

Gender, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Rural Livelihoods

Exploring some of the challenges faced when implementing projects aimed at empowering women in ICTs in relation to rural livelihoods.

“Gender interventions require that awareness and attitudes of people change.

Gender, ICTs and Rural Livelihoods forum participant,
www.e-agriculture.org, July 2010

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The Multiple Dimensions of Gender

For Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to benefit women in agricultural production and to challenge existing gender imbalances in rural livelihoods, it is necessary to understand women's status and the gender roles and responsibilities in the society. Thus, when designing interventions, projects need to consider that women are integral to households, families and communities and that gender issues are not fixed, varying from community to community.

In agriculture, more than 40 per cent of the jobs belong to women. Women are more likely to work in agriculture than in other sectors in most regions. Yet, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), even though women are major producers of food crops, in most of the world, women lag well behind men in ownership of agricultural land and access to income from land. This lack of access can also be applied to the area of information access and the ability to share and learn from this knowledge.

These factors should be considered when understanding the complexities of the multiple gender dimensions that impact women's access to and use of ICTs in the areas of agriculture and rural development. It is also necessary for ICTs initiatives that aim to empower women to include men in the process given their existing power and authority, as patriarchy is the dominant discourse in most communities.



Credit: GenARDIS

What Restricts Women's Access to Technology?

The application of ICTs in agriculture and rural development can have a significant impact on rural populations, which are made up primarily of women. However, there are many factors that impact women's access to knowledge. Women face many challenges, and rural women in particular are less likely to prioritize ICTs in their daily lives as they have less time and less comfort in using ICTs based services. Some recurring obstacles include:

- Women have fewer resources and less income available to secure the use of ICTs.
- Women and girls are often illiterate and lack access to education.
- Gender stereotyping and socialization says that “technology is not for girls or women”.
- In typical rural communities, men control the technology, thus excluding women from an awareness of how ICTs can contribute to improving livelihoods.
- Capacity development focused only on technology-related skills is not sufficient when addressing the disparities caused by gender imbalances.



Credit: GenARDIS

“Technologies are not gender neutral. We need to apply a gender lens to ICTs projects to recognize and take cognizance of differential power relations and how this affects women and men's access to and use of communication tools. Gender, ICTs and Rural Livelihood Forum participant, www.e-agriculture.org, July 2010

Some Solutions

There is a critical need for gender-disaggregated data to analyze how women and men access ICTs and use them for agricultural related activities, and how this can be improved. In addition, steps can be taken to ensure that men and women both fully benefit from the application of ICTs in rural livelihoods. These include:

- 👉 Governments should support and promote rural infrastructure including provision of electricity and at the same time, contribute to conditions which support and promote the use of ICTs among women and girls.
- 👉 If women in rural communities are to benefit from e-agriculture, relevant technologies such as mobile phones, wireless technologies and community radio which are not dependent on literacy levels should be promoted. ICTs tools that are presented to be used to achieve economic benefits should be simple and affordable. These tools should be adaptable to the local context in which they will be used.
- 👉 Projects promoting women's empowerment and ICTs in e-agriculture should use holistic, transparent and participatory designs for community involvement by women and men to avoid potential gender-based violence.
- 👉 Local content delivered via ICTs that is useful and relevant to women will increase the uptake of ICTs services and applications.
- 👉 Development initiatives should include monitoring and evaluation to gather evidence to encourage informed policy interventions. Evidence should include gendered differences in the effects of the intervention; benefits as a result of access to and use of ICTs tools for rural livelihoods; capturing differing roles and benefits for men and women.



Credit: GenARDIS

Capacity Development and Training

- In order to make a positive link between rural women's livelihoods and ICTs, capacity development must be rooted in the societal context and linked to improving conditions.
- Projects can change women's negative perceptions about how they look at ICTs through practical and participatory training. Training delivered by women to women is generally more successful.
- A short-term strategy is appropriate choice of technologies that are user-friendly, affordable and physically robust. Long-term strategies should address literacy levels in order to expand the choice and use of ICTs.
- Training interventions need to be aware of cultural and social conditions and trainings should be conducted where women congregate.
- In some instances telecentres are appropriate and useful venues if the community culture enables women to comfortably use the centres.



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General Conclusions

If gender is overlooked in rural Information and Communications for Development (ICT4D) initiatives then an opportunity to improve the socio-economic conditions of women, who are the largest and most active component of the rural population, is sadly ignored. Government support and promotion of rural infrastructure, as well as the promotion of equal access to - and the use of - ICTs among women and men is critical.

Therefore, policy makers need to consider gender on every policy that affects access to and use of ICTs in rural communities, for the benefit of all rural populations.

This Policy Brief is based on the input of e-Agriculture Community members who participated in the online forum held from 5 to 16 July, 2010.

The complete discussion can be found (in English) in the Forum Archive at www.e-agriculture.org/forums/archives

Further information and resources can be found in the Key Topics section of www.e-agriculture.org