GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs

Global Information Society Watch

2013

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ETHIOPIA

Empowering women through ICTs
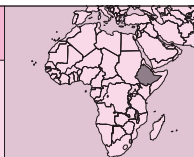
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Introduction

Ethiopia is a country of over 85 million people,[1] nearly half of whom are women. It is also a predominantly rural country, with 85% of the entire population employed in agriculture. It has been leading the way with regard to making market information instantly available to the country's smallholder farmers, many of them women.[2] Over 90%[3] of agricultural output is driven by smallholder farmers, and with a contribution to the country's GDP of over 40%, agriculture plays a major role in the overall Ethiopian economy.

The role of gender in the Ethiopian agricultural system is also critical: in post-harvest activities for cereals, women contribute as much as 70% of on-farm labour; in marketing, particularly in cereals, the participation of women is as high as 60% of the labour market share. While government strategies do identify the role of women in the agricultural value chain, the gap is in the implementation of these strategies.

Ethiopia has witnessed rapid penetration of telephone technologies and access to other information and communications technology (ICT) services in the last five years. By the end of 2012, Ethiopia's mobile penetration had reached over 18 million subscribers (nearly 21% penetration). However, fixed-line penetration remains less than 1.5%, and internet and data users account for a mere 1.1% of the population.[4]

Research shows that although the type of ICT tools that women tend to use differs from men, increasing awareness and use of ICT tools by women in their social and economic lives is evident. This report tries to explore how the use of ICTs empowers women in their social and economic activities. It considers the case of women smallholder farmers who use mobile phones to access market information in order to enhance their income. It also looks at how ICTs are being used to empower women entrepreneurs through networking among women in business in Ethiopia.

Policy and political background

As a commitment to gender equality, Ethiopia issued the national Ethiopian Policy on Women in 1993 and granted equal rights for women in its constitution. Furthermore, the recently adopted family law, a new pension rights policy for women, and other efforts made for the advancement of women such as an affirmative action provision for higher education, employment and promotion, are some of the policy and legislative instruments worth mentioning. These are all ensured through institutional mechanisms created to implement policies and strategies on women, where currently the Ministry of Women's, Children and Youth Affairs takes responsibility to this effect.

However, despite positive government legislative, policy and programme initiatives, gender equality is far from being realised. This is evident in that Ethiopia ranked 72nd out of 93 countries according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which focuses on women's and men's capacities to engage actively in the economic and political sphere.[5]

The national ICT policy of Ethiopia clearly stipulates in its strategies for implementing the policy that it "supports the development of ICT systems and programs that enhance the participation of women and the disabled." The policy's overall guiding principle indicates that it will provide unhindered access to ICTs, where gender inequalities shall be gradually eliminated by building the capacity of women and girls in the use of ICTs.[6]

1   www.csa.gov.et

2   Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) *Accelerating Ethiopian Agriculture Development for Growth, Food Security, and Equality*. www.ata.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/Ethiopia-Agriculture-Diagnositc-Integrated-Report-July-2010.pdf

3   Ibid.

4   www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

5   UNDP (2008) *Human Development Report 2007/2008*, UNDP, New York.

6   Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1997) *The Ethiopian National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy*. www.eictda.gov.et/Downloads/Policies/ICT_Policy_English.pdf

Empowering women in the agricultural sector

In Ethiopia, women play an active role in family-based agriculture, and female-headed households make up 21% of all households.[7] However, until recently they have had limited public recognition as farmers within the national agricultural development framework. Structural barriers, such as the heavy burden of domestic drudgery, reinforced by local cultural perceptions, have limited women's participation in official agricultural extension activities to a large extent. In addition, women's lack of access to land, finance, technology and decision-making power have critically impeded their ability to take part in profitable market activities. However, more than ever, farmers and particularly women farmers need access to relevant agricultural information to help them plan for and cope with changes and enhance their income and the contribution of agriculture to the overall economic development of the country.

In Ethiopia, like many other African countries, gender disparity in agricultural markets is a big issue. As Oxfam's studies in Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania show, women smallholders face many barriers in market access and services and are poorly represented in formal producer groups in key economic sectors.[8] Furthermore, a number of factors appear to affect women's capacity to engage effectively in agricultural markets, including barriers such as having resources at their command (e.g. land), socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs, and domestic workload. It is recognised that these barriers may vary between places and can change when new market opportunities appear (if, for example, roles in the household can be renegotiated; values change over time). Literacy, education level and access to information are also factors. As a result, smallholder farmers are always reliant on market information obtained from traders they know in their locality and trade only with people they know. In the end, they would not have any means or power to bargain a better price for their produce.

Given these challenges, there is one successful example of an initiative that tried to address the challenges of smallholder farmers, and particularly women, by enhancing their access to markets and benefiting from increased income generation through a mobile market information system. The Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (ECX)[9] has allowed "price discovery" for farmers where previously producers had little knowledge of international market prices and could rely only on middlemen who pocketed the largest share of the profits by selling on heavily marked-up goods. Through this system, farmers can now access live market information from the ECX via four different channels: by using their mobile phone to call a toll-free number and listen to the prices in local languages (using IVR – interactive voice response); by subscribing to receive the prices on their mobiles via SMS (short message service); by viewing one of the 83 electronic ticker boards (price display boards) in rural areas which are customised into local languages; or by visiting the ECX websites. Although how many farmers access the information through the ticker boards is not known, the IVR channel receives 61,000 calls a day (or 1.1 million a month) on its 120 telephone lines, hundreds of thousands of SMS messages are sent every month, and the website gets 2,000 hits a day – 50% of which come from outside Addis Ababa, the capital.

The ECX service also has another advantage that women benefit from considerably, in terms of not only getting market information and making the decision when to sell, but also receiving their money on time. The ECX introduced what is termed a "T+1" clearing and settling time which it implemented in partnerships with ten local banks. In this system, farmers receive payment by 11 a.m. the day after a sale is agreed. Between 2011 and 2012, 109,500 transactions were made, with the value of commodities (coffee, sesame, pea beans and maize) traded totalling USD 1.5 billion. The efficiency of the system was well maintained during this time: there were no defaults on payments or deliveries, no trading order errors, and the system did not go down once. Even though not all commodities produced are traded on the exchange, as they may be sold through farming cooperatives or at auction houses (i.e. coffee, beans and sesame), about 90% of these items move through the commodities exchange. This has resulted in improving the livelihoods of the farmers and the producers, and farmers have been encouraged by greater profits to both produce more and improve the quality of production.

Previously, about a third of the price of goods sold went to the farmer, but those who sell through

7   World Bank (2005) *Well-Being and Poverty in Ethiopia: The role of agriculture and agency*, Report No. 29468-ET. siteresources. worldbank.org/INTETHIOPIA/Resources/well_being_0605.pdf

8   Oxfam (2013) *Women's collective action in the honey sector in Ethiopia: Involving marginalized women in collective action – making a difference through NGO interventions*. policy-practice. oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-collective-action-in-the-honey-sector-in-ethiopia-275773

9   The ECX was started five years of ago with support from the Ethiopian government, as well as donors including USAID, UNDP, Sida and the EU.

the exchange take as much as 80% of the sale price home. In the entire agricultural value chain from the farmers and producers to traders, this system demonstrates how ICTs empower women in their social and economic activities. A woman trader interviewed by *Gebeyachin*,[10] the bilingual newspaper produced by ECX, and who is currently participating in the ECX, indicated that she was previously not actively involved in the family company that was trading coffee. She said her husband was the one in charge; however, after the ECX introduced new market possibilities, she started to work and lead the company's activities, including marketing with other male traders. She said that female traders do not need to go through the process of negotiating, selling and receiving money, as the exchange does all the work for them, using ICTs.

Empowering urban women entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs have also demonstrated how ICTs empowered them to participate in other social and economic activities. The Association of Women in Business (AWiB) is a good example of a platform for mid-level career women and business owners that has enabled women from diverse backgrounds and with diverse dreams to come together using its dynamic website[11] and to help each other explore their career paths. The online forum facilitates discussions on various topics, which members can participate in from the comfort of their homes or offices. Members of the association are also able to blog on the website, where they share their experiences in business, mostly from a gender perspective, enabling other women in the network to discuss issues that commonly face women and how they can be addressed. To support the skills development of its members, the association is also providing an e-learning platform where it has successfully launched a 12-week online personal development course led by an internationally certified life coach. It also aims to bring more offerings to its pool of e-education packages for personal and professional growth.

Both cases – involving women at the grassroots in rural areas, on the one hand, and mid-level professional women and business owners who are mostly based in urban areas, on the other – show how ICTs can empower women and bridge the inequality gaps.

Conclusions

Studies show that the challenge that women face in their entrepreneurship activities and in participating in the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) sector, among others, include absence of technological know-how and integration into business processes and problems of finding markets and distribution networks.[12] The case studies highlighted in this report demonstrate how ICTs can empower women to enhance their equal participation in their social and economic activities.

Nevertheless, generally, the diffusion of ICTs is highly uneven. There is a concentration in urban areas, and some rural areas are almost untouched. Access to ICTs is further constrained by income, and also increasingly constrained by literacy and education. This is evident from the greater use of the interactive voice response (IVR) option in the ECX market information system, which costs more compared to use of the SMS-based services. Furthermore, these factors particularly affect access to and use of ICTs by women, as recent surveys suggest that women are less likely to know and use the internet and that they are less likely to own mobile phones and cover the expenses of using them.[13] As a result, as much as access and usage greatly enhance women's empowerment, economic empowerment itself would help improve women's access and use of ICTs – and this is not instantly achievable. It has been argued that there is a link between the magnitude of the gender divide and overall ICT penetration levels. The argument also asserts that as income and development improve, overall penetration levels increase. As income increases, and as it is distributed fairly in the household, households will be able to afford more phones, providing more women with access.[14]

However, there continue to be other challenges that limit equitable access and the use of ICTs. These are cultural and social aspects that are considered by many as normal social practices, household gender relations, and discrimination against women and girls in key areas of ICT access and usage, such as education and employment. Studies reveal that

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10 Ethiopian Commodity Exchange (2012) *Ethiopia Commodity Exchange Monthly Newspaper*, 7(5), August 2011. www.ecx.com.et/downloads/Newsletter/20120309102708781Gebeyachin-Issue%205_English.pdf

11 www.awib.org.et

12 Singh, G. and Belwal, R. (2008) Entrepreneurship and SMEs in Ethiopia: Evaluating the role, prospects and problems faced by women in this emergent sector, *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 23(2), p. 120-136.

13 Amde, W. (2011) Investigating gender-associated patterns in ICT access and usage in Ethiopia, paper presented at the CPRAfrica Conference 2011, Nairobi, Kenya, 15-19 April.

14 Zainudeen, A., Iqbal, T., Samarajiva, R. and Ratnadiwakara, D. (2008) Who's got the phone? Gender and the use of the telephone at the bottom of the pyramid, paper presented at the 2008 International Communications Association Conference, Montreal, Canada, 26 May.

various cultural barriers limit the opportunities for women to access ICTs, including harassment, work overload (particularly in rural areas) and gendered perceptions in relation to the use of certain ICTs. Given the key role of women both in household food security and in improving agricultural productivity, ICT-for-agriculture interventions should include explicit strategies for assuring access by women, and for strengthening the information, communication and networking resources of women. Therefore, in addition to economic empowerment, it is of paramount importance from the policy perspective to ensure the implementation of the various legislative instruments adopted by the government to safeguard the equal rights of women and men – to accelerate equitable participation in society and the economy by all.

Action steps

In the framework of the guiding principles of Ethiopia's ICT policy, it is noted that the policy seeks to ensure unhindered access to ICTs, and that gender inequalities shall be gradually eliminated by building the capacity of women and girls in the use of ICTs.

To this effect, one of the pillars of the policy is ICT and education, which aims to ensure that ICTs are an integral part of education and training at all levels. One of the strategies to achieve this is developing special ICT training programmes for women – and groups such as people with disabilities – in order to address gender and social inequalities. To this end, it is of paramount importance for the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology to start implementing this strategy. This is needed both in order to achieve the government's commitments in ensuring women's rights, and to enable women to play an active role in the social and economic spheres, thereby accelerating economic growth.

It is noted that women's contribution in the agriculture sector is greater than men's, particularly in post-harvest activities. It is therefore important that the ECX provide special support to women, particularly in rural areas, to ensure their equal access to market information. These measures could include working with networks of community ICT access points, both to create awareness on the use of mobile- and internet-based services and to enable women to use these services. ■