

## Barriers to Women Participation in Information Society in Nigeria

Umar Musa Yila<sup>1</sup> & Bakare Olatunji Azeez<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

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This study tries to investigate the barriers to women participation in information society in Nigeria. The study has identified some of the barriers to women access to internet as to lack of Infrastructure which include both the hardware, software and the network. Education and skills this include literacy, language, computer skills and information literacy. Socio-cultural and economic problems such as the African culture, religious beliefs and other family responsibilities has also affected women participation in the use of internet. Women participation in information society is depend on some of the following requirement such as Educational empowerment economic empowerment provision of infrastructural facilities attitudinal change towards the use of ICTs. The study concluded that women have to be fully engaging in the use of internet so that they can also participate and contribute about their inclusion in shaping the Information Society.

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**Keywords:** Women, Information society, Internet

### Introduction

The development and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, has caused enormous changes in the work and organization of daily life in the industrialized countries, which have led to a process of transition from "industrial" society to "information". One of the key features of the information society is the high degree of public use of information (Moore, 1999). This means that everyone should have access to information for their own social, economic, political and cultural development. As Dearnley and Feather (2001) have pointed out, information technology does not define the information society or the information society is just a technology of information and related activities such as the Internet. However, ICTs offer tremendous opportunities to improve the way communities and individuals act by providing alternative, universal and often cheaper means of accessing and disseminating information, and in particular, the Internet has led to the development of the information society. The ultimate goal of the information society is the empowerment of all citizens through access and use of knowledge.

However, there is concern that some people including women, may be further away from the opportunities offered by the changes than the men for ICT. Thus, although the Internet has been hailed as an emancipating and democratizing force it is gender-neutral, it has been discovered that the information society is becoming increasingly divided into information 'haves' and 'have nots' with women. Particularly immigrant women, minority women, women with disabilities, women in poverty and older women are lacking the information resources available to others ( Houdart-Blazy, 1996). Contrary to this perspective, other commentators have drawn attention to the potentially liberating nature of the Internet for women (Bahdi, 2000) and argue that ICTs give women the opportunity to connect and participate in the Internet world arena and the development of society and the community in a new way. This article examines issues surrounding women and the Internet in present information society. The issue of use and access will be explored, as well as the benefits and potential of the Internet as a networking tool for women. Finally, the barriers of participation and the way forward in Nigeria will be discussed.

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<sup>1</sup> National Open University of Nigeria, E-mail: [musayila@yahoo.com](mailto:musayila@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup> First Bank Nigeria Limited, E-mail: [Papyze@yahoo.com](mailto:Papyze@yahoo.com)

## **Women in Nigeria**

Women make up about half of Nigeria's population and know they play key roles, such as mothers, producers, managers and community promoters / organizers and so on. Its contribution to the social and economic development of societies is more than half that of men because of its dual role in production and reproduction. However, their participation in informational structures and processes, where decisions are made about the use of community resources generated by men and women, remains insignificant. Nigerian information society was gender sensitive nature, an important feature of traditional society (Aina, 1998). It is the structure of a set of social relationships with a material base that allows men to control women (Stacey 1993, Kramarae 1992, Lerner 1986). A system of social hierarchy and gender differentiation that provides material benefits to men and at the same time imposes severe restrictions on women's roles and activities in the information society and sets the criteria for the status of women in families and structurally unequal markets overlook the conditions of gender discrimination in inheritance rights and legal adulthood, implicitly endorsing domestic violence and to punish differential wages for equal or similar work. Tradition, culture and religion have inspired the century-old relationship between men and women, the male domain firmly rooted in the structure of social and institutionalized organization at all levels of leadership. The authority of parents justified the marginalization of women in education, the information society, economy, the labour market, politics, business, family, home affairs and inheritance (Salaam, 2003). Moreover, this masculine culture is decisive for male dominance over women, since men will come from the family to maintain the family name and increase the proportions, while a woman will marry. Therefore, the activities of being male leadership training, while women are limited to local activities; They attribute to them the culture that affects them in the later roles of life, causing them to lose their self-esteem and self-confidence in their career in the evaluation of adult life, and a global policy. Despite the clear commitment of the international community to gender equality and closing the gap between men and women in the formal political arena, which is reinforced by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, marginalized and poorly represented in political activities(UNDP report, 2005).

## **Women and Internet Access and Use**

During the 1990s and early 2000s, various research reports and surveys documented the digital divide, discussed women's difficulties in accessing the Internet, and examined subtle differences in the use of technology between men and women.

### **Access**

According to the latest figures from the British National Statistics of Statistics, British men are more likely to use the Internet than women (National Statistics, 2001). 57% of men used the Internet against 45% of women. However, the differences between the sexes are interesting. According to the NOP, women aged 15 to 25 are superior to men, suggesting that young women feel at least comfortable with technology (Kinnes, 1999). Although the phenomenon of "chickclicks" appears to have arrived in the United Kingdom (O'Rourke, 1999), the experiences of older women who have received less computer training and familiarity with education are not well documented. Therefore, it is important not to be essentialist in the use of the Internet by women, because the use and attitude of a single woman on the Internet depend on a number of variables. All women do not lack experience in computer science, confidence, skills and access to interaction with the information society; In fact, some women have better access to facilities and feel more comfortable with the technology than some men in developed countries. Although these differences need to be analyzed, we can assume that women run the risk of losing power over men, as a number of barriers discourage women from using the Internet as the men. In the past two decades, there has been a lot of talk about the transformative power of technology in society, yet little attention has been paid to an emerging digital gap. In its report, "Measuring the information Society 2013", the International Telecommunication Union estimated that by the end of 2013, 2.7bn people (40 percent of the world's inhabitants) were using the Internet. However, men are twice more likely to have access to the Internet than women. According to Intel's report Women and the Web: "on average across the developing world, nearly 25 percent fewer women than men have access to the Internet, and the gender gap soars to nearly 45 percent in regions like sub-Saharan Africa." Though Africa has recently seen rapid growth in Internet access, women are vastly underrepresented in technology. The rise of cyber cafes has benefited men more than women because boys and men have more freedom of movement to get to the cafes and have more access to make and spend money at them.

Furthermore, there is a disturbing trend of cyber bullying experienced by young women in Nigeria. They also find it difficult to access technology because of cultural restrictions and their lower status in society. Because women face barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination when getting training and education, we are witnessing the rise of a second digital divide. It is important to understand that technology and access to the Internet is essential to women's empowerment across the continent and it is key to overcoming these barriers in the first place.

**Report from Bauchi and Kano State showed that** Over 60 percent of educated women in the northern part of the country do not have access to the Internet, claims Ya'u Zakari Ya'u, the Executive Director, Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD). He stated this on Monday during a stakeholders' meeting on the report of research on Women and Use of Internet in Northern Nigeria, held at Professor Iya Abubakar Community Resource Centre (CRC), Bauchi. He said the research recently carried out by the centre showed that the number of women does not access Internet thereby making them technologically and socially disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts. Zakari Ya'u explained that the survey conducted in Bauchi and Kano states enumerated the factors hindering northern women from using the Internet to include inadequate infrastructure, computer illiteracy, bad perception about the Internet as well as religious and cultural concerns, among others. He said some clerics and husbands discourage women in the region from browsing the Internet and joining the social networks chat rooms for fearing that their wives may lose privacy, get exposed to undue sexual harassment or visit unwholesome sites that could corrupt them. Zakari Ya'u assured that CITAD would soon embark on awareness campaigns in the area on the significance of the Internet and its enormous benefits to bridge the gap. Also speaking, Hon. Maryam Garba Bagel, the only female member of the Bauchi State House of Assembly who served as chairperson of the occasion said, "It is not a taboo for housewives to use Internet or social media because they could get useful information and knowledge that would add value to their lives," adding that women might even learn how to cook certain foods on the Internet.

### **Barriers to Women's Internet Access and Use**

Women's access to the Internet is increasing, but a number of difficult and persistent obstacles remain. Time and Money are the very practical obstacles that can prevent women from accessing the Internet. Resnick (1995) found that "the biggest barriers for women to connect are time and money". Women generally have less disposable income than men and earn only 82% of men's hourly wage in the United Kingdom (Women and Equal Opportunities Department, 2002). Therefore, the cost of online connections can be more of a hindrance for women than for men. However, finances may not be the insurmountable obstacle that it was. Prices for computer equipment and Internet service providers are falling, and women no longer need a computer or Internet service provider to access their homes because the Internet is accessible in many public places, including public libraries and supermarkets. In the UK, the UK Online Centres initiative aims to provide ICT access to local community sites such as cybercafés, public libraries, universities, community centres and conference rooms (UK Online Centres, 2002). The centres also provide training and support to new users, which is a significant barrier for those who are wary of using the Internet or who even enter unknown public space for those who have no confidence in the use of Internet.

For us, in developed countries, access to ICT or Internet is also on the increase than before, although we must not forget that some members of society do not have access for various reasons. It is also important not to generalize from a Western point of view and to recognize that, especially for developing countries several obstacles must be overcome before the widespread use of the Internet can be reached, including connection costs and shortages of telephone lines and stable electricity. According to Harcourt, (1999) in an anthology of contributions that explore the use of technology by women around the world, offers an excellent overview of the potential power of projects using the Internet worldwide, but also highlights concerns relating to lack of access or inequitable access.

Even if a woman has access to a computer in her household or at hand, the lack of time to go online can be an obstacle to use. Married or partnered women still generally work a double shift of paid work and domestic or caring responsibilities. All the surveys conducted over the last decade continue to indicate that women, even those with full-time paid employment, are still responsible for the bulk of the work of the household. With so many demands on their time, it is clear that women have less spare time than men to surf the Web.

Furthermore, Spender suggests that women do not view using the Internet as a leisure pursuit as men do (Spender, 1995). This assertion is supported by other researchers in the area who argue that women view computers and their applications as tools but not as a leisure activity (Martin, 1998 and Cunningham, 1994).

So it seems that even when women can find the time to access the Internet and become proficient in its use, they might not necessarily see a purpose for it. As an article in the *Washington Post* reasoned, 'It's not that going on-line is too complex a task for women [...] to master. It's that they have yet to find much in the way of useful and compelling benefits for doing so' (Maier, 1995).

The challenges or obstacles to internet utilization for women's development are a global phenomenon but it is more obvious in developing countries. As a result of Africa's numerous problems such as poverty, high level of illiteracy among others, it is the worst hit. Just as in many areas of development (e.g. agriculture, health, and education), women face enormous challenges in ICT for their own development. Using and benefiting from Internet requires learning, training, affordable access to the technology, availability of information relevant to them and a great amount of collaborative efforts to create an enabling environment. Several obstacles have resulted in the differential access and impact of the internet on women. The following is a highlight of some:

#### **a) Infrastructure**

The success for the utilization of any Internet rests in the availability of the infrastructure that is set up in the environment. Internet infrastructure in most developing countries and costs are exceedingly high. The little infrastructure available is even concentrated in the urban areas, and the bulk of women live in the rural areas. This tends to pose a huge gender gap in access to internet. It affects the majority of women, who in most African countries including Nigeria are poor and are living in rural areas. They lack access to these infrastructures in terms of access to computers, electricity, phone lines, computer hard and software, servers etc. The infrastructure deficit of the rural areas coincides with gender demographics more women live in rural areas than men. Therefore, majority of the population in rural areas, women have a smaller chance than men to access new technologies. As the UNDP Report (2000) noted, women with their special responsibilities for children and the elderly, find it less easy than men to migrate to towns and cities. The urban bias in connectivity thus deprives women more than men, of the universal right to participation in information society. Findings of George (2005) show that economic mobility as well as professional achievements mostly conceal certain underlying conditions of social upheavals among immigrant families and communities. This does not imply that women need to be encouraged to migrate to the cities as bread winners, rather, to show the trickle-down effects of their engagements, and to whistle blow the dangers associated with urban bias.

#### **b) Education and Skills**

According to the United Nations Report (2000), two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women who reside mostly in developing countries. Similarly, women are also less likely to know the international languages that dominate the web. Therefore, given their limited access to schooling, women especially those living in the rural areas, are also much less likely than men to have computer skills. This results to limited exposure and isolation of many women in developing countries particularly those in rural areas to have access to education and other skills, which will enhance the utilization of these infrastructures.

The case of Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Sheikh Usman 'Dan Fodio is a good example for reference at this point. Mack and Boyd (2000) have done a terrific job by writing about the historical, spiritual, and literary portraits of this remarkable Muslim woman, who at age 20 was a warrior, a teacher, a poet, and a key adviser to her father in his struggle to bring about a revolution (1804). It was in recognition of Nana Asma'u's intellectual contributions to the revolution that made Mack and Boyd to give the title of their work *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (2000). One major take home from her case is if Nana Asma'u (1793 - 1864), was able to utilize her educational skills and assist in making a successful revolution at a time when cell phones were not invented, what can the current women of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century achieve, utilizing the powers of ICT?

#### **c) Socio-Cultural and Economic Problems**

Women generally tend to have more limited direct access than men to information and they are even restricted to accessing the Internet in some countries including Nigeria due to culture and religion. The African Gender Institute (2003) stated that in some societies there is disapproval of women's request to overnight browsing in a public cyber café especially married women.

In addition, rural information centres are located in areas that women may not be comfortable frequenting. Although, there is recently a transformation in the access to internet through cell phones, it nevertheless has its own limitations including the lack of resources to constantly buy recharge cards for the phones; the power failure to charge the phones; and role conflict with the women's expectations as wives, as mothers, and as workers or full time housewives. In other words, women have problems of time given their multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities. Their leisure hours are few and the centres may not be open when women can visit them. To yield positive results therefore, every meaningful policy should therefore reflect women's moral, spiritual, and cultural values.

Traditional cultural attitudes in most societies discriminate against women, depriving them access to education and technology. Girls are encouraged to take any job or encouraged to get married rather than seek higher education. There is also the issue of gender bias in attitudes towards women studying or using information technology. Many people hold outmoded views that girls cannot think or work scientifically and that science is too mechanical and technical for girls, thus discouraging female students.

Phobia is also another obstacle in that most women have developed it for ICT especially considering the negative perception of the ICT tool as a tool for domination and oppression of NGOs to disabuse the minds of women on ICT as a negative tool.

Lack of financial resources can hinder women to participate fully in ICT community. This is because almost all communication facilities cost money and majority of women are afflicted by poverty. Poverty is rooted in gender imbalances, which are in turn rooted in gender inequality dynamics that stem from issues which cut across race, religion, status, culture and geographical location among others. Thus in comparison to men, women are worst hit as a result of their very limited involvement in economic activities in relation to their male counterparts. Okunna (2000) stressing on this maintains that the major cause of poverty among women especially in Nigeria is their low access to credit and income earning opportunities, as well as marginalization from major economic activities. Since most women in Africa are full housewives without paid employment, they cannot fully participate in information technology. The ICT has its financial implication for every user requires money. To use cell phones, it must be recharged and to browse the internet and design web sites require money. Most women do not make much money as men, so they cannot afford the necessary computers, hardware and online services cost. More so, those that have the money believe to spend it on something else than ICT.

### **The Role of Policy in Encouraging Women Participation in Nigeria**

Equal rights and full participation of women in all spheres of life is an outcome for full and complete development of any modern civilized nation. Women constitute majority of the population of many nations, and therefore need to be incorporated in the activities and affairs of those societies. In the area of information technology, for women's access and use of the media to be addressed it is necessary to consider, appreciate, and utilize their potentials, which could accrue from their full access and equal participation in the ICTs. To this end, certain measures must be put in place to address gender discrimination in information and communication technology. Here are some of these policy measures?

#### **a) Educational Empowerment**

Education and information are central to building human capabilities. Education builds cognitive skills for processing information. Women's empowerment educationally will help them strengthen their individual and collective capacity as women. It will also enable them to advance their status as women in the society as well as give them the opportunities that ICT offers. Educational empowerment for the women can only be realized through universal access to and completion of basic education with resources adequate to ensure that the functional literacy and numeracy are instilled in a sustainable sense. This will enable them to understand the language of information technology and be in a position to use it efficiently. Hafkins (2001) maintains that women need to educate themselves on technical areas, so that they can translate the technical terms into reality. Similarly, the level of literacy must be addressed by way of providing training for women to learn the use of ICT facilities. As mentioned earlier, this task is not only a government's responsibility, but equally that of the civil society. As Arimah (2001) posits, the informal sector in Nigeria needs value-based reforms that can be achieved through government's exploration of new ways of engaging the viability of the sector, and through public private partnership (PPP).

Thus, the private sector should accrue part of whatever profit it makes to the community in the form of Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) and the education sector needs the largest share from that. Additionally, such policies and sharing formulae should be favourable to the girl-child and women, as educating them is as good as educating the community as a whole.

### **b) Economic Empowerment**

Poverty and illiteracy remain the primary obstacles to internet growth in developing countries like Nigeria. Women and children are still the majority of those living in poverty. Reducing the gender gap in education will invariably increase the opportunity for women's economic empowerment. There is also the need to reduce job discrimination at their work places to financially empower women. In addition, creating cooperative societies for women will enable them have access to small scale loans that would help start small scale businesses. In the long run, it will increase women's finances and make them less dependent on men, and eventually increase their financial access to ICT facilities.

### **c) Provision of Infrastructural Facilities**

To achieve the right to communicate as a basic human right for women in Nigeria, women have to take on themselves the difficult task of gaining access to the necessary infrastructures that will enable them use the ICTs. This entails the provision of more infrastructures that will take care of the majority of women who reside in rural areas as well as making available the latest infrastructure for users' needs. This means an understanding of the system of access and use of the ICTs by majority of the people in the society. Similarly, women must be involved in the technical complexities of information technology in order to reflect gender issues. The Nigerian government and NGOs therefore, should work towards actively devising creative solutions to provide access to ICT. Access to ICT through community access points should be looked into by government and NGOs. They should also look into concerns related to consumers' ability to pay for services, particularly in rural and poor areas. Universal access policies aim at developing solutions that provide community access at affordable prices. For instance, Nigeria has adopted the rural telephoning policies and with the collaboration of some international agencies that are working towards realizing this goal. Expansion of public telephones and ICT access point's example, in post offices, community viewing centres etc. are some of the efforts.

### **d) Attitudinal Change Towards the Use of ICTS**

For women and girls to enter the information age for ICT use to be engendered, women must transcend some attitudinal barriers. Since science and technology disciplines are domains that are historically ascribed to males, women and girls find it intimidating and alienating. They therefore tend to see the ICT sector as a realm that is unfriendly and dominated by men.

Thus they assume that technology and its production, application and maintenance as areas that fall more easily into the male domain. Women therefore need to overcome this technophobia; they need to be encouraged to change such attitudes that act as 'internal' barriers to their participating in the ICT sector; and they should be encouraged to take up the challenges of the new information and communication technology in order to excel in it as they have done in other fields of endeavour in Nigeria.

The northern part of Nigeria is known to be the most educationally backward region in Nigeria as Hajiya Aishatu Jibril, the Minister of State for Education estimated the number of child beggars in the region at more than 10million, and the menace is on the increase.

Undoubtedly, the girl-child is the worst hit. Now, the from the Nana Asma'u's case, we can understand that, the Nigerian women, notably the northerners, have a role model that can inspire them in changing their attitudes in favour of seeking for the both religious and secular knowledge including the ICTs' for the betterment of their lives and sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Internet began as an instrument of the powerful, as Bahdi argues, the marginalized are now harnessing the technology to promote diverse causes (Bahdi, 2000). Women and feminists have not been slow to recognize the potential power of the Internet for information dissemination, gathering and sharing and for connecting with like-minded people in the pursuit of common objectives.

There are still some formidable barriers to overcome in increasing women's use of the Internet and ensuring that they participate fully in the Information Society. Some of the more obvious problems have been discussed above but there are other quite fundamental issues to address, such as the question of language. Website design can also be a factor rendering some Internet content inaccessible to a large proportion of women worldwide.

Despite the difficulties, women must engage with the technology now if they are to have a say in shaping the Information Society. Women have been excluded from important aspects of society and governance for many centuries, in information society the use technologies could reinforce that marginalization if women do not master the technology and speak out about the future of the Information Society. Although there are concerns about commercialism, explicit, misogynist content and the power of the Internet to homogenize, on balance is probably more dangerous for women to be excluded altogether than to try to work within a male dominated electronic environment. Hopefully, by engaging with it we can change it for the benefit of women all around the world.

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