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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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Lori Nordstrom

Publication production
Mallory Knodel

Proofreading
Valerie Dee
Lori Nordstrom

Graphic design
Monocromo
info@monocromo.com.uy
Phone: +598 2400 1685

Cover illustration
Matías Bervejillo

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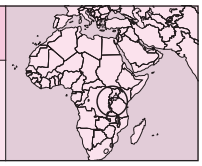
RWANDA

Women's rights, gender and ICTs: Girls in ICT Day leads to policy shaping



HeHe Limited
Emmanuel Habumuremyi
www.heheltd.com

Introduction

As traditional Rwandan society was characterised by men controlling social power relations, the introduction of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the country was portrayed by the media as a field dominated by men. Despite today's countrywide gender awareness, Rwanda is still struggling to reduce poverty and ensure that men and women have equal rights.

All government policy making and planning is required to reflect these rights. This is a result of both international and national commitments, including but not limited to the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). To translate these international commitments into action, national instruments like the national constitution, Vision 2020, the economic development and poverty reduction strategy (EDPRS), national gender policy, decentralisation policy, ICT for development (ICT4D) policy, an action plan known as the National Information Communication Infrastructure (NICI) plan and a long-term investment framework are in place. These national instruments highlight gender as a cross-cutting pillar in all sectors of development.

The ICT4D roadmap, established in early 2000, addresses developmental challenges and aims to accelerate the country's socioeconomic development process. Since its adoption, however, technology-related disciplines in Rwanda have been dominated by males.

Following the celebration in Rwanda of the international Girls in ICT Day, initiated by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), three outcomes among others were recorded: the creation of Girls in ICT Rwanda, the creation of Camp TechKobwa, and the establishment of SMART Girl as a main pillar for the SMART Rwanda programme.

Policy and political background

The current Rwandan constitution, enacted in June 2003 through a referendum, required a quota of 30% women in all government decision-making bodies. By June 2013, Rwanda's bicameral parliament had female representation of 56.2% in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. This made Rwanda the first country in the world with such a high degree of female political representation in the legislative branch.[1]

Various mechanisms were used to reach this number: the gender-progressive constitution; the establishment of a gender ministry with a clear mandate; a national women's council elected at the grassroots and represented at the national level; and a women-only ballot for electing their representatives to parliament.[2]

These policies are paired with the promulgation of gender-related laws, including Law No. 22/99 of 12 November 1999, which supplements the civil code regarding matrimonial regimes, liberalities and successions;[3] Law No. 08/2005 of 14 July 2005, which determines the use and management of land in Rwanda;[4] and Law No. 59/2008 of 10 September 2008, which provides legal sanctions against perpetrators of gender-based violence, to name a few.

Best practices

- The Rwanda Development Board (RDB) has a department in charge of women's entrepreneurship through ICT development, business development services, market orientation and the scaling up of businesses.
- The use of ICTs in telecentres established in all districts and internet cafés established in different urban areas provide both men and women with easy access to business-related information.[5]
- The One Laptop per Child (OLPC) programme is progressing well. Young girls and boys are being

1 www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/magazine/paul-kagame-rwanda.html?emc=eta1&_r=0
2 www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/887
3 www.migeprof.gov.rw/IMG/pdf/MATRIMONIAL_REGIMES_LIBERALITIES_AND_SUCCESSIONS-2.pdf
4 Official Gazette No. 18 of 15/09/2005.
5 www.migeprof.gov.rw/IMG/doc/BEIJING_15_UN-3.doc

trained to be accustomed to gathering information online on various topics at an early age and encouraged to work in the science and technology field.[6]

- The cabinet meeting of 18 November 2011 passed a prime minister's order determining modalities in which government institutions prevent and respond to gender-based violence. Since then, the institutions in charge have put in place toll-free hotlines which victims or witnesses of gender-based violence can call to seek help and report cases.

Some weaknesses

By reviewing the abovementioned policies in a gender responsive manner, a big gap was identified in the role of ICTs in promoting women's right, fostering women's economic empowerment, and involving women actively in the transformation of daily life using ICT opportunities. Starting with the national gender policy, one can rarely find inputs emphasising the importance of ICTs in women's socioeconomic development. There is mention of women accessing ICT facilities, including the internet, and an emphasis on women accessing various sources of information.[7] As for the ICT4D policy, NICI I and NICI II list various planned actions for the benefit of women in the form of the creation of an enabling environment that supports and encourages strategies to access ICT opportunities, the promotion of women's produce that allows direct sales online (also allowing women to apply for micro-lending),[8] the training of girls and women in ICT skills,[9] and formal education with special consideration of young girls. As for NICI III, it is rare to find consideration of women in its content.

These very limited ICT programmes for women may have been caused by reasons identified by the Rwanda civil society platform while analysing the gender policy: low capacity in planning, weak advocacy, limited budget allocation, insufficient gender-disaggregated data, few gender targets, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation by gender advocates and others responsible for mainstreaming gender equality in the development process.[10] This has led to an absence of data on women and ICTs in the gender statistics reports.[11]

To tackle this challenge, the Ministry of Youth and ICT (MYICT) came up with a new vision for the ICT sector, under the acronym "SPREAD" (Solution, Private-sector led, Reliable, Enabler, Accessible/affordable and Demand-driven).[12] The ministry initiated various flagship programmes to deal with the identified gaps. Among others, they designed a five-year ICT literacy and awareness campaign, which started this year. It targets three million people from rural communities. MYICT also designed a programme that aims at increasing ICT device ownership in the country. The ministry believes that once citizens have access to the internet, at affordable prices, their needs and rights are going to be expressed and satisfied as they arise.[13]

What is "Girls in ICT Day"?

Rwanda is steadily moving towards its vision of becoming an information-rich and knowledge-based economy and society, and an ICT hub in the region.[14] A country with over 10,537,222 people (51.8% females against 48.2% males),[15] it now boasts three mobile phone operators: MTN RwandaCell, Tigo and Airtel. The mobile phone penetration is 62.8% as of July 2013.[16] Rwanda has over 10 licensed internet service providers. This offers a huge opportunity for women to voice their views on policy making and expose abuses of their rights. Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, are also emerging as a popular means of online interaction. Currently, among Facebook users, 69% are males compared to 31% females as of 31 August 2013.[17]

A lack of awareness among students, teachers and parents on what a career in ICTs could offer led to the celebration of Girls in ICT Day. The event concept paper states: "Attitudes can change when girls meet ICT professionals and see what life is like on the job so they better understand the opportunities the ICT sector holds for their future."[18]

The day was celebrated for the first time on 9 May 2012, when Rwanda was celebrating World Telecommunication and Information Society Day under the theme "Women and Girls in ICT". Prior to this event, the women entrepreneurs involved formed a group: Girls in ICT Rwanda. The group consists of

6 www.migeprof.gov.rw/IMG/doc/BEIJING_15_REGIONAL_RWANDA_REPORT_02_July_2010_1_-2.doc

7 www.rcsprwanda.org/IMG/doc/NGP-FINAL_VERSION_JULY_2010_cabinet.doc

8 NICI II, p. 157.

9 NICI II, p. 166.

10 www.rcsprwanda.org/spip.php?article127

11 statistics.gov.rw/sites/default/files/user_uploads/files/books/National%20Gender%20Statistics%20report%2C%202013_1.pdf

12 admin.theiguides.org/Media/Documents/Rwanda-ICT-Profile-2012.pdf

13 Interview with the minister of MYICT, May 2013.

14 blogs.worldbank.org/ic4d/co-creating-smart-rwanda-smart-africa-and-smart-world

15 www.statistics.gov.rw/sites/default/files/user_uploads/files/books/2012_POPULATION_HOUSING_CENSUS_latest.pdf

16 www.rura.rw/fileadmin/docs/statistics/Monthly_telecom_subscribers_July_2013.pdf

17 www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/rwanda

18 Girls in ICT Concept Paper, April 2012.

tech women of all ages including entrepreneurs, professionals and university students. It was established to encourage women and girls to venture into ICTs.[19] The group has visited a number of schools in Rwanda where the group's members speak to teenage girls to encourage them to consider ICTs as a career option as well as help them to understand and appreciate the importance of developing ICT skills in any career.

The first celebration was marked by awarding outstanding women and girls in ICTs who demonstrated ability, either by implementing innovative projects in ICTs, or in their respective workplaces.[20] Those who received awards included Akaliza Keza Gara, the managing director of Shaking Sun, a multimedia company; Paula Saphir Helene, the senior network security engineer at RDB; Immaculate Bugingo, the chief executive officer of Rwanda Gateway Limited; and Marie-Christine Gasingirwa, the director general of science and technology at the Ministry of Education. They were recognised for using the power of ICTs to provide new digital opportunities for the Rwandan community.[21]

The day was celebrated for the second time on 25 April 2013, under the theme "Expanding Horizons and Changing Attitudes". It focused on knowledge sharing, training, collaboration, social networking, generating business opportunities, and enhancing business exposure and visibility for players in the ICT domain. The guest of honour of the event was Ann Mei Chang, the senior advisor for women and technology in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the US Department of State.[22] She declared: "The importance of your career is to stay true to yourself, otherwise you will lose your identity as you try and merge with your colleagues. Information technology is a male-dominated field, but not out of bounds to women."[23]

Outcomes of Girls in ICT Day

- Girls in ICT Rwanda: This is a forum of women working in the field of ICTs whose main goal is to improve the current statistics regarding women in the ICT sector as well as to alter the stereotype held by many young girls that ICTs is a man's job.[24] The testimonies of Girls in ICT Rwanda members inspire young girls to join the ICT field. Esther Mbabazi, Rwanda's first female pilot, encouraged young Rwandan women to follow their dreams and never stop being passionate. Clarisse Iribagiza, CEO of HeHe Limited, a mobile computing technology company, said that the biggest reason for girls not taking courses in ICTs is the way that science and technology subjects are structured. "I studied computer engineering, but before it was combined with entrepreneurship I was not sure why I was taking this course, apart from repairing people's computers," Iribagiza said.[25]

- Camp TechKobwa: A newly founded programme inspired by Rwanda's resilient and ever-growing ICT scene, its purpose is to provide young women with unhindered access to computers in order to develop skills and creativity and to inspire them as the next generation of Rwandan entrepreneurs.[26] The camp encourages young women to become active citizens by building their self-esteem and confidence, and empowering them to start computer and media clubs with their ICT teachers upon returning to their schools. Camp TechKobwa is an ideal way to offer adolescent girls self-development opportunities in a fun and friendly atmosphere.[27]

- Smart Girl: This initiative is one of the ten pillars of Smart Rwanda, which aims at using ICTs to enable the production value chain using mobile solutions by equipping female farmers with the right knowledge to negotiate for better prices. Through e-learning it trains women farmers in areas such as vocational issues, saving, entrepreneurship, HIV/AIDS, positive parenting and preventing unwanted pregnancy. Smart Girl seeks to increase the awareness, knowledge and confidence of girls in rural areas. Disadvantaged girls in rural areas with little exposure to ICTs will benefit by leveraging existing school infrastructure like computer clubs. Girls are encouraged to spend several hours a week to gain structured exposure to ICT skills and knowledge. This government programme is designed in partnership with the World Bank.

19 focus.rw/wp/2013/04/ict-ministry-puts-girls-in-the-spotlight

20 m.gov.rw/Rwanda-hosts-ITU-Annual-Regional-Development-Forum,821.html?lang=en

21 www.rwandagateway.org/fr/spip.php?article1011

22 itu4u.wordpress.com/2013/04/15/a-networking-night-out-with-girls-in-ict-rwanda

23 www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?a=65346&i=15309

24 www.gov.rw/Rwanda-celebrates-second-annual-Girls-in-ICT-Day-encouraging-girls-to-expand-their-horizons?lang=en

25 www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=15330&a=66039

26 sites.google.com/site/techkobwa/

27 www.facebook.com/media/et/?set=a.386241714808630&type=3&l=10eb22eea3

Conclusion

The government of Rwanda is committed to promoting ICTs as a key driver for rapid socioeconomic development. Efforts have been made to put in place an enabling environment for girls to use and benefit from ICTs, along with their brothers, through building infrastructure and training – both formal and informal education.

However, statistics show that citizens living in rural areas have limited ownership of ICT devices, such as computers, smartphones and TVs. Most of these are women.

MYICT has proposed a shift in perspective so that people no longer see ICTs as something beyond their reach, but rather as a tool that offers solutions, services and a system that enables people conduct their ordinary business in a smart manner. This is expected to increase the number of female users of ICT devices and services.

Data on women's rights violations online is not enough. For members of Girls in ICT Rwanda, the current struggle is to ensure access to ICTs and then to monitor their positive and negative effects.

Action steps

- The private sector should continually be encouraged to launch initiatives that expand coverage to rural areas and provide ICT devices and services at affordable prices.
- Through mentorship and internships, the private sector should initiate platforms that empower women in getting more knowledge on ICTs to help them be whoever they want to be, and to reach their full potential.
- Through awareness raising, the government should create an environment that empowers and encourages girls and young women to consider careers in the growing field of ICTs.
- The government should support outstanding women to make sure that they realise their goals in the promotion of ICTs in our country.
- Data collection for ICT indicators should consider disaggregating results on gender to inspire planning that considers women in ICTs. ■