African Women and ICTs edited by Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb

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REVIEW

'African women and ICTs' explores the relationships between information and communication technologies (ICT); women's empowerment; gender discrimination; access; entrepreneurship and advocacy. Over a three-year period, fourteen research teams, in twelve African countries explored this set of issues working within the framework of the GRACE (Gender Research in ICTs for Empowerment) project. The teams made up of academics and activists adopted the principles of critical emancipatory research using techniques such as the Transformational Attitude Interview developed by Ineke Buskens who co-edits this volume along with Anne Webb.

Contributions are grouped around four main section headings: ICT tools: access and use; Female only ICT spaces: perceptions and practices; Using ICTs: making life better; and Creating new realities.

Much of what is discussed in this series of studies falls within the Women in Development body of knowledge and practice which for over four decades, has been part of the policy debate/agenda on the African continent. Unfortunately the evidence presented here makes it clear that the that WID has had a less than optimal impact on women's' lives as the scenarios women are experiencing with respect to ICT are all too easy to recognise

from research conducted decades back. It is all those other divides that we have not been able to address that reinforce the digital divide.

'Women's use of cell phones to meet their communication needs: a study of rural women in the from Northern Nigeria' by Kazanka Comfort and John Dada; while focusing on the case for strong regulatory regimes and adherence to quality of service standards with respect to the provision of mobile phone services reminds us that about 70% of the rural poor in Nigeria are women. (An even more shocking statistic comes from an article from Mozambique where we are told that 15% of farmers in a district are girls under 10 years of age.) Most of them cannot read or write in any language. Therefore they are excluded from using SMS (text messaging), usually a lower cost option than a voice call. Women go into debt to make calls which eventually do not go through due to poor quality of service. The specific case of a woman who regularly invests time and money in a fifteen-kilometre motorbike taxi journey to use a phone kiosk only to suffer a poor voice signal demonstrates that ICT actually introduces new hardships and stress. The study points to the need for further research including the impact of mobile phone use on household budgets and how the use of phones is changing social ties. The promise of ICT is not delivered to people already struggling to survive. Too many of them are women but some of them are men. In a way none of this is new or surprising, but draws our attention to the need to track what is really happening in rural households as a new virtual class system takes hold. After all capability deprivation (Sen, 1979) is not a new idea.

Other essays illustrate both the limitations and potential of ICT, which can be used by women to build new business or improve existing business process but cannot resolve difficulties with business fundamentals. The spread of the studies highlights the differences in gender roles across the continent. For example while the separation between consumption, production and marriage in Senegal allows women to assert their economic independence the situation in some countries of Southern Africa is quite different. Whatever the case, improved communications do not immediately resolve information needs and empowerment is not automatic. The transformative potential of ICT can be unleashed when people push beyond discriminatory gender norms but even in the case of Kenya's dynamic IT professionals once in the workplace those wider social norms affect job mobility and career development.

Overall the result is a mixed bag. At one level extremely interesting and useful in documenting on-the-ground realities at the start of the 21st Century and at another level a bit disappointing in that the 'innovations' with respect to methodology and the related issues of rigour and consistency may diminish the potential for the declared objective of policy impact. The attempt to 'transcend our own conscious knowing and imagining' (Editor's introduction) may leave decision makers cold-and cause them to retreat

firmly to their own zone.

In their epilogue the authors refer to 'mindset' issues and in that context it is not clear at all that this book will make a difference to the fact that women contribute to and benefit less from the information society. Perhaps the true transformational potential of ICT is in the blended solutions that allow us to gather information with significantly greater ease, speed and sometimes at a lower cost. Open Source GIS (Geographical Information Systems) solutions linked with mobile telecommunications including PDAs could enable the vital research that needs to be done to track women's realities and specifically the changes taking place in this information age. How we use that information will indeed depend on our mindset.

REFERENCE

Sen, A (1979) 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXXVI (1979), 463-489