feel too old to learn. There is a fear by older women to learn new skills. We are not yet used to the idea that learning does not end in the classroom. The approach to education in Africa is still very formalistic. This is compounded by the technical problems with access and the way training is presented."

Carol Ugochukwu of the Worldwide Organisation for African Women in Nigeria adds: "when I first heard about ICTs I said: this is not for my age group. It is something for the younger generation to pick up at school." Ugochukwu only overcame her inhibitions when she went to the United States of America to study and took weekend classes in Internet usage: "it was only then I realized what a superb tool ICTs were for me!"

Mercy Wambui of the ECA Communication team comments: "I think it would be a good idea to think about existing ICT training programmes and curricula in terms of how they address specific age groups. We are considering experimenting with this at ECA. Older people don't want to be seen in the same IT-driving license class as the more junior members of staff!"

### ***What difference have ICTs made to your life?***

The comments in this section were far more expansive than in any other part of the questionnaire. The positive spin offs that women spoke of may be categorized as practical, professional and personal growth or emancipation. The following is a sampling of responses:

#### Practical

- "It has reduced my mobility, saving on cost and time. Sending email to the United States for instance is a lot cheaper than phoning." – Norah Madaya, Acacia National Secretariat, Uganda
- "I have acquired skills in effective use of the Internet/email that has been useful in the implementation of my day-to-day activities. I feel more confident because I get updates that are current"- Juliet Were Oguttu, ISIS, Uganda.
- "Able to communicate with family friends and colleagues across Africa and the world. Able to keep track of and participate in regional and global debates and processes. Got my current job by finally applying for a notice that had been sent to me and I'd forwarded it to other contacts after it crossed my desk for a third time through email!" - Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director, FEMNET.
- "I pay less for mailing costs and I can be aware of new approaches"- Abreu, Mozambique

### Professional

- “I feel more confident and skilled ...I am accessible and my facility with ICTs has enabled me to stay ahead of my peers”- Norah Madaya, Acacia National Secretariat, Uganda
- “ICTs opened up my world, particularly with regard to research and work development opportunities. I remember discovering the concept of ICTs for development purposes about two years ago, and how I finally realised that I had discovered my passion for my work life. The easy access to information and communication with relevant people has made it infinitely easier to develop a broad base for my research, and also acquire work in my field. I have more contact through electronic means, with people who give input to my work, than I have face-to-face contact”- Samantha Fleming, IDASA and SA Institute for Distance Educators, South Africa.
- “I have personally developed self- confidence in the use of ICTs. I have also gained access to information that has enabled me to be at the cutting edge of issues that enable me to perform well in my professional activities”- Lillian Mashiri, Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre and Network, Zimbabwe.
- “Mailing lists often create a sense of solidarity and belonging. Requests for information and support amongst peers have created an online supportive community”- Jenny Radloff, African Gender Institute, South Africa.
- “Development of knowledge networks in which what matters are the common objectives and not socio-cultural differences; opportunities to publish in virtual magazines without going through the obstacles that are common in hard copy magazines; regular information on conferences, activities and courses related to my subject area”- Awatef Ketiti, Research and Information Centre for Women, Tunisia.
- “Better understanding of globalisation”- Marie Helene Sylla, ENDA SYNFEV, Senegal

### Personal emancipation

- “The freedom to have access to spaces other than the bedroom, a kitchen, and to be fully and safely able to act in public spaces is key to women’s emancipation in the world’s future, Unless African women can participate fully in

cyberspace, they will face a new form of exclusion from society.”- Marie Helene Mottin Sylla, ENDA SYNFEV, Senegal.

- “Access to ICTs has made a big difference in my personal growth and development. I now have access to an enormous network of people and feel part of a global community of people committed to improving the lives of women. There is great solidarity in that reality”- Sarita Ranchod, Project Manager, Women’sNet, South Africa.
- “I think it would be fair to say that ICTs have revolutionised my life. Although I am aware that technology is merely a tool, and that the problems facing communities and individuals today cannot be solved by technology; it is definitely the most democratising influence society has ever seen. For me personally, ICTs have opened up the possibilities of what can be done in development work with particular emphasis on communication strategies and provision of information, given appropriate application of such technology”- Samantha Fleming, IDASA and SA Institute for Distance Educators, South Africa.
- “They have helped me to resist worrying so much about being excluded from decision- making bodies. Also, I have started to write more from a gender perspective. I was told that this would marginalize me even further but that does not concern me as much any more.”- Anne Knott, Vista University, South Africa.
- “I feel I belong to a world larger than my five senses can perceive. They have provided the opportunity to access information on a wide array of issues often at reduced cost.”- Buhle Mbambo, University of Botswana
- “Internet offers the capacity to act and to be an active recipient in the communication domain and not a passive recipient, like television or other communication media”- Awatef Ketiti, Research and Information Centre, Tunisia.
- “These networks have helped women to express themselves better; to understand and see better national, international and world issues and to debate these.”- Traore Konate, Mali

#### Frustration

- “ICTs have empowered me but also frustrated me when I cannot afford them for my personal studies, at home, nor for several grassroots NGOs I work with.”-

Matseliso Moshoeshe-Chadzingwa, University of Lesotho and University of Natal.

### **ICTs and organizations**

It would be impossible to establish from a random sample such as that carried out what percentage of African women's NGOs have access to ICTs, other than to say that there is a rapid increase in the number of NGOs getting connected; and that this is happening at a much faster pace than say in government (WHERE?). Clearly, NGOs, with their smaller, flatter and more flexible structures have been quick to perceive the benefits of ICTs. Moreover, the networking, research, lobbying and advocacy activities of NGOs are well served by the new technologies. It has been suggested that because of their socialization, women are particularly good net workers, and that this has often helped to overcome whatever inhibitions there might be to the new ICTs. But the old axiom- that the chain is as weak as the weakest link- is also especially true of ICTs. The current patchiness of ICT usage across the continent militates against more effective usage as illustrated by the following research findings:

***Some women's NGOs still do not have access to ICTs:*** Two of the NGOs interviewed did not have access to ICTs. Both were from West Africa and both were umbrella bodies for women in remote rural areas. Chief Bisi Ogunleye of the Country Women Association of Nigeria and Network of African Rural Women's Association- a well known campaigner for women's land rights - spoke of her frustration at organizing her visit to the Commission on the Status of Women meeting through fax and phone. More importantly, the network of 200 groups that she services, with up to 200 000 members, are mostly reached by word of mouth; making the organizing of any event, let alone a campaign or petition, a torturously slow process. She points out that email in her office alone would not be enough: it needs to reach all 200- member organizations. But she believes the benefits would be enormous. Apart from their application in organizing and caucusing, she notes that ICTs could provide information vital information like agricultural prices and could be used for E Commerce among women.

Princesse Happy of Cadef Africa in Yaounde, Cameroun, expressed a similar combination of frustration and anticipation. She presently can only access email through someone's office in town. It is inconvenient and costly- "it vexes me", she says. The



organization is an umbrella for 82 women's organizations with 1800 members served by just one phone line in the head office, and five among the 82 partners. Email is vital for her work, she says: "it would make communication easier and cheaper, and we could begin income generating activities."

***The degree of individual access within organizations is limited:*** With the exception of better-resourced NGOs, many of which are in South Africa, the ideal of one worker, one computer and one email address is still far from the case in many African women's NGOs. Often there is only one email address, operated by a secretary, restricting usage to the sending of administrative notes and limiting networking and interactive possibilities. Use of the web- a potentially important research tool- in such instances is even more restricted.

***Women's double work burden takes its toll:*** Unlike men women often don't have the time to tinker- an important factor in developing ease with ICTs. As Abantu For Development commented in the electronic discussion on gender and ICTs on the Flamme website: "the issue of over work and over burden also plays a role. Many women activists work so hard that they are unable to create space in their work day to utilize online spaces."

***Many NGOs have shifted to private sector ISP providers:*** The majority of those who responded get their internet access through private sector providers. The only exceptions were those who obtained access through universities and in South Africa NGOs who are serviced by SANGONet. Elsewhere on the continent, the trend is to move away from NGO providers. Mercy Wambui comments: "Those providers that started off as APC points/FIDO nodes e.g. Mukla in Kampala and ELCI were faced with a number of challenges including competition from the private sector that was offering both cheaper and faster email and web access with 24 hour technical support, e.g. Africaonline." The trend is an interesting comment on the rapid growth of private sector activity around ICTs in Africa.

***Telecommunications infrastructure is weak:*** Many African countries still suffer from poor phone connections. As Rosemary Orlale Okello of the African Women and Child Feature Service puts it: "If it's not the rats eating the cables it's the vandals. We simply

can't take advantage of the new technologies when our infrastructure is so outdated." Many East African countries are undergoing frequent power cuts as a result of the drought, adding to the technical burdens.

***Limited in country access detracts from effective internal networking:*** The majority of respondents said they used ICTs primarily to communicate with donors and international networks. To the extent ICTs were used internally, this was invariably to communicate with other NGOs, but only in capital cities. The fact that there is barely any internet access outside capital cities is a major limitation for umbrella organizations seeking to mobilize and provide a platform for grassroots women's groups- in some respects a far more urgent need than communicating with the outside world. An example of this is the Co-ordinating Committee for Gender and Development in Zambia that has seven affiliate offices in each of the country's provinces. None have access to Internet, and only three of the 12 board members can be reached through this medium. Says Chairperson Inonge Wina: "it is frustrating. If we had email the board could be constantly in touch. Alerts could be issued and responses mobilized. In some cases, the only way we are able to communicate is by driving to the offices of our affiliates."

Only in South Africa did any respondents say they used ICTs to communicate with government departments, which have either not been connected or have not developed an IT culture. This is worrying indeed, given the much-touted applications of ICTS for improving transparency and accountability- and ultimately good governance.

***Sectoral caucusing is also weak:*** The ability for NGOs to coalesce around themes and issues is also weakened by the lack of widespread connectivity and ICT usage within organizations. This is true even in South Africa, which has a high degree of connectivity among women's NGOs, but not necessarily a uniform degree of usage. An example is the reproductive rights campaign around the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act that involved thirty organizations, of which only about ten were active users of email. According to Marion Stevens who formerly worked for the Women's Health Project and was involved in the campaign, the fact that several different forms of communication had to be used added considerably to the administrative burden and frequently led to accusations of certain partners not being consulted.

**Regional networking is improving but still has limitations:** Networking among African NGOs has arguably been one of the more effective areas of networking, but again this is limited to capital cities. For example FEMNET, established during the third World Conference on Women in Nairobi to mobilise African women's NGOs, has four hundred individual and group affiliates around the continent; holds an annual general meeting every three years; and must stay in touch with its membership in between. That need has been especially pressing in the caucusing for the Sixth African Regional Conference last year and preparations for Beijing Plus Five this year. FEMNET Chairperson Sara Longwe says: "ICTs have made our communications strategy easier, affordable and feasible." Flamme- the joint venture website and electronic discussion forum conceived by Women'sNet and FEMNET (see Chapter Three) is a testimony to increased regional networking.

WILDAF, which brings together a thousand individuals and organizations concerned with women's rights across twenty four countries in Africa is another example of a regional network that has been involved in the processes around Beijing making increasing use of ICTs. But only about ten percent of WILDAF's members can be reached by email. Communications officer Lynette Matimba comments that: "there is still a mindset problem with the heads of many NGOs who do not see ICTs as a priority".

***ICTs are cutting costs, but not in a planned way***

When asked what the benefit of ICTs had been, the majority of respondents cited costs savings. A Kenyan-based organization noted that while it costs \$10 to send a two-page fax overseas, an individual email subscription cost \$30 for the whole month. Few organizations, however, were able to give detailed breakdowns of their cost savings. Similarly, few of those polled appeared to have attempted to maximize this benefit through deliberate policies, such as spelling out the conditions under which fax/ DHL/ postage etc could be used in preference to email.

***ICTs are changing organizational culture, but this could be more strategic***

Some organizations, alive to the benefits of ICTs for their work, have gone out their way to facilitate access and build ICTs into their work culture, as illustrated in the following excerpt from the response by Thebile Phute of the Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC) in Harare:

“Everyday at work, all the staff in this organisation have access to personal computers and are given personal email addresses. The mode of communication within staff and the outside world is through use of email. As a result the use of telephones is limited. The whole organisation has access to Internet and since we do a lot of writing, it has proved to be an indispensable tool for information research. The organisation has invested in a radio link to avoid too much reliance on modems and telephones for our information flow to be effective. Since our email and Internet access are unlimited, one is free to join as many mailing lists as possible, as long as they are related to one's work. For publicity purposes, we have mounted our project's databases on the Internet and SARDC has a web page, where we share information relating to SADC countries, implementation of declarations/protocols and policies relating to gender, environment, governance, democracy and socio – economic issues. These topics relate to the projects in operation at SARDC.”

Abdelkrim-Chikh says of her organization: “ENDA-TM is a very decentralized organization, where teams/units have got a great autonomy and antennas around the world. ICTs have brought about better exchange of experiences and have brought together cross-cutting programmes; therefore improvement of internal communication, reinforcement of personnel capacities and cost reduction of intercontinental exchanges; as well as intensification of external exchanges.”

Some respondents commented on the fact that ICTs had helped to flatten structures and increase transparency within their organizations as it was now possible to make one's voice heard by copying messages to all concerned, including one's superiors. A South African respondent noted that there are some government ministers who are email literate and will respond directly to messages sent by NGOs who would otherwise never dreamed of being able to secure an appointment with the minister.

But Jenny Radloff of the African Gender Institute commented that ICTs can also have the effect of creating new hierarchies within organizations between those with and those without ICT skills. Alka Larkin of Women'sNet adds: “there is undeniable status attached to being technology – literate, even at a beginner level, and this has provided motivation, interest and enthusiasm amongst the participants.”

Rosemary Okello- Orlale notes that very few organizations have devised a policy or strategy for making the most efficient and effective use of ICTs or thought through the organizational implications. For the most part, she notes, “even the existing ICT capacity is under utilized; we are barely going beyond the world processing capacity of this equipment.”

Alka Larkin of Women’sNet adds: “Restricted access in organisations or low usage/ inefficient usage is also due to lack of knowing how to work off-line (e.g. composing e-mail messages off-line and sending them in a batch minimizes time spent connected and thus minimizes telecom expense to the organisation). These were among tips and techniques, which were discussed in the workshops.”

Mercy Wambui comments: “I think it boils down to the lack of knowledge management and automation strategies that enhance productivity, generation of content, sharing, distribution and dissemination. If a convincing argument that shows the advantages of using email for internal communication (e.g. costs saved on exchange of disks, paper time etc) then more people would put in place strategies that make it work. I think ICTs are more than exchanging email and forwarding stuff... its about time management, enhancing work flows and accountability at the work place... with some email enabled aspects that act as personal interface between people and machines. Beyond the cost argument, I think a few concrete examples of how ICTs have changed the work place can help.”

## Training

*“Much work is done at training African women on the basic use of ICTs to access information; less is done on training women in the strategic use of ICTs as a means of disseminating information so as to create two way, more participatory flows of information.” – Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director, FEMNET*

Training for women in ICTs needs to be extended, made gender sensitive and deepened. Of the twenty-nine who responded to the question of whether or not they had received training, one third had received no training at all, and only two of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the training they had received. For the most part ICT training received by those polled had been brief, inconsistent, and not tailored to their needs.

As Lillian Mashiri of the Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre comments: “through personal experience I have noted that in some cases women feel overwhelmed by technology and do not appreciate or understand its benefits. In other cases I feel that technology has been introduced to women in such a way that it appears to be something extremely complicated by men. That is why it is important to demystify technology and present it in a user friendly way. I think we should focus on ‘hands on’ training and also on lobbying for gender transformative policies.”

Halima Traore Konate of Sotelma in Mali adds: “I believe the formal training is much better than the on-the-job training or through trial and error, for the tool and its applications are better known. However, the on-job and trial and error training has its positive side: cost-effective, more people are trained and have access to new ICTs.”

Matseliso Moshoeshoe Chadzingwa of the Universities of Lesotho and Natal sees scope for both: “formal training tends to be instructional, while on the job experience is practical, it supplements the former and is more effective if continued.”

Lynette Matimba decries the basic nature of most available ICT courses: “it does not delve more in-depth. There are things that we as women need to know about in order to use ICTs more effectively, such as E Commerce.”

The research on “From Beijing to Beijing Plus Five” by Kole and Okello found that “as much as there was a large demand for technical training, there was an even higher demand for non technical training. The following was the list from this research of training requirements in descending order of choice:

- Organisational;
- Information Management;
- Training of trainers or facilitators;
- Technical training;
- Using chat groups;
- Making web pages and discussion groups.

Mercy Wambui comments: “creating intranets through internal local networking is one

way of resolving the problem (of access to the World Wide Web). People don't have to go to the Internet (incurring costly downloading time) for information that can be mirrored on the Intranet. But it helps to use the Intranet for internal administrative processes as well."

More innovative forms of adult training such as mentorship also bear further consideration. Respondents to the survey often spoke more enthusiastically about a partner or friend who gave them ongoing support and had jump-started them into the information age than a training course. Several respondents spoke warmly of the training provided by SANGONet that has a specific focus on women. Two respondents specifically praised Women'sNet training co-ordinator Alka Larkan. As Thembile Phute of SARDC put it: "I managed to plan for my training through Alka on the ITTAIN mailing list. I am extremely grateful; the training was a great success. ICTs have made me access information on the Internet that I never thought existed."

**BOX: Reflections of a trainer: interview with Alka Larkan, Women'sNet Training Co-ordinator**

*Q: Is there a different way of training women to use ICTs?*

A: I think that women don't need a different methodology per se, but they definitely need to be trained in a manner that is sensitive to the fact that they are often perceived (by themselves and many others) as unlikely possessors of technical expertise or knowledge. I also want to point out that I don't really train people to become technical experts- the aim of the training I do is to provide women with a definite ability to use the internet and communication technology generally for their work.

*Q: How do you demystify the technology?*

A: That can be a lot of fun! There are number of ways, starting with the definitions above and the history and topography of the Internet – brief explanations of how an individual pc connects in Africa via different machines, to one in, say, in Japan. If there are first time pc users, I sometimes ask them to take the pc apart – or just unplug the mouse and plug it in again, etc. People enjoy that. My most effective technique is a personal story. I talk about when I first got a computer and couldn't find the off-switch (duh!) for 5 days... sad but true. People have remarked that this inspires confidence –

makes one wonder a bit. I don't have an Internet connection at home. Other people sometimes share their tech-traumas.

There are certain things that I always include in my training because it provides access to the so-called elite world of cyberspace: firstly, I like to define the terminology – and this includes terms like hacker, cyberspace, cyberpunk, as well as the words like search engine, server, online/offline, software, Internet. Once definitions are established – definitions that are hooked into technological culture and not technology – people are able to play with what I call '3D' perceptions of communications technology.

*Q: How do you teach those who do not have regular access to ICTs?*

A: That is a big problem. Usually, a requirement for participation is access – at a friend, sister, organisation, home, work, Internet café – although I have had a few participants (maybe one to two percent) who have no access to a pc or Internet. In Mpumalanga and E Cape people were keen to try to find funds for computers after the workshop. They specified that they could see how useful it would be to their work. Also, people seemed to want to get together and pool resources or start their own training or user networks (support each other to gain access). This was fantastic to see, and time will tell.

*Q: Is age an issue?*

A: Age is definitely a factor. Older people feel far less confident. Douglass Rushkoff, in his book "Children of Chaos", mentions that adults need to learn how to adjust to this dislocated world of technology and Internet communications by looking to the people who have known nothing else: kids. Of course, that doesn't apply in the Transkei or remote Northern Province, does it? But younger women learn faster and feel more confident. Older women remark on this and one has to boost confidence all the time. I don't know if I can specify how I do this kind of thing – a teacher once said to me "we all work our own magic in the classroom" – it's a bit like that. I just always have to respect the dignity of the people I facilitate workshops for, whether they are 12 or 70. I also always thank participants for the exchange of learning.

*Q: What other dimensions do you have to factor in?*



A: When teaching high school, I was trying to teach a class with hectic racial and gender divisions and issues. Everyone was aggressive. The girls had low self-esteem around learning; the boys were sexist ... nightmare. I decided upon an experiment: I made them sit white, black, boy, girl and partnered them – then I told them that their marks would now be interdependent and they were responsible for their partner's learning. If they knew more, they had to learn to share and if they knew less they had to learn to demand knowledge. There would be no racist/sexist remarks, or I would take away marks. They united in hatred for me – and alarm! - and it worked. Since then, I always use that principle in training. I get a person who is quick or knowledgeable to partner someone who may have low confidence or problems asking for help. Throughout the training participants have expressed enthusiasm and excitement at the prospect of sharing their skills with their co-workers, friends and family.

## CHAPTER THREE: ICTs AS A TOOL FOR FURTHERING GENDER EQUALITY

*“The growing strength of the NGO sector, particularly women’s organizations and feminist groups, has become a driving force for change. Non-governmental organizations have played an important advocacy role in advancing legislation or mechanisms to ensure the promotion of women. They have also become catalysts for new approaches to development. ... Now ICTs can strengthen this role despite the fact that in some countries, governments continue to restrict their ability to operate freely- Aidah Opoku Mensah, Ford Foundation.*”

The range of different applications of ICTs in the struggle for gender equality in Africa is an indication of the rich potential that exists in this area. This chapter will cite and critique a few of these examples gathered during the course of the research. It will argue that there is scope for being more strategic in the usage, for example in evaluation and follow up mechanisms. The chapter will argue that there is particular scope for enhancing the more hard- core economic applications of ICTs, that could in turn have a direct impact on reducing poverty: the major priority in Africa.

### **Lobbying around Beijing Plus Five**

The creation of Flamme website, a joint project of FEMNET and APC-Africa-Women, is an excellent example of the partnerships and networking that have been spawned by the five year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women; and in the case of Africa, the Sixth Africa Regional Conference that preceded it. The aim of Flamme is to gather experiences and views, to promote networking and action through electronic discussion around the issue: How ICTs can and will help us to implement the recommendations of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action?

In September 1999, fourteen women from nine African countries got together to develop an African women’s website committed to sharing and developing Beijing Plus Five information in a web site and to build capacity among participants to build websites for their own organizations.

FEMNET Executive Director Muthoni Wanyeki describes FEMNET as follows: "FEMNET works to track and promote the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing PFAs through advocacy, training and communications. It monitors implementation continentally (focusing on institutional mechanisms and women and the media) and it provides gender training through a FEMNET model on engendering policy and practice in the twelve areas. It provides a communications infrastructure for its membership so as to share experiences, strategies, etc on work on the PFAs." (APC-Africa-Women is described in detail in Chapter one).

During the five- day workshop FEMNET and APC-Africa-Women considered the information needs of the networks that they serve. The women were not web designers or administrators, but they learned the technical skills to build the Flamme/ Flame website. FEMNET Chairperson Sara Longwe comments: "By bringing the end users into the design, the website was built in an empowering way. There was ownership of the process by the beneficiaries. The technology was demystified"

Sonja Boezak, Information Co-ordinator at Women'sNet, adds: "Prior to the workshop we met electronically so that we could introduce each other and familiarize ourselves with virtual workspaces. Since the workshop the mailing list has been used to post information about the latest developments leading up to the African regional conference; to request additional information for the web site; as a forum for technical support and trouble shooting."

"The collaborative process that has been the building block for the Beijing Plus Five process in Africa has made this network strong and valuable. Although I feel that there have been many more successes, I think that in a way part of the success of the initial workshop is not only the skills we acquired, or the resource that was built, but also the subsequent processes. The Flamme mailing list, for example, is a result of what started as a five- day workshop. The network has grown beyond the women who attended the workshop... and also beyond the borders and this continent.

"The Flame/Flamme network is an African one, but forms part of a global network of NGOs. Women Action is a global coalition of international and regional information, communication and media networks. It aims to enable NGOs to actively engage in the

Beijing Plus Five Review process for women's empowerment, with a special focus on women and media....

"The challenges are still lack of information, training and access to the new technologies, but with stronger networks and creating a culture of information exchange we can make a difference to improving the lives of women in very real ways."

### **Women's rights**

Several examples were cited during the research of women's rights campaigns in Africa that have been conducted using the Internet:

**Religion:** Women living under Muslim Law (*Femmes sous lois musulmanes*), a French and English-speaking network has an international solidarity network and whenever the need arises sends out to women's networks around the world urgent alert calls for action. Many African women responded to an alert sent on 31 January, involving a death sentence passed on four students involved in student demonstrations in Tehran. The network also swung into action around the declaration of sharia law in certain Nigerian states (see Chapter one).

**Gender justice:** The Gender and Africa Information Network (GAIN) grew out of a workshop in March 1997 that brought together information centres from around the continent to discuss communication mechanisms around gender justice in Africa. Archived messages are a rich source of information. Requests for information are posted and responded to by participants where possible. Several petitions are organized through GAIN.

**Violence Against Women:** In Zambia, 39 women and men were arrested when they staged a peaceful protest against the rape and strangling to death of four young girls last year. Many of the supporters had been urging police and government to protect children's rights and curb the growing number of children being raped. On four occasions a permit was requested and each time it was denied- before the peaceful demonstration went ahead. Women NGOs in Lusaka immediately posted emails to GAIN letting people know about the arrests, asking for information to be circulated widely and saying where email letters of support could be sent. Messages of solidarity

began to pour in.

When the women were released they sent out the following message via GAIN: “Our very warm and sincere thanks for your expression of solidarity with all the 39 of us who were arbitrarily arrested and detained two weeks ago. We have drawn great strength and renewed vigour from your strength and encouragement. It is seeing the larger connection of what we are doing and interacting with concerned people like you that gives meaning to our work and gives us the hope, inspiration and courage to stand up for what we know in our hearts is right!” (Email sent to GAIN by Salma Ginwalla on 1 February 2000).

According to Inonge Wina, Chair of the Co-ordinating Committee for Gender and Development in Zambia, the campaign is being carried forward in demands for legal reform (especially the need for stiff sentences on rape)

***Female genital mutilation:*** In Chad three years ago a campaign was carried out in support of film-maker Fatma Yakoub following the backlash against her film on Female Genital Mutilation.

***Sexual orientation:*** Phumi Mtetwa, of the AIDS project at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg is Secretary General of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) with headquarters in Brussels where there are three staff members. There are twelve board members in different regions, and ILGA has 350 affiliates (of whom about 50 are in Africa). As Mtetwa notes “the entire organisation is run virtually. We meet once a year; otherwise all our other meetings are via email.” ILGA conducts general advocacy on sexual orientation and helps to provide country specific responses. During the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in late 1999, ILGA launched a concerted campaign to make AZT more accessible. ILGA has also been lobbying for gay rights in the Beijing Plus Five Review process. From a practical point of view, Mtetwa notes that email conferencing has the great advantage that “you don’t have to keep tapes or take minutes: you have the fullest possible record of the meeting! No one can come back and say ‘I did not say that’ when they wrote it themselves!”

*Comment:* Rights campaigning is probably one of the more developed applications of

ICTs in the struggle for advancing gender equality in Africa. The advantages and benefits are obvious! What is still lacking is more strategic planning and follow up to these campaigns: who is being targeted, and how, with what effect? Beyond the event, what measures are taken to put in place sustainable solutions? For example, have the laws on rape in Zambia been tightened since the incident in January? If not, what can be done? If campaigns do not lead to sustainable solutions they will have raised much dust without shedding much light.

## **Education**

***SchoolNet South Africa*** is a school networking initiative supported by the Acacia division of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Acacia is an international program to empower sub-Saharan communities with the ability to apply ICTs to their own social and economic development. SchoolNet aims to develop an IT culture in schools through training and capacity building. It is a public/private sector partnership guided by the South African Department of Education.

Acacia, the Open Society Foundation and World Links initially supported the programme for Development. However, SchoolNet SA has been able to establish a number of key private sector partnerships that now largely support SchoolNet activities and is key to their development and expansion. Private sector partners include Microsoft, Nortel, Internet Solution, Cisco, MWeb, Intekom, Communications and Telkom SA. Private sector contributions consist primarily of in-kind contributions, and it is anticipated that these will increase in future.

Acacia supported a baseline study on the use of ICTs in schools in South Africa. This study will be distributed to the national Department of Education and NGOs. The report will be used to develop provincial strategies for the use of ICTs in schools. In addition to this, Acacia is involved in school networking in Angola (project is in its initial stage), Lesotho (project is in its implementation stage), Mozambique and Namibia.

At a regional level, the “Promotion of Regional School Networks in Southern Africa” project which focuses on five countries (Zambia, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland and Angola) was implemented to pilot connectivity in each country, to feed into educational

policy and to lay the groundwork for a national school network. Only Zambia and Zimbabwe were subsequently linked to the project.

Shafika Isaacs, an Acacia programme officer comments: “while it (SchoolNet South Africa) holds potential for women, the integration of an explicit gendered approach has so far been absent. This will be one of the areas that I am keen to focus on in the future.”

*Comment:* Isaacs comment is pertinent. Though it may seem obvious, gender criteria must be built into the design and monitoring mechanisms of such projects to ensure that girls and boys benefit equally. While schools offer an excellent institutional conduit for ICTs among the next generation, they still do not address the problem of the older generation and of those who are illiterate. To date there still does not appear to be a project in Africa that links ICTs to literacy.

## **Health**

**HealthNet**, a satellite based network for health workers, has been a godsend to many NGOs and practitioners in the health sector; providing information and diagnoses and responding to urgent please for drugs, information and resources. As pointed out in the foreword by the Executive Secretary of the ECA, there are enormous possibilities for applying ICTs in the health sector, which the World Health Organisation estimates is forty percent about sharing information.

During the Flamme electronic discussion on ICTs, several women stressed the need to develop the use of ICTs in the struggle against AIDS. Women’sNet is in discussion with potential partners for hosting the SA AIDS electronic discussion pre AIDS 2000 and during the AIDS 2000 meeting. It is envisaged that the conference will include a round table on using ICTs to advocate and lobby around HIV/AIDS issues.

## **Environment**

EcoNews Africa in Nairobi is an excellent example of the axiom: think globally act locally. Actively engaged in the lobbying efforts around the Rio Earth summit (and one of the first NGOs in Africa to use ICTs) EcoNews Africa has worked over the years with grassroots organizations for which it has acted as what EcoNews Programme Officer Margaret Nyambura calls an “information broker”. In Kenya, a group of Masai people,

supported by EcoNews Africa, succeeded in getting a court order against the granting of their traditional land by the government to Dutch horticulturalists. They used the Convention on Desertification, translated and explained to them by EcoNews Africa, as one of their lobbying tools. EcoNews Africa has worked with a group of Kenyan women in repackaging information for a community radio station. These experiences have been transmuted to international fora where EcoNews Africa is a campaigner for environmental justice- most recently at the second ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in late 1999 and in the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt cancellation.

### **Economic empowerment**

**The Jubilee 2000** campaign has been conducted electronically by NGOs across the globe, including African women's NGOs, demanding that the IMF ensure debt relief by the year 2000 for developing countries.

**Globalisation:** *AWAIT INFO FROM MOHAU; MOST RECENT PANOS CAMPAIGN*

**Budget:** In the run up to the release of the latest South African budget in March, Women'sNet issued a challenge to the media to cover the budget in a gender sensitive way. As part of the initiative, Women'sNet created a bulletin board where South African women were invited to comment on the budget.

**Entrepreneurship:** A number of interesting case studies are emerging in West and East Africa on the use of ICTs for commerce:

*ASAFE* in Cameroon is an association of women entrepreneurs. The ITU has intervened at their request to help develop an e-commerce system for intra and inter regional trade for the organization.

Gisele Yitamben, in her response to the research questionnaire, describes *ASAFE* as follows: "ASAFE works for the promotion and the development of small enterprises in general but also initiatives that generate income and revenue in all sectors and domains put together. The initiatives and projects are compatible with environmental protection, and must be bankable. *ASAFE* endeavours to develop an enterprise form (micro and



small enterprise) and self-employment; promote alternative financing so as to facilitate loan access for individual groups and small enterprises that cannot get bank loans, either because of their low volume of their activities or lack of traditional guaranty required by traditional banks; strengthen organization and management capacities as well as intervention capacities.”

*Kayar Beach* in Senegal (to follow)

The *Council for Economic Empowerment of Women* in Uganda (CEEWU) plans to establish a Women’s Information Resource Electronic Service (WIRES). According to Zavuga Goretti of CEEWU, “WIRES will have computers and women will download information from the computers aided by information officers at the centres to increase their income. The WIRES will give information on how to get and use credit, information on agriculture and any other activities women are engaged in. Through our WIRES centres we hope to empower women with information on how to access credit and start profitable enterprises. In the process the women will be able to generate resources to help them acquire property and further their economic base; thus reducing their dependence on men.”

**BOX: Nabweru telecentre in Uganda empowers women farmers**

*by Rosemary Okello-Orlale, African Women and Child Feature Service*

For Dorcas Kabusomba a small-scale farmer in Nabweru Town, seven kms north of Kampala, the sky is the limit with the information revolution that is changing the lives of many women in the area.

The 46 year old Kabusomba, now a successful farmer, owes it to the Nabweru Community Telecentre (NCT) which was opened in 1998 to help the community have access to the wider range of information.

"This telecentre has revolutionised our lives," says an excited Kabusomba who comes regularly to the Centre.

The Nabweru Community Telecentre is a pilot project set up by the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) and is one of the many ICT projects funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) under the Acacia initiative.

According to Kabusomba, through the information they have been able to get via the telecentre, including video shows, they have been able to learn new methods of producing maize, fodder and sweet potatoes; as well as how to carry out effective zero grazing and poultry keeping.

"At the moment I have 200 broilers which sells at Ush 3500 (US\$ 2.36) each and one Friesian dairy cow that gives me two hundred litres of milk per day and I sell at Ush 600 (US\$ 0.4) per litre," says a beaming Kabusomba.

A mother of nine, Kabusomba attributes the improvement in her small-scale farming to the information from the telecentre: " Before I started getting the information from the telecentre, I was not able even to feed my children and the only litre of milk I used to get, went into feeding my children which was not even enough. But after being taught the new ways with the information that has been downloaded from the Website, the milk production improved."

The Acacia initiative aims to demonstrate, test and promote community- based ICT applications for rural community development and empowerment, in ways that build upon local goals, cultures strengths and process.

"UNCST and IDRC are looking at ICTs and how they can help communities especially women." Says Dr. Zavubabel Nyiira, Executive Secretary of UNCST and Acacia project National Programme Coordinator.

*Acacia* East Africa programme officer Edith Adera says following the finding that women are still minority users of ICTs in telecentres (see Chapter five) *Acacia* plans to identify women entrepreneurs around Nabweru; assess their training and information needs; and then train them in the use of ICTs. *Acacia* will work hand in hand with the *Council for Economic Empowerment of Women* in Uganda (CEEWU) on business

training for the women. A CD ROM on small business training developed by the International Women's Tribune Centre in New York is being adapted for use in the training with the assistance of the Uganda Chamber of Commerce.

Norah Madaya, the project officer for Acacia Uganda National Secretariat, says among many other issues the Internet will be used to address maternal health and child nutrition. This will include the initiating of telemedicine program as well as ways of improving living standards of women by facilitating the provision of agricultural information.

" The Internet has already become an important tool on matters of agriculture in this areas," says Daniel Semakula, an Information Officer at the Nabweru telecentre.

According to Semakula, the telecentre has established relationship with agricultural research centres in Uganda and they go to the communities, collecting information from farmers.

" The farmers tell us what type of information they want. In most cases is about a certain disease and how they can increase their production. The information is then e-mailed to research centres and after we get the response with the advice on how to solve the problem, we then go back to the farmers." he explains.

*Comment:* Initiatives on direct applications of ICTs for the empowerment of women need further exploration because of their potential direct and immediate impact with regard to poverty alleviation. Sharing of best practices would greatly assist.

### **Democracy and governance**

***The Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE)*** in Uganda acts as an "information broker" by accessing critical and relevant information on the Internet for women parliamentarians. Patricia Munabi, a programme officer, describes the organization as follows in her response to the research questionnaire:

“The mission of FOWODE is to promote gender equality through skills training, advocacy and research and publications. Under the local government programme, FOWODE has been engaged in building the capacity of women leaders at the grassroots level. FOWODE has trained over six hundred women leaders in skills for participation in public life. Some of these women have contested and won local government elections. Many voters’ education workshops have been held for women at the grassroots to prepare them for elections.

FOWODE has also worked with women legislators and their allies in Parliament since 1995. Its activities have ranged from preparing them for elections to skills for effectiveness in Parliament and delivering constituency services.

FOWODE is carrying out civic education for the referendum in fifteen districts with the aim of creating awareness about political systems and including gender as a main consideration in the referendum debate.

Through its advocacy programme, FOWODE has been able to introduce gender equality in important legislation such as the Local Government Act and the Land Act. The Centre is undertaking a Gender Budget Project that aims at introducing techniques of analysing national and district budgets from a gender perspective to key decision makers with a view of achieving gender equity in resource allocations in government sectors both at national and district levels.

FOWODE provides a research service and a small gender- focused reference library for women, workers, youth and disabled Members of Parliament. Gender activists and scholars also use the library. FOWODE Centre publishes a Newsletter “*The Voices*” which provides a forum for sharing ideas and experiences of women in public life, and encourages debate on critical topical gender issues. A series of Issue Briefs is published to provide information to legislators and sometimes to lobby for certain positions regarding gender equality.”

***Akina Mama wa Africa*** (AMWA) is a pan African non- governmental development organization founded by African women based in the United Kingdom with an African

regional office in Kampala. The name, in kiSwahili, means “solidarity among African women”. AMWA was founded to create space for African women to organize autonomously, identify issues of concern to them and speak for themselves. It provides training; advocacy; research and advisory services. The African Women’s Leadership Institute (AWLI) in Kampala trains women between the ages of twenty-five and forty in critical thinking on gender issues; organizational and resource development; and strategic planning. As part of its support to alumni and outreach work, AWLI has successfully piloted national leadership training workshops. The organization also provides technical assistance to women’s organizations in various parts of Africa- including fundraising training, staff and board development. ICTs are critical in holding together and enhancing an organization such as this whose operations spread over two continents; and for whom networking- with alumni and new recruits is central.

***Women’sNet in South Africa*** played an active role in disseminating information on women in the 1999 elections and in providing a platform for women to air their concerns to politicians. Women’sNet is currently engaged in a project for the forthcoming local government elections in South Africa that involves creating an information and networking hub; publicizing gender and local government issues in various media; training; developing a “how to” manual on using the Internet to co-ordinate a political information and advocacy campaign; publishing a plain language elections bulletin and facilitating discussion around election issues on electronic media.

*Comment:* There are far more potential applications of ICTs in democratisation and good governance projects. These include decentralizing and making services more accessible to women; and providing avenues for women to interact with politicians, for example for making submissions to parliament and asking questions of their representatives. Women in politics, and especially in local government, could play a leading role in advocating greater access for women to ICTs. The applications of ICTs to women’s involvement in peace building and conflict resolution also bear further exploration. Such applications have so far been weak, because infrastructure has broken down in these countries. But experience from Eastern Europe and elsewhere suggests that women’s peace movements could be strengthened by access to ICTs- giving them the ability to send out alerts; garner regional and international support; as well as network among each other.

**Media:** The Nairobi- based ***African Women and Child Feature Service (AWC)*** is an example of an organisation that is applying ICTs to the critical objective of increasing coverage of gender issues in the mainstream media in Africa.

Among the early NGO users in Kenya, AWC attributes much of its growth and outreach to ICTs. The agency produces and markets stories on gender issues to mainstream media; conducts advocacy, research and training on gender and media issues. It has produced newspapers with a gender lens at a number of international conferences, including Habitat in Istanbul, and the Food Summit in Rome.

On International Women's Day in March 2000, AWC, in partnership with Kenya's Nation newspaper, participated in Scottish journalist Lesley Riddoch's campaign: "*Women Make the News*". Riddoch drew up an electronic template for a woman's newspaper to be inserted into mainstream media with the aim of women writing about women for this, and upcoming international women's day celebrations. She included in her package stories that were spiked from the BBC and others that illustrate the gender biases of mainstream media. After initial hesitations by the Nation on whether it would get the advertising support it needed for such an insert, AWC and the Nation produced a thirty-page pull out in which advertising far exceeded expectations.

The AWC, in partnership with Inter Press Service Third World News Agency, the South Africa-based Gender Links, FEMNET, and APC-Africa-Women will be co-ordinating a team of African journalists to produce a daily newspaper during Beijing Plus Five; and virtual newspapers every 8 March in 2001 and 2002 as a follow up to this event. The virtual newspapers will be in the form of templates that will be distributed to mainstream media with stories and suggestions for coverage, leaving room for country-specific ideas and content. The aim is to Africanise Riddoch's concept- a move welcomed by her.

Ironically, despite the immense advantages of ICT to the media, many African news organisations lag behind both in access and usage to ICTs. AWC, for example, delivers its stories to the Nation newspaper on disk for fear they may not arrive or be displaced if they go by email. Rosemary Okello- Orlale says the effects of ICTs for the agency have been "mind boggling"- cutting costs, enabling communication to take place in the region

and further abroad; providing research resources; a constant flow of information and alerts; and a rich source of story ideas.

The ***Tanzania Media Women's Association of Tanzania*** (TAMWA) has actively used ICTs in its lobbying campaigns. Founder Fatma Alloo writes: "TAMWA has a programme whereby we do "bang style" journalism where we take an issue and blow it up in the press and cover it at all angles so that if it concerns various ministries to solve it then this "bang style" journalism brings together various parties concerned. For example we had the issue of plantation rats eating away at workers feet, and especially those of women, in the Tanga region. We discovered this is so because at night women sleep on the floor with their children while the man occupies the only bed; so it was a social issue of the position of women in society. Besides that we also found out that through the Ministry of Environment we had to set the boundaries of where the workers abodes should be so that plantation mice are kept at bay from workers quarters. It was also a Ministry of Health issue. So to solve the issue we needed to educate society but also get a commitment of various ministries involved." TAMWA proceeded to blitz the media on the issue as it has done in several other campaigns.

*Comment:* Nowhere do ICTs lend themselves more immediately to application than in the media- a profession in which speed and cheap communications is key. The AWC illustrates how ICTs have given African women the latitude to set up their own media enterprises, and to write for mainstream media on gender issues in a way that is financially viable. Before the advent of ICTs this probably would have been unthinkable. Again, such applications could be far more widespread. There is indeed scope for an Africa wide gender and media movement, working with NGOs and mainstream media to eradicate gender stereotypes and provide meaningful coverage of gender issues.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONTENT CREATION

*“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 need for women in gender institutions and information management people to be developed to be able to effectively manage the gender information process so that it reaches our sisters and brothers in the Bundu” - Thembile Phute, Southern Africa Research and Document Centre, Harare*

Apart from usage of ICTs, a critical issue for Africa generally, and African women in particular, is the extent to which indigenous information resources are being generated on the Internet. It is not enough for African women to be passengers or hitch hikers on the information superhighway: they have to be drivers and shapers of the Internet.

The seven million documents on the Internet primarily originate from developing countries. Over 70 percent of the host computers that form the foundations of the Internet are in the USA. English is used in almost 80 percent of the websites although less than one in ten persons worldwide speaks English. Africa generates about 0.4 percent of global content, or 0.2 percent excluding South Africa.

Though information creation and dissemination is a relatively new area for African women’s NGOs it is growing rapidly. The table below provides an overview of African web sites and discussion groups generated in Africa. While there are large numbers of international web sites that have an African content, this chapter looks at the information being generated within the continent itself. It should be noted that this list is not exhaustive, however it has attempted to provide varied samples of web sites and discussion groups in order to highlight the strides that African women are making.



***African web sites and discussion groups generated in Africa***

***Table three***

<b>Name of organization</b>	<b>Area of work</b>	<b>Web site address</b>	<b>Target audience</b>	<b>Highlights of information available</b>
<b>Association for Progressive Communications (APC) Women's Networking Support Programme</b>	Focuses on increasing women's participation in the use of ICTs through the provision of research, training, information and support activities. Promotes gender equity in the design, implementation and use of ICTs.	<a href="http://www.gn.apc.org/apcwomen">http://www.gn.apc.org/apcwomen</a>	Women, groups and organisations working in the field of gender and supporting women's networking through the use of ICTs.	The web site contains information on the origins of the APC Women's Networking Support Programmes, as well as projects, work areas and regional focal points.
<b>Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)</b>	Economic and social policy analysis	<a href="http://www.un.org/Depts/eca">http://www.un.org/Depts/eca</a>	Member States, NGOs, private sector, academia and general public	The web site contains publications, thematic papers on ICTs as well as archives of online discussions on ICTs for development with emphasis on ICTs and gender
<b>African Gender Institute (AGI)</b>	Research and teaching institution focusing on issues of gender equity and social justice in Africa.	<a href="http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi">http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi</a>	Intellectuals, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners working towards the attainment of gender equality in Africa.	The site includes information on the Institute itself with extensive links to other African web sites. The site also includes links to global web sites focusing on women's issues. However there is much emphasis on knowledge produced within developing contexts.
<b>Association of African universities (AAU)</b>	An international NGO set up by the universities in Africa to promote co-operation among themselves and	<a href="http://www.aau.org">http://www.aau.org</a>	Students, academics, researchers and policy makers	The site contains a newsletter and a database of women experts in African universities.

	between them and the international academic community.			
<b>African Women Global Network (AWOGNet)</b>	Global organisation focusing on improving the quality of life and status of women and children in Africa by targeting other organisations and institutions with similar objectives. Offers technical and other support services targeted to improve the lives of women and children. Pays particular attention to educational services that provide education to women and children and projects that increase Internet connectivity for African countries.	<a href="http://www.osu.edu/org/awognet">http://www.osu.edu/org/awognet</a>	Various institutions, organisations and indigenous national organisations within Africa, that work toward the advancement of women and children in Africa.	Site contains information about AWOGNet activities and programmes.
<b>Commission on Gender Equality (CGE)</b>	Statutory body established in terms of the South African Constitution in order to promote and protect gender equality.	<a href="http://www.cge.org.za">http://www.cge.org.za</a>	Government, civil society, private sector, media.	The site contains information about the CGE including its programme of action. In compliance with their Constitutional mandate to investigate gender related complaints, the web site also contains a complaints form that may be accessed through this site. In addition to this, a gender and media directory is available. This is a database for journalists, media professionals and the

				public who wish to access the names and contact details of women willing to be contacted for information. This initiative aims to increase women's representivity in the media. The site also hosts detailed information about CGE projects, programmes and activities.
<b>EcoNews Africa</b>	Non-governmental organisation that analyses global environment and development issues from an African perspective and reports on local, national and regional activities that contribute to global solutions.	<a href="http://www.web.apc.org/~econews">http://www.web.apc.org/~econews</a>	Targets NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs) in order to assist them in influencing policy review and formulation.	Has related sites. Promotes the need for information flow between and among local, national, regional and global levels.
<b>Federation of African Media Women (FAMW-SADC)</b>				
<b>African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET)</b>	Non-profit NGO. Main aim is to share information and ideas among NGOs in Africa with a more effective NGO focus on women's development. Supports efforts to promote gender sensitive development plans, policies and programmes.	<a href="http://www.africaonline.co.ke/femnet">http://www.africaonline.co.ke/femnet</a>	African NGOs. Collaborates with regional bodies such as Economic Commission of Africa (ECA) and African Development Bank (ADB).	Related web sites: Women'sNet and Flamme. Provides information on FEMNET's projects, activities and training programmes.
<b>Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)</b>	Non-governmental organisation focusing on reducing the gender gap in girls' access to education. It serves as a lobby group for gender equity in education at national, regional and international levels.	<a href="http://www.fawe.org">http://www.fawe.org</a>	Women ministers in charge of education systems, women vice chancellors of universities and senior women policy makers in education	Focus on engendering education policy and practice with the aim of achieving Education For All (EFA). Site includes FAWE's projects and information about the "Experimentation and Demonstration Grants Programme" that funds

			in Africa.	and supports various projects experimenting with different ways of increasing female access to education in sub-Saharan Africa.
<b>Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC)</b>	Independent regional information and documentation centre that focuses on the collection, dissemination and production of information on key development processes.	<a href="http://www.sardc.net">http://www.sardc.net</a>	Government, policy makers, non-governmental organisations, private sector, regional and international organisations, development agencies, parliaments and the media.	Has a section on gender, in the form of the Women in Development Southern African Awareness (WIDSAA) programme. This programme works closely with other SADC countries in assessing the impact of development policy on women.
<b>Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF)</b>	Women's rights network focusing on promoting strategies which link law and development to increase women's participation at community, national and international levels.	<a href="http://www.hri.ca/partners/wildaf">http://www.hri.ca/partners/wildaf</a>	Organisations and individuals with common objectives.	Site has information on WILDAF's area of work, programmes, activities and publications.
<b>WomenAction</b>	Global information, communication and media network that enables NGOs to engage in the Beijing + 5 review process with the goal of women's empowerment, focusing specifically on women and the media.	<a href="http://www.womenaction.org">http://www.womenaction.org</a>		
<b>Women'sNet</b>	Networking support programme that enables South African women to use the Internet to access people, resources, issues and tools	<a href="http://www.womensnet.org.za">http://www.womensnet.org.za</a>	Focus on capacity building and training of historically disadvantaged women, capacitating then to use ICTs to meet their specific	The site includes Women'sNet News which focuses on the latest gender news, a calendar of events, and has practical information e.g. information on jobs.

	needed for women's social activism. Joint project of SANGONet and the Commission on Gender Equality.		needs.	In addition to this, it has information on Women'sNet projects, programmes and events. The site also includes a bulletin board where messages may be posted, as well as archives of news and events. Have many related web sites.
<b>Famafrique</b>	Was created to allow francophone women's organizations to participate in the processes around the Africa regional conference and Beijing.	(check) Famafrique@enda.sn	Women in francophone Africa	The site includes information on past workshops on women and ICTs; electronic solidarity; information on beneficiaries and partners; information on a programme creating income generating activities for women and youth; ENDA SYNFEV annual reports; ENDA-PRONAT projects and programmes
<b>Toiledelles</b>	Electronic bulletin for francophone African women	(check) toiledelles@enda.sn	Women in francophone Africa	Regular news updates on events

This sample highlights a range of different African women's groups involved in content development. The following are a few examples of the types of institutions that are establishing websites, and the kind of information that is available on them:

***NGOs with a specific gender and ICT focus***

The APC Women's Networking Support Programme was established because of the urgent demand from within the women's movement to access ICTs for social activism. It was established in 1993 in the run up to the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing and was prompted by the rapid development of ICTs.

In South Africa, Women'sNet has increased the flow of information on gender. The content is locally produced and Women'sNet has aimed to create links with other forms of media by way of their Community Radio Project (see Chapter five). The project re-packages information in order to make it radio-ready and therefore accessible to people who may not have Internet access.

[Famafrique@enda.sn](mailto:Famafrique@enda.sn) to follow

### ***Academic institutions***

The Association of African Universities in Ghana is an NGO that has been established by universities in Africa to promote co-operation among themselves and the international academic community. The AAU is the principal forum for consultation, exchange and sharing of information and co-operation among universities in Africa. Within the ambit of its gender programme, the AAU together with the Forum for African Educationalists (FAWE) is creating a data- base of women in African universities that will provide skills profiles of African women experts. The skills audit serves as a resource base for utilising the skills found on the continent.

### ***Gender specific institutions***

The South African Commission on Gender Equality has an organizational website that includes a gender and media directory. This is a database for journalists, media professionals and the public to access the names and contact details of women willing to be contacted by the media for information. This initiative aims to increase women's voices in the media. By placing this resource on the website it can be updated frequently.

### ***Regional networks***

FEMNET is an NGO dedicated to sharing information among NGOs in Africa for a more effective NGO focus on women's development. WILDAF is a women's rights network focusing on promoting strategies that increase women's participation in development. WomenAction is a global network that enable NGOs to engage in the Beijing + 5 review process. These web sites allow individuals and organisations with similar foci to network, discuss issues, share information and formulate strategies to enable them to work more effectively.

### ***International networks focusing on Africa***

AWOGNet is an organisation focusing on improving the quality of life of women and children. It pays particular attention to projects that increase Internet connectivity for African countries. While it is based in Ohio USA, it networks all men and women, institutions and organisations throughout the world whose focus is the improvement of the lives of African women and children.

### **Discussion groups**

A mailing list is a topically focused discussion group that occurs through email distributions. On line discussion lists are an accessible and cost effective way for sharing and exchanging information and ideas and therefore of generating indigenous knowledge. It is therefore an important tool to facilitate lobbying and advocacy.

The table below provides examples of discussion lists focusing on gender issues. It is important to distinguish between working lists that are constituted for a specific purpose (for example the Flamme list serves the specific purpose of providing an electronic forum for women to debate, discuss, share information and ideas about the Beijing Plus Five process.) Other lists focus on specific issues (media or violence against women), while others focus on gender issues more generally (Women'sNet News and Gennet). The following are some examples of discussion groups; most of which have already been described in detail elsewhere in this report.

### ***Examples of discussion lists focusing on gender issues***

**Table four**

<u>Name of organization</u>	<u>Email address</u>
Famafrique	<a href="mailto:femmes-afrique@enda.sn">femmes-afrique@enda.sn</a>
	<a href="mailto:femmes-afrique-info@egroups.com">femmes-afrique-info@egroups.com</a>
Flame/ Flamme	<a href="mailto:flamme@lists.sn.apc.org">flamme@lists.sn.apc.org</a>
GAIN	<a href="mailto:gain@lists.sn.apc.org">gain@lists.sn.apc.org</a>
Gennet: (an email discussion list hosted by the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Natal in South Africa).	<a href="mailto:raven@und.ac.za">raven@und.ac.za</a>
Women'sNet:	<a href="mailto:women'snet-news@lists.sn.apc.org">women'snet-news@lists.sn.apc.org</a>

The feedback during period five of the Flamme discussion group- on what participants

liked and disliked about this and other discussion groups- offers interesting insight into the value and challenges of electronic mail groups:

Buhle Mbambo, of the University of Botswana shared her experiences of GAIN during the electronic discussion group on gender and ICTs: “What I believe is one of GAIN’S strengths is that it consists of interdisciplinary groups of largely African women working in different fields. It therefore provides a platform for basically asking questions on gender and a potential to get an answer or useful direction to any answer. One of the major inroads GAIN has made is being involved in the whole issue of women and ICTs. If we are going to talk about women accessing information in the information society we cannot ignore issues of access and capacity to use ICTs. However the effect of these efforts of GAIN can only be recognized at local level when participants translate these programmes and activities at that level. This is where the link with local organizations is effective.”

Commenting on the Flamme discussion on gender and ICTs, Mbambo felt that the space is too unanimous: “We did not engage with one another so much. We tended to agree on most things. It would have been good if we engaged a bit and discussed things.”

Lilian Mashiri of the Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre added: “For me, the African Women’s Online space has created a friendly space for women to discuss ICTs. I do tend to agree with Buhle that we have not really engaged with each other as much as we can. Let us share and debate more on issues that we do not agree on.”

Awatef Ketiti of the Research and Information Centre for Women in Tunisia said that more French speaking women should take part in the space. French speaking women, even if they do understand English, are so few, that they have been reduced to “speaking among themselves” on the list. She also felt that the list was oriented towards women in NGOs and institutions, but poorly towards those of women engaged in research “a priority in terms of ICTs.” Among the recommendations she made were the need for a database on French- speaking women researchers, publications and directories.



## **Language**

Language remains a major challenge in content development by and for African women. Marie Helene Mottin Sylla has been a driving force in translating and creating content in French relevant to women in francophone Africa. These efforts were given a tremendous boost by the Bamako 2000 initiative, which highlighted the importance of creating more African content in French. Women constituted one of the working groups and had an important influence on the Bamako Declaration (see Chapter One). Yet Mottin Sylla is aware that there is a much bigger challenge- to create content in African languages. Translation software is a fast growing area- but still far from perfect. Mottin Sylla notes that language is one of the critical policy issues that must be taken up by African women if ICTs are to be more accessible.

## **Information, knowledge and wisdom**

*“Knowledge is a sword, and wisdom is a shield”- the Bible*

---

Even as African women confront the basic issue of establishing a presence on the Internet, important debates are emerging on what content, for whom, and with what end. For those who have access, the information revolution is in danger of creating an opposite problem- that of information overload. Does information translate into knowledge, and does knowledge turn into wisdom? How can indigenous knowledge be captured and transmuted via the Internet? In particular, how can the abundant wisdom of African women, borne of their life experiences, be captured and transmuted through a tool like the Internet?

Shiva and Dankelman (1995) argue: “women’s knowledge systems tend to be holistic and multidimensional. The introduction of agricultural technologies usually result in resource fragmentation undermining the position of women...the woman’s role becomes more and more of a labourer as she loses control over production and access to resources.”

In a paper on “Reconceptualising Education for the Production, Use and Management of ICTs” Cathy Mae Karelse of the IDRC comments: “The introduction of systems or ICTs into local knowledge systems in ways that do not comprehend social relations could, in fact, introduce new disparities. In contexts of gender differentiation, for instance, ICT

incorporation could disadvantage women and result in their subordination. What seems to be called for is an articulation between local knowledge systems and new ICTs so that the latter simply build on efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility and sustainability increasingly apparent in the former.”

ECA communications officer Mercy Wambui, in a contribution to the Flamme website discussion on gender and information technologies added: “I’m of the opinion that knowledge encompasses the broader notion of processing information. Information is a small part of the equation. Knowledge takes into account production of content/information, and passing on/ sharing/use of the information with some sort of impact at the end of the line. The impact or result then feeds back to the person at the knowledge base to then improve/add or restructure/evaluate the content that has been generated.”

These issues link closely to the discussion on outreach in the next chapter: how to make ICTs accessible, in a meaningful way, to those who do not currently have access.

## CHAPTER FIVE: OUTREACH

*“For most of Africa- Zambia is an example- few people have access to the superhighway. Even as an academic member of the university, we do not have such facilities. Getting information is difficult. Telephones are a luxury and many areas do not have that facility. Many rural people do not have access even to a radio. The roads are impassable even at the best of seasons; as a result even well funded NGOs fail to reach some areas. First, provision of such infrastructure should be a priority. For now villagers should be trained by organizations specializing in gender issues and these will disseminate information to others”- Judith Lungu, Research Association of Zambian Women Academics*

*“ICTs are not about piling out information, but about participation in decision making, whether you are seated at the table or not” - Mercy Wambui, ECA*

The percentage of African women who have access to the information superhighway is so negligible that one may even question why this research was undertaken. In the research that preceded this by Ellen Kole and Dorothy Okello (see Chapter One) respondents were asked how best they reach their grassroots constituents. In order of rank the methods of communication were: face to face; phone/fax/telex; postal mail; radio; email and Internet.

What the current research *did* reveal was that among those who have access to ICTs, there is a strong concern about the ultimately most important question of this study: how can ICTs be made more accessible to those who do not have such access? The following excerpts from the debate on this issue that took place during the *Flamme* discussion on gender and ICTs illustrates the complexity of the issues:

*Buhle Mbambo* of the *University of Botswana* wrote: “Sometimes I think we get too concerned with the numbers of women with access to ICTs. The percentage of ICT users is small regardless of gender. Africa will not in this century get to a point where the majority of women have access to ICTs.... Here are a few thoughts:

- We have to find a way of getting the few with access into decision- making so that they can influence policy for the benefit of women.

- Not all African women need access to ICTs. There are some whose pressing need is access to ICTs, for some it is votes to get into parliament. We need to identify the sectors whose need is ICTs. Empower those who have an immediate need, who will then use it immediately.

I think working on doing more with less may be the way to go until we have a critical mass of users who demand access to ICTs as a right.”

Zavuga Goretti of the *Council for Economic Empowerment of Women* in Uganda responded: “Most women in Africa and Uganda in particular still lack basic knowledge on ICTs. The percentage of women who have had access is so small compared to those who haven’t.... Most rural areas lack infrastructure like telecommunication lines, power, roads etc. This continues to affect availability of ICTs in this area. This leads to inaccessibility of ICTs to most women. Women still believe that ICTs are only for men; that privileged category is the one to own and exploit such facilities. These gender differences will continue to prevail as long as they are not gender sensitised.” She went on to make the following “suggestions that can help solve Africa’s problems”:

- “Basic training of ICTs for all women should be given, and should not be too costly. Even those who have never gone to school can begin literacy classes on ICTs.
- ICTs should not only be found in urban areas. They should be decentralized, located in the rural areas as much as possible.
- Demonstration sessions or mobile sessions on ICTs that can reach the rural areas can be used to raise awareness of the existence and importance of ICTs.
- Lobbying for improved and increased infrastructure development specifically in rural areas should be done.
- Liberalisation of the infrastructure sector to allow foreign or indigenous investors for increased and cheaper ICT services should be done.
- Gender sensitisation workshops, discussion forums, experience sharing, meetings and information exchanges between countries should be done.
- ICT is a new term in our countries. The literature that exists on ICTs is scarce. There should be documentation of the importance of ICTs and how they can be exploited and their impact on women and empowerment.
- This literature should be availed to women in simpler languages which they can understand so that women can get to know the importance of ICTs in their

lives.”

Lilian Mashiri of the *Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre Network* wrote: “I do tend to agree with Buhle that numbers are not important and that we should strive to enable women to gain access to ICTs and for them to make effective use of it. While it may sound like we are not doing much in terms of women’s access to ICTs it is actually a major task.”

The following sections will explore some of the strategies that African women are pursuing to reach out to those who do not have access to ICTs- from repackaging to multimedia solutions to telecentres and issues of public access. It will also explore the critical policy issues on universal access and the need for gender activists to become far more involved in such debates.

## **Information brokerage**

### ***Repackaging***

In its survey of 700 women’s NGOs around the world, the APC study found that: “Many ‘connected’ women act as bridges to unconnected groups in their communities by repackaging information they find online and sharing it through communication channels such as print, fax, telephone, radio, theatre etc. Women in the South, in particular, have been very active in this area. Likewise they repackage “offline” information into electronic formats to share widely with women online. The findings indicate that women are working hard to create relevant and useful resources for and by women—often in challenging circumstances. The findings also indicate that women play an important role in bridging the information gap for non-connected groups in their communities.”

A number of organizations that responded to the questionnaire in this research noted that they repackage information that they obtain through ICTs in formats and languages that are more accessible to their constituents. For example:

Judith Lungu of the *Research Association of Zambian Women in Academia* wrote: “The way we have made ICTs work for the community is by using information that we have learned from WWW and email for training purposes. We have no capacity to give hardware or software. ICTs can be accessible to rural women through organizations like

ours who can regularly disseminate information to them. This can be done through leaflets and posters depicting illustrations that they can understand and radio programmes.”

Thembile Phute of the *Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre* wrote: “We draw a lot from Flamme and Women’sNet for our newsletters and other publications. As a programme we publish the SADC Gender Monitor in conjunction with the SADC Gender Unit. This tracks the progress in the region (Southern Africa) of the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action, specifically analysing the twelve critical areas of concern.

This programme- Women in Development in Southern Africa Awareness (WIDSAA) - is regional in focus, action - oriented, and aims to be a catalyst and information service to the region's governments, parliaments, NGOs and agencies, the media and the public in the formulation of policy affecting women in Southern Africa. WIDSAA acts as a regional clearing - house for exchange of information, methodologies, skills and experiences. It facilitates the sharing of relevant information for consideration of appropriate policy frameworks. We publish documents and try to make them available both electronically and in printed form. We distribute our publications through our regional partners, for further distribution to their networks in the different countries.”

Lilian Mashiri added: “The *Zimbabwe Women’s Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN)* ...was set up in 1990 with the main aim of enhancing the position on women in Zimbabwe through the collection and dissemination of information on women and development and has now expanded its focus to encompass the strategic focus on gender and development issues. The centre seeks to influence policy and practice to ensure that the rights of women are protected at all levels. Our core business is to collect and distribute information on women, gender and development so as to influence policy at national and provincial level.

(ZWRCN) also collects disseminates information to enable men and women to make informed decisions about their lives. In addition...ZWRCN provides gender, policy and civic education training at the community level, to build women and men’s capacity to participate in public dialogue and debate on gender and development issues.” The

ZWRCN plans to establish an Internet Café for women in 2000.

### ***Resource centers***

Some organizations have resource centres that are open to women and the general public to use. For example, Fatma Mint Elkory of the Bibliotheque del'Universite de Nouakchott wrote: "Through the existing structure, particularly the computer resource center and the library, the university offers the possibility to access several Internet services to a very large public. However limited these facilities are, they help to meet the demand."

### ***Inter-phasing ICTs with radio***

Given the reach of radio in Africa, some women's NGOs have begun to seek ways of inter-phasing ICTs with radio. For example:

*Women'sNet Community Radio Pilot Project* is gaining ground in South Africa, where two percent of the population have access the Internet, 15 percent to newspapers and 89 percent to radio. The project began with a pilot in the populous Gauteng province that aimed to work with community radio stations, women's organisations and other media projects to:

- Train community radio to use the Internet effectively to generate gender-sensitive programming;
- Provide training in gender sensitivity to community radio stations with a view to impacting on programming and news gathering;
- Train gender organisations in the preparation of radio-ready content;
- Develop a network of community radio stations and gender organisations - forming partnerships to strengthen community information;
- Establish an Internet –based clearing house of radio-ready content;
- Develop capacity among women's organisations to enable them to generate content for news and programming on community radio;
- Improve information and communication skills capacity among women's organisations to help them deal with the media and to prepare radio-ready content for community radio.

Through the radio project, Women'sNet is able to re-package information available on the Internet into radio ready material for broadcasting. In this way, a range of information becomes accessible. A report produced by Women'sNet indicated that both community radio stations and gender organisations found the training useful as it provided a forum for partnerships to be created. Community radio stations have begun changing their programming to include women's voices. The project has been successful in inter-phasing Internet with other forms of media to increase community outreach. A work-in-progress version of the site can be found at <http://radio.womensnet.org.za>. The project was formally launched on 29 March 2000.

*Eco* in Kenya has long supported a women's community radio station in Kibwezi, central Kenya. According to the director, Margaret Nyambura: "Eco tries to bridge local and international decision-making processes. One of the ways we have done this is to provide information to, and support for the Kibwezi community radio project. It is an exchange of information. The basic idea is that the women do the production, and come up with their own programmes. Whenever we see something that is relevant on the Internet, we send it to them."

### **Technologies that advance access**

Technology is moving at a rapid pace- so much so that Africa may have the luxury of skipping certain stages. As remote as many parts of the continent may seem, various innovative solutions to connectivity are in sight. These need far greater exploration and investment by government in research and development. The following are examples of technological innovations that carry promise for the future, and need further study:

WorldSpace was formed to provide the first digital audio broadcasting and multimedia delivery satellite service to cover the emerging markets of the world. The system is capable of delivering web-based content files automatically and regularly, without requiring a phone line. The system thus offers enormous possibilities for reaching remote communities.

At the Buwama Telecentre in Uganda, there is no landline. The community is linked to Internet by MTN wireless, the cell phone provider. Because cellular phones do not require elaborate infrastructure they could result in rapid connectivity; but at present this



is a costly option.

Awatef Ketiti of the Research and Information Centre for Women in Tunisia writes: “A really simple and useful recommendation for women: that Internet be operable from a TV set. Research on ICTs indicates that this may not be far away.”

There are various medium term solutions applicable to rural areas without phones and power (HF and VHF connectivity in place of a phone line for the Internet; and solar generated electricity for computers). This technology is being successfully employed by a group of pastoralists that Eco, supported by the Acacia programme of IDRC, is working with in Arusha, Tanzania.

### **Telecentres**

Telecenters were first introduced in Scandinavia in the 1980's to address the problems of smaller and isolated communities using IT and telecommunication facilities. The concept has spread to rural areas of Canada, Australia, USA, European countries, and Brazil- and is being increasingly tested in Africa.

There are tremendous possibilities for telecentres in Africa: They could be a base for collecting and disseminating information to farmers. Government information could be made available to local communities; and local communities could pose their questions to government using these facilities (see also box on Nabweru Telecentre in Chapter four).

In her response to the questionnaire for this research, Samantha Fleming of IDASA and the South African Institute of Distance Educators commented, “the Koinonia multi purpose centre in Paarl East is a brilliant example of how communities are being served with most ICTs. They train community members (mostly youth and approximately seventy five percent female) in a range of community media (radio, newspaper) and provide critical basic computer training using Word, Excel, Internet and email”.

The ECA estimates that outside South Africa there are twenty pilot telecenters scattered throughout the continent with the majority in Ghana, Mozambique and Uganda, as well as in Benin, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. It says that: “the telecentre

approach may be one of the most important means of providing access to advanced services in rural areas and therefore needs the support of all stakeholders, as well as further study to determine the most appropriate models.”

Peter Benjamin of the Link Centre at the University of Witwatersrand, and author of a literature review for a Telecentre 2000 survey being carried out at the time of writing, says there are thirty different names for telecentres- from telecottages, multipurpose community centres, digital clubhouses and televillages. Typically, the multipurpose telecentre in Africa provide IT and telecommunication facilities; user support and training for community members.

In Africa, as elsewhere, the main policy issues regarding telecentres have been whether they should be publicly or privately owned; or somewhere in between. Those who argue for public funding say that the centres should be like a public good- similar to libraries and schools. Others point to the inherent management and sustainability problems of facilities that are wholly publicly owned.

There are many examples in Africa and elsewhere of small business initiatives that have sprung up around ICTs and are giving the “non connected” public access to such facilities at reasonable rates. In Senegal, there are over seven thousand “telecentre prives” run by small entrepreneurs that are heavily used. In Bangladesh, Grameen telecom is working to establish 68 000 village payphones using cellular technology that will provide access to over 100 million poor inhabitants. Women own many of these enterprises.

Yet the Panos Institute has cautioned that even where telecenters are subsidized, like that in Nabweru (see Chapter Four), they may be beyond the reach of ordinary people. As Aida Opoku Mensah, writing for the Panos Institute, commented: “Their sustainability depends on them being run on business lines and charging enough money to users to keep the operation sustainable. That may not be a bad thing but perhaps we should call a spade a spade and not raise expectations that these services will be affordable to everyone.”

Benjamin points out that the link between telecentres; access to ICTs, providing services

and assisting development is a complex one. These links do not necessarily follow each other.

He points to three broad models for developing telecentres: straight commercial; subsidized or step up migration, meaning going from subsidized to commercial. Benjamin comments: “research into methods of providing universal access have either been run by well meaning donors, wishing to show a beneficial impact without really considering cost; or by private sector operators nervously seeing if there is a viable market for telecommunications in disadvantaged areas. Very few studies have looked at how to provide a much needed basic service in a manner that is economically sustainable and reproducible.”

The physical location of telecentres is important. Experiments to date have tended to locate these as stand alone facilities. That has advantages (see box on Mamelodi below), but may also have disadvantages. Kate Wilde of the IDRC notes that it is “easier to expose others to technology via existing systems than to go in blank.” Possibilities include locating telecentres with phone shops, schools, police stations, hospitals and clinics.

Linking telecentres to post offices is another possibility. Benjamin notes in his paper that in Ghana there is a joint venture between a post office and Internet service provider (ISP) that offers free email addresses. Thirty thousand Ghanaians signed up in three months to send/receive email.

#### **Mamelodi- A telecentre in action**

Bongi Mahlangu is a high school graduate with a diploma in computer science working as a volunteer at the Mamelodi Community Information Services (MACIS) in Pretoria’s main township. Young and enthusiastic, she assists clients in the use of email and the Internet, while eagerly responding herself to job advertisements and checking her mail to see if she is in luck. With her qualifications, she is hopeful that she will get a job as a general office administrator. Knowing how to use ICTs, she says, “is exciting and I think it is the way to the future.”

The Mamelodi centre is one of about fifty telecentres around South Africa being

established under the auspices of the Universal Service Agency (see below), a statutory body with the task of ensuring wider access to ICTs. There are nine million households in South Africa, of whom thirty five percent have a phone at home. But eighty five percent of these are whites and the remainder blacks.

The USA Act (1996) stipulates that each telecentre has to employ at least one woman as a trained manager. About sixty percent of the managers of telecenters in South Africa are women.

Esme Modisane, manager of MACIS is one of these. She describes how the telecentre began in July 1995 in the library; but moved to the current autonomous premises in 1998 due to insufficient space. In addition, “users were threatened by the library: they saw it as a place of learning, not a place for ordinary people.” The centre provides telephone, email, Internet as well as a community directory of services and interactive kiosk. It links information needs of the community with information resources that provide vital information on health, housing, education, government services and plans, employment and citizen action information.

MACIS operates on a Wireless Community Network invented by the South African Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research that provides online high- speed access to local nodes and to the Internet.

Registered as a non- profit company, the centre is governed by a board of community members. The centre was capitalized through the CSIR and USA, but does not receive a subsidy. The centre is expected to run on user fees, but these must be lower than private rates. Thus the centre charges R5 for thirty minutes of Internet time- half the commercial rate.

Limitations on cost recovery impose severe financial constraints, Modisane points out. She is the only full time employee and otherwise has to rely on volunteers like Mahlangu. In general, telecenters have been slow to start up in South Africa; about 50 out of a planned 200 have been established. The USA openly admits several problems with the first telecentre including lack of financial systems; inadequate training of the managers; no clear tariff structures; unclear expectations; as well as theft without

insurance.

According to Modisane, the most popular services are word processing; fax and photocopying; followed by the ICT applications- although these have started to pick up significantly this year. She spends much of her time making presentations and doing advocacy work for the centre at schools and community meetings. "There is still techno fear," she notes. "Most of the adults say: we are too old; we are illiterate."

The reluctance to use ICTs, she concedes, is especially acute among women. Despite the centre being managed by a woman, the majority users are men. Very few women send emails or surf the net. Mary Dhlamini, an older woman at the centre at the time of visiting, said she had come to make phone calls to organize a church event in the community. She said she had heard about email but never used it; and she wasn't sure if she would have time to learn. Modisane said she had not had the time or capacity to run special training courses for women.

### ***Gender dimensions of telecentres***

Evidence from elsewhere tends to corroborate the findings at the Mamelodi centre that despite women playing an active role in running telecentres, they are not the main users or beneficiaries. For example:

Edith Adera, Programme Officer for Evaluation with the *Acacia* initiative of the IDRC in East Africa noted in an interview that *Acacia's* evaluations of the two telecentres it supports in Uganda have shown that "women are not coming in large numbers and we are trying to find out why." Informal interviews have revealed that women are busy; often the times of the telecentres are not convenient; and training is frequently at the least convenient times- such as the early morning when women are most busy. In some cases, women said their husband's forbade them from going to the telecentres. Other interviews revealed lack of confidence as a result of illiteracy, language and content that did not "speak to them".

As a result of these findings, Adera said that the project intended to be far more vigorous in its disaggregation of statistics and analysis of trends. Proposed solutions to ensure full

participation by women include: changing training times to the early afternoon; offering special training sessions for women; and sensitising the men to the value of women's access to ICTs.

Acacia is also working with the Council for the Economic Empowerment of Women in Uganda on an economic empowerment project using ICTs (see also Chapter three). This will include a baseline survey on women's information needs for trade and agricultural activities; training in how to use the technology; and monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the technology enhances the economic activities in which the women are engaged.

Writing in the March/April 2000 edition of *TechKnowlogia*, in an article titled "A High Twist: ICT Access and Gender Divide", Mary Fontaine records the following research findings on the LearnLinks experience with *Community Learning Centres (CLC)* in Ghana: "Located in three Ghanaian cities, the centres tracked ICT usage by gender over a nine month period. In general the experience indicated that the higher or newer the technology, the less likely women were to use it... The managers of the NGOs that run the CLC's in Kumasi, Cape Coast and Accra were all women, an intentional decision designed to encourage women to patronize the centres. Yet nearly three times as many men as women have registered... Of those visiting one of the centres over a nine month period... 1904 men browsed the Internet compared to 253 women... Women sent a mere 13 percent of the number of messages sent by men. While the percentage of male and female participants registering for typing word processing and database courses were similar it is not surprising that the percentages registering for a course called Internet Orientation were skewed in favour of males." To encourage women to use ICTs, one of the NGOs organized a Women's Week during which women were invited to sample the centres wares.

In research published in the July 1999 edition of the Oxfam journal "Gender and Development" on "Rural Women, Development and Telecommunications" Heather Schreiner described how the community at *Bamashela in KwaZulu-Natal* has used its telecentre established in 1998. Women there are primarily engaged in subsistence farming and some small- scale income generating activity. They spend up to six hours a day collecting fuel and water.

The telecentre was constituted, and provides similar services to those described in the case of Mamelodi above. But it has been dogged by technical and management problems; and has not been able to generate enough income to keep prices affordable for all. Of the five staff, only one is a woman. Woman users interviewed either used the center to make phone calls or for drawing up CVs. They cited lack of language skills and education as barriers to computer use.

Schreiner commented in her response to the questionnaire for this research: “Research has shown that there is a serious interest by rural women to access ICTs. They already are aware of the potential benefits. They do not need to be sold the idea. They are motivated and need practical and ongoing skills training of hands on ICT use. Pilot some projects, that can be monitored, learn from those projects to implement a more comprehensive plan.”

Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director of FEMNET agrees. In a contribution to the electronic discussion on gender and ICTs on *Flamme*, she commented that a huge amount has been said, written and debated on ICTs. What is important now is to make these facilities work for women, by introducing gender criteria in to the design, implementation and monitoring of such projects.

#### **Giving Women a first go at ICTs in Senegal**

Abdelkrim Chikh of ENDA in Senegal wrote about a project she has been involved in that gives precedence to women: “a programme that I put in place and coordinate: CYBERPOP, gives collective access to ICTs through a positive discrimination in favour of women of eight of the most underprivileged districts of Dakar and its peripheries (Rufisque, Pikine, Yembeul, Yarakh). The project involves:

- Training of sixteen young school drop-outs (ten women and six men for 7 months to manage the eight Community Resource Centres (CRC), equipped with multimedia computers, a printer, UPS modem and a telecentre. The role of the youngsters is to serve as inter-phase with the people who speak only indigenous languages.
- Setting up CRC management committees directly involving those in charge of

popular organizations, namely women who constitute forty eight percent of these organs leaders

- 8 March 1999 (International Women's Day): a popular forum on women's activities and strategies for sound development. The objective was to reinforce the crosscutting nature of gender issues within the eight pilot sites, in addition to the two out of eight dealing with women.
- 8 March 2000: The theme was "free access for young girls for a period of one week: ICTs & Internet resources initiation."

Karen Banks of the Association of Progressive Communication's Women Network Support Programme comments: "telecentres alone are not the answer. They are just access to a phone line. Providing access to X number of people in Y miles is a matter of political commitment."

#### **Universal access: policy issues**

"ICTs should be popularized and massively used. ICTs should be a public service such as transport, health and education. Governments should consider ICTs as a basic product like bread, sugar and foodstuff. ICTs should be demystified in the mind of those who use them and those who don't. There should be a big campaign to sensitize and inform people that the Internet is not more complicated than a stove." - ***Awatef Ketiti, Research and Information Centre for Women, Tunisia.***

The various solutions discussed above to problems of access are all linked to the overall policy environment for telecommunications- and in particular the attitude of governments to making access to information a fundamental right for its citizens. Information and communication policies have historically been treated as a secretive area by unstable and insecure governments. Greater democratisation calls for greater transparency and accountability that in turn call for far more progressive attitudes towards access.

The background document to the ECA's first African Development Forum (ADF) on ICTs in 1999, titled "Democratising Access to the Information Society" commented: "Traditionally, telecommunication provision has been accomplished through universal service strategies in the industrialized world, which aim to provide access to almost every individual in society. Liberalization and deregulation of African telecommunications markets have precipitated universal service concerns even though access still needs to



be convincingly addressed.”

Mozambique now has legislation that guarantees basic service throughout the country. South Africa has established a South African Universal Service Agency (USA) that promotes affordable universal access. The prevailing definition of this is: “living within 30 minutes travelling time of a telephone, universal service is more than fifty percent of economically eligible households with a telephone and service for twenty four priority customers.” But these examples are the exception. Most African countries have yet to formulate a clear position on universal access.

Christine Kanyengo of the Medical library, School of Medicine, University of Zambia commented during the electronic discussion group on the *Flamme* website: “I think this is where libraries and resource centres should play a bigger role so that just as they advocated for free access to books and other printed materials, they should do the same for ICTs so that women can also benefit from it.”

An ECA background document for the ADF titled: “Policies and strategies for Accelerating Africa’s Information Infrastructure Development” notes that as telecommunications are gradually deregulated on the continent, “one of the most crucial unresolved policy issues is to define the most beneficial market structure of the telecommunication sector.” As noted in Chapter one, Africa is in fact not so far behind the industrialized world when it comes to deregulation, but services in rural areas are lagging behind.

The paper goes on to note that the generally accepted view is that rural services are not profitable. However, cost- reducing factors combined with the increase in services that can be supplied, are casting this assumption into question. As the paper states: “all this suggests that new rural telecommunications services in Africa may actually be profitable, and that traditional USO’s combined with restricted moves towards full compensation in the sector may not be the best strategy for Africa. A more rapid introduction of open competition in the sector may actually be a better model for achieving the required levels of infrastructure development.”

This does, however, call for careful regulation. The paper notes that in the past, the

PTO's or relevant Ministry acted as both operator and regulator. By 1999, about half of African countries had established some form of independent or quasi-independent regulatory body for the telecommunications sector- a trend that needs to be accelerated.

The cost of Internet access, and the fact that this is restricted to capital cities, is a key policy issue for ensuring universal access. The ADF paper notes that the issue of local call tariffs and Internet usage is not unique to developing countries, but that the predominantly rural nature of Africa means that special strategies need to be adopted to address this. While satellite distribution will play a key role in rural Africa in the future, PTOs can establish a special "area code" for Internet access that is charged at the local tariff, allowing Internet providers to immediately roll out a network with national coverage. Despite the huge advantages of this strategy for those in remote areas, only thirteen African countries have adopted this strategy.

At a global level, the ADF paper notes that so far Africa has tended to remain outside the debates on Internet governance, partly because of the history of the Internet itself as a self governing entity. The paper stresses that it is becoming increasingly important for Africa to ensure effective representation in these structures.

Another critical policy issue with regard to access are taxes and surcharges on ICT equipment. In many African countries ICTs are treated as luxury items- with the notable exception of Mauritius, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda that have reduced taxes on ICT equipment to less than ten percent. The ADF paper notes that under utilization of existing computer resources is common, as a result of the preponderance of stand alone personal computers in the same office with no Local Area Networks (LAN's).

### ***Gender dimensions of universal access policy***

The research revealed some important activities by African women's NGOs in lobbying for policies that would create greater access, especially for women. For example:

- The Acacia secretariat in Uganda has set up a subcommittee on policy;
- The Isis-WICCE director in Uganda was part of the team that carried out a survey in preparation for the national information and communication policy framework in Uganda;
- The three partners of APC-Africa-Women (ENDA / SYNFEV; Women'sNet and ECA) as well as FEMNET have been active in this area;
- Acacia in South Africa was involved in drafting the telecommunications bill there;
- Eco in Kenya have used the South African bill for lobbying in Kenya;
- Abantu for Development launched an Alliance for Gender and Policy Advocacy (GAP) alliance during the Sixth African Regional Conference on Women in Addis Ababa in November 1999. The organization has since hosted training for trainer's workshop on engendering the ICT sector.
- The African Information Society Gender Working Group (AIS GWG) has produced a book, *Engendering ICT policy* that aims to provide practical skills and information to ensure full participation by women in the ICT arena.

Marie Helene Sylla of SYNFEV/ENDA in Senegal commented: "the issue of women involvement in the determination of policy is a new element that has come up in French-speaking African women's agenda, questions of access, of information, training and infrastructure being perceived today as a priority issue."

In general, of all the questions in the research questionnaire, the one that elicited the least responses was around the involvement of women's NGOs in the broader policy debates on ICTs: a major priority in looking to the future.

#### **Universal access- a policy agenda for African women**

Nothing is more important for African women's access to ICTs than to engage in the policy debates around the issue, *Muthoni Wanyeki, Executive Director of FEMNET* argued during the electronic discussion group on the Flamme website on African women and ICTs. These are her words:

“Poor infrastructure (even for the relatively privileged, capital city-based African women) is why even those of us aware of ICT resources do not use them as they should. So we have to address the legal and policy basis on which ICT infrastructure is developed and rolled out.

“Very few African women’s organizations and networks have been involved in advocacy work around the privatisation of telecommunications. We have therefore been absent from debates about planning for universal access to telecommunications-universal access defined in a manner that caters for African women, and particularly for African women in resource and infrastructure-poor areas.

We have been absent in developing laws and policies, which ensure that the poor and marginalized benefit from ICTs. Why this resistance? The gender-based mystification of both technology and economic planning. The lack of information. The lack of understanding that telecommunications fundamentally affects the right to communicate and that no one is more affected than rurally based women. Section J (of the Beijing Platform for Action) does not address these issues or the draft African reports (both governmental and shadow) on section J.

We need to ensure that concerns about telecommunications are strongly addressed at the preparatory committee and at Beijing Plus Five. The work of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) Gender Focus Group should be drawn on in this process. Following the review process, we need a planned process of linking with African media and IT organizations and really following up on our respective countries policy frameworks (if the privatisation bills have already been passed and made acts) to ensure that concerns about universal access, about mechanisms for access that are gendered, are taken into account.”

## CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

*“It is necessary to work together for a united vision; share resources; support each other; transcend the competition culture and practice complementarity; popularise the computer tool so that access to ICTs be made practicable for the general public interest, and reinforce synergies.”- Gisele Mankamte Yitamben, ASAFE, Cameroun*

*“Policy must be accompanied by practice. It is no good just doing a gender edit of existing policies. It is no good for example, just to say there must be more women in institutions of science and technology. We have to set targets, implement them, monitor them.” Lisham Adam, Economic Commission for Africa.*

The recommendations arising from this report are in two parts: some key strategic issues; and a checklist for engendering ICT policy and use in Africa.

### **Key strategic issues**

#### ***Right to information and universal access***

Until information is viewed as a right, governments are not likely to take the necessary measures to make it accessible. This should be the strategic starting points for women’s organizations.

The “Global Connectivity for Africa: Issues and Options conference” hosted by the ECA in 1998 urged “generating further recognition for communications as a basic human right.” The Peoples Communication Charter, drawn up by a coalition of NGOs engaged in communications, states that “people have the right to acquire the skills necessary to fully participate in public communication”. It further states: “people have a right to universal access to and equitable use of cyberspace”.

As noted earlier in this report, the provisions for information technology in the Beijing and African Platforms for Action are extremely weak, linked only to the media, because of the time when they were written. Lobbying for stronger provisions would be a strategic entry point for African women, as it would place the onus on governments to take issues of

gender and ICTs seriously.

### ***Engaging in policy debates***

A clear message in the research is the importance of African women's organizations engaging far more actively in the debates on telecommunications that are currently so live on the continent, especially those concerning universal access.

As the ECA's Mercy Wambui, puts it: "ICT is a means, not an end. But you can't have either unless the policy environment is conducive. I am not a technical person, but I know what I need. At the ECA's fortieth anniversary what became apparent is that what we need to do is get women involved; to sit at the table whether they understand technology or not. Women know what they need; and that is what policy is about. The rest can be left to technicians. We need a critical mass of women at the policy level... we need to stop piggybacking this function and make it a matter of roll call."

Wambui suggests that there be a few women from each country, networked through an umbrella organization like the APC-Africa-Women, who develop skills and expertise in ICT policy issues and can become spokespersons at home as well as in international bodies such as the World Trade Organisation. Such a core of African women ICT experts could also become involved in software development, IT training, and in initiating an IT culture among women in their countries.

### ***Putting ICTs to strategic uses***

The research reveals how at present even the existing ICT capacity in African women's organisations is under utilized. It also shows how, both within organizations, and in the various activities they undertake for the advancement of gender equality, ICTs are not necessarily being put to their most strategic uses. Indeed, in many instances ICTs are being used as little more than a cheap form of postage. More research and training needs to be done on organizational applications: for example, easing the double burdens of domestic and work responsibilities for women; research; effective networking and lobbying; conferencing and transforming organizational cultures. More work also needs to be done on the direct applications of ICTs to empowering women- in trade, agriculture, situations of conflict, health, education, governance etc.

### ***Raising awareness***

The extent to which ICTs are applied to the total emancipation of African women - in the words of ECA Executive Secretary K.Y. Amoako - will depend largely on an ICT culture being cultivated. In a contribution to the *Flamme* discussion, Fatma Mint Elkory of the Bibliotheque de l' Universite de Nouakchott shared the following experience of "Internet Days" in Nouakchott: "they aim to affirm the political will to include this important and unavoidable tool for research, contact, knowledge and exchange. The organizing committee director is a Mauritanian woman." These days, she writes, have been extremely successful in galvanizing awareness and could be emulated elsewhere. In South Africa, the Link Centre has been running highly successful basic ICT literacy courses for the general public in different localities on a Sunday. These too have helped to raise awareness on ICTs. Many more such initiatives are required.

### ***The Diaspora***

African women in the Diaspora represent an important resource in taking forward issues of gender and ICTs on the continent. They have access to technology, resources and to influential bodies in the countries where they currently live. The ECA established a network of Africans in the Diaspora to work with it on ICT issues following the first ADF. It is worth exploring an "African Women in the Diaspora and ICT" support group linked to this and/ or existing organizations of African women in the Diaspora.

### **An African gender and ICT checklist**

ICTs will only start working for African women if a targeted and systematic approach is taken to redressing all the current barriers to access and effective applications. Women's groups in each country will want to draw up their own strategic plan for engendering ICTs that looks at: key issues; policies interventions required; targets; time frames; who is responsible; monitoring and evaluation criteria. The following checklist is a guide for these more detailed plans.

### ***Core issues***

- What is the level of literacy of women and what is being done to redress this?
- What proportion of boys and girls are in primary, secondary and tertiary education? What is being done to address the imbalances?
- What proportion of girls and boys are in the arts and sciences? What is being done to redress the imbalance?

- What proportion of men and women are in ICT-related jobs? At what level are they? What is being done to redress the imbalance?
- What proportion of men and women are in the decision-making structures concerned with ICTs? What is being done to redress the imbalance?

### **Access**

- At what stage is deregulation of the telecommunications sector? What are the potential benefits for women? How can these be maximized?
- What is the pricing structure for telecommunications services and equipment? To what extent is this a barrier to access for women? How can these costs be reduced to facilitate greater access?
- Is there a universal access policy in place? Are its provisions sufficient? Is access by women specifically recognized in the policy?
- What regulatory arrangements are in place? Are they sufficient? Do the regulators see ensuring access by women to ICTs as part of their function? If not, how can this be redressed?
- Has your country considered increased regional co-operation to realize synergies, sharing of best practices and cost savings with regard to ICTs?
- Are there policies in place to reduce costs of telecommunications equipment?
- Are partnerships being established between government, the private sector and civil society that maximize the possibilities of access, and specifically access for women?

### **Policy engagement**

- Are women's NGOs engaging in telecommunication policy debates?
- If so, how and to what effect?
- Are women working in this area networked and is there scope for improving communication between them within the country, at regional, continental and international level?
- How can the engagement with policy issues at all these levels be strengthened?

### **Organisations**

- Does the organization have in place an IT policy?
- Does the policy recognize the need to promote gender equality through the use of ICTs?
- Has the organization consciously sought to maximize the benefits of ICTs in house, for example with regard to cost cutting, greater transparency and flattening the structure?



- How are ICTs applied? Are these the most strategic applications?
- To what extent are the World Wide Web and teleconferencing used in the organization? Could these be strengthened?

### ***Capacity building***

- Have gender considerations, e.g. socialization, been built into the design of ICT training?
- Have the needs of older women been taken into account?
- Is the training made available to all members of the organization?
- Does it serve to demystify the technology?
- Is training ongoing or once off? Is it accompanied by support mechanisms?
- Has any thought been given to mentorship programmes for women who are conversant with ICTs to support first time users?
- Does the training go beyond the basics to incorporate information and knowledge creation and management? Does it include an understanding of policy issues?

### ***Gender and ICT training***

- Is gender training being offered to male decision makers in the ICT sector?
- Is gender and ICT training offered to members of the organization? Are there regular discussions on this issue?

### ***Applications***

- How are ICTs being applied to advance gender equality? Are there more strategic ways in which they could be employed for this purpose?
- Specifically, are there ways in which ICTs could be used to directly benefit the economic empowerment of women?
- Are there ways in which ICTs can be used to improve women's access to social services, such as education and health? Is there any scope for ICT access to be linked to literacy classes?
- Can ICTs be used in the HIV/AIDS campaign; and are there specific ways in which they can be used to ameliorate the devastating effects of this pandemic on women?
- How can ICTs be used to enhance women's access to decision-making, and to making governance more responsive to the needs of women?
- Are gender considerations built into all stages of the project planning cycle of the organization, including any ICT projects that it may be engaged in?

### ***Content development***

- Who is the audience? Which women are you reaching?
- How relevant is the material you are creating?
- Has there been a needs analysis to determine information needs? Is the information being created responding to an expressed need?
- To what extent is language a disempowering factor? What is being done to address this? Is sufficient attention being given to the creation of content in African languages?
- Is the website content packaged in a way that is accessible?
- Is there a cross linkage of websites, especially to information being generated by other African women?
- How can the rich oral traditions and wisdom of African women be translated into content for the Internet?
- How can African women become more involved in software development? How can this be used to raise the profile and voice of African women on the Internet?

#### **Outreach**

- What repackaging possibilities have been explored? How accessible are these to women?
- What technical options are being explored for making ICTs more accessible to remote areas and specifically to women in remote areas?
- Is the convergence of ICTs and multimedia being fully taken advantage of in order to increase outreach?
- What options other than the written word are being explored: e.g. touch screens?
- To the extent that there are telecentres in the country, to what extent are women benefiting from these initiatives?
- Have gender considerations been built into the design, implementation and monitoring of these projects?
- What difference has access to ICTs at such centres made to women's lives?

#### **A closing prayer**

The list is so long that it would be easy to despair. But small successes along the way always offer a glimmer of hope.

The ECA's Mercy Wambui is fond of recalling the opening of a telecentre project among villagers in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha, when she still worked for Eco. It had seemed like an impossible task: there were no lights, no phone line.

The radio and solar equipment provided by the IDRC as an innovative answer to the problem of rural connectivity got held up by customs in a long wrangle over VAT. The community, meanwhile, was engaged in its own uphill battle with the government over the granting of their traditional lands as mining concessions, and it was anxious for the communication centre to begin operations.

When the project was finally inaugurated, the community and well-wishers stood in a circle at the foot of the awesome, snow capped Mount Kilimanjaro- the highest mountain in Africa. The elders first thanked God for the mountain, as was their practice. And then they offered the following prayer, which translated as:

“God give us rain, give us food, and give us information technology. We have seen the benefits for development. And we no longer want to be isolated.”

Amen!