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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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CAMEROON

Access to the internet for women

PROTEGE QV
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www.protegeqv.org

Introduction, policy and political background

In the late 1990s, Cameroon embarked on a broad privatisation campaign in the telecommunications sector that culminated in the adoption of a series of legal measures, most importantly Law 89/014 of 14 July 1998 which, up to now, regulates telecommunications in our country.

This law made provisions for approximately ten regulations, establishing the end of the public monopoly in the telecommunications sector. It also led to the dismantling of the government department responsible for telecommunications and instituted three sets of provisions, namely provisions for exclusive concessionary rights, provisions for regulated competition, and provisions for free competition.

Thanks to the liberal framework set forth in the 1998 Telecommunications Act, the sector was opened to competition and on June 1999 a mobile phone licence was granted to a private enterprise. Towards 2000, internet service providers (ISPs) appeared in the sector.[1] It is worth pointing out that the state-owned telecommunications company (CAMTEL) is the only authorised access provider, thereby providing access to the ISPs who serve as "secondary providers". However, the ISPs provide their services based on economic activity, population density and availability of infrastructure, such as ICT backbone, and in doing so, they abandon rural and unprofitable areas.

To redress this and in accordance with provisions 19 and 20 of the Telecommunications Act, plus the recommendations of the World Summit on the Information Society, the Cameroonian government launched its ICT outreach policy, aimed at building multipurpose community telecentres (MPCTs)[2] to bridge the digital divide between the well-off areas and the underserved ones.

A survey of MPCTs

The 2002 move to set up MPCTs had the goal of developing rural areas by allowing women and young people to access the internet. The objective was to set up 2,000 internet access points throughout the country by 2015.

In 2010, PROTEGE QV[3] , with the support of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), carried out research entitled "The contribution of five multipurpose community telecentres to secondary education in rural Cameroon". The objective of the research was to identify and analyse the impacts of MPCTs set up in Cameroonian rural areas on secondary education.

During the course of this research, out of the 34 MPCTs that were functioning at that time, PROTEGE QV selected the MPCTs of five localities for its case studies. These five localities were Ambam (in southern Cameroon), Bangang (in western Cameroon), Bankim (in northern Cameroon), Jakiri (in northwest Cameroon), and Makenene (in central Cameroon).

The criteria for the selection of these MPCTs included: regular access to the internet; equipment in a good state; regular energy supply; and the MPCTs being operational for at least three years.

In each telecentre, a team of two persons was selected and trained in order for them to be able to conduct interviews with all the students and teachers who visited the telecentres in order to identify what interests they had. A representative sampling was used.

One month later, the interview forms were collected by the research team and the data contained was analysed. In all, 1,015 students and 235 teachers were interviewed. The findings included the following:

1 There are numerous internet service providers (more than 30), but the market is led by CAMNET, a CAMTEL subsidiary, and two mobile operators, namely MTN and Orange.

2 In an interview with the magazine "Performances du Ministère des Postes et Télécommunications" in 2008, the former minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Bouba Bello Maigari, set the ambitious target of creating 2,000 multipurpose community telecentres throughout the country by the year 2015.

3 PROTEGE QV (Promotion of Technologies that Guarantee the Environment and the Quality of Life) is a Cameroonian association created in 1995 which aims for the promotion of individual and collective initiatives geared towards the protection of the environment and the amelioration of the quality of life of Cameroonian families. www.protegeqv.org

- Of the five MPCTs selected, two were managed by women while the rest were managed by men.
- Of all the services offered, the most solicited was the internet. Others included photocopying, word processing, printing, photography, scanning, use of the telephone, and postal services.
- Of the 1,015 students interviewed, 453 were female while 562 were male.
- Of the 235 teachers interviewed, 70 were women while 165 were men.

It was observed that those who make use of ICTs at the centres are generally youths under the age of 25 (55%), and few people over 40. These youths and young adults include students who use the centres to do research and homework assignments, and teachers who prepare their lessons.

The results also made it clear that women have less access to the internet and computers than men. However, despite the fact that they have less access, there is increasing interest in and use of ICTs amongst women. For many people the MPCTs were places where they encountered their first computer and learned how to use it.

When it was asked during the interviews why few girls visited the MPCTs, the reasons, which are a reality of everyday life, included:

- Many girls still think that computers and technology are a man's issue.
- Some girls do not see what benefit they will gain from using technology.
- Many girls are not even encouraged to use technology because of cultural constraints which create a situation where many boys end up oriented towards science subjects while girls end up oriented towards the arts.

Apart from girls who go to the MPCTs for school-related work, there has been a growing tendency for many women, and even men, to become addicted to social networks, the most common being Facebook, Twitter and hi5. Most of the youths who visit MPCTs spend at least 30 minutes on these social networks to chat with friends, to comment on friends' status updates and events which have been posted, to make new friends, and – in the case of girls and young women – to look for boyfriends and husbands. This attitude has become so common that it is tarnishing the image of girls who access the internet in public venues such as MPCTs and cybercafes.

However, a positive image of women and their use of ICTs is equally pervasive. Throughout the world, and in Cameroon, governments are working to reduce the gap between men and women who use ICTs and to empower women to make use of ICT tools. One will find more women today learning how to use computers and connecting to the internet, and more women are involved in computer studies. There are associations here in Cameroon which have that goal, such as PROTEGE QV, and even associations specialised in the promotion of women computer scientists, such as PROFIN.[4]

In addition, the involvement of women in the smooth functioning of MPCTs has also been remarkable. Women managers work very hard in order to be recognised as good performers. This is how Salamatu Yinyuy Sule, a woman manager at the Jakiri MPCT in the northwest region of Cameroon since 2008, received an award from the Telecentre.org Foundation[5] for being one of the outstanding telecentre managers in 2012. She distinguished herself through her leadership and management capabilities, and her efforts to make her MPCT one the most visited in the country. During the research by PROTEGE QV, her MPCT was found to have the greatest positive impact on students' education (70% of the students who used the centre had better grades in class due to their use of the MPCT).

Another aspect of ICTs is the use of mobile phones. Nowadays, their use is widespread in Cameroon. Almost every youth has a mobile phone. In general, females tend to have more sophisticated phones than males.

Women, it was found, prefer sophisticated phones to show off to peers. However, many of them do not make use of one third of the phones' applications. The applications they make most use of include chatting applications like WhatsApp, Viber, Yahoo Messenger and Skype.

According to Research ICT Africa's Gender Assessment of ICT Access and Usage in Africa survey,[6] the diffusion of ICTs is unevenly concentrated in urban areas, leaving some rural areas almost untouched. Access to these technologies is constrained by income, as is usage, and – as they become more complex – access is increasingly constrained by literacy and education. The survey

4 Promotion de la Femme Informaticienne: www.profin.cam.cm

5 An independent, non-profit, non-stock international organisation that manages the global programme telecentre.org; this programme supports the establishment and sustainability of grassroots level telecentres. www.telecentre.org

6 www.researchictafrica.net

revealed that women in Cameroon have greater knowledge of the internet than men.

Concerning mobile access, the survey found that women with similar income, education and employment status are as likely as men to own a mobile phone. It also found that although men spend more money on mobile phones, women with revenue spend a greater share of their monthly income on mobile usage.

Due to a lack of mobility and access to income, rural women are more likely to be deprived of access to ICTs than rural men.

We can see from this that there exist gender inequities in access to and usage of ICTs in rural Cameroon – and even urban Cameroon to some extent. These inequities cannot be addressed through ICT policies *per se*. There need to be policy interventions in areas that would allow girls and women to enjoy the benefits of ICTs equally. For example, policies and programmes can be set up to incentivise the education of girls, and particularly their participation in subjects such as mathematics, science and engineering, as more girls in secondary school tend to orient themselves towards arts subjects because of the stereotypical mentality that science is for males and the arts are for females. Many of these barriers that women face are related to religious and cultural norms and practices that are difficult to legislate away.

Conclusion

ICTs in general and the internet in particular provide individuals and communities with opportunities. They can also present solutions to social and economic oppression. Women and girls have been discriminated against for too long and the violence against them encompasses all things that deny a woman the right to realise her potential for development because of gender. Examples of these rights violations include rape, forced marriage, pregnancy in underage children, female circumcision or genital mutilation, sexual harassment at work, forced prostitution, honour killings, and child prostitution.

In Cameroon, women constitute over 52% of the country's 19.5 million inhabitants,[7] the greater percentage of them living in rural areas where the MPCTs have provided them with basic access to the internet.

Despite the emancipating potential of the internet, the PROTEGE QV survey noted that the few women who use the telecentres are teachers and students. In rural Cameroon, women do not use the internet to access critical information useful to support those that have been discriminated against. They have also not used the internet for information that could help them make decisions about themselves, their lives, their bodies, or to exercise autonomy or self-determination.

The survey also suggested that women and girls have not profited from their access to the internet in ways such as using it to overcome cultural limitations, discuss the difficulties encountered in their various communities, exchange experiences, share ideas, or provide mutual support.

ICTs are powerful tools to denounce and report various women's rights violations. Women can use their mobile phones or laptops to send text messages to groups, take photographs, or to report cases of violations.[8] However, we learned from Cameroonian rural women that this has not been their experience so far, and has not been amongst their concerns. Overall, in rural Cameroon, women and girls have, up to now, used the internet merely for educational purposes and to overcome limitations in mobility. Mobile phones have broadened their livelihood options and well-being. However, they have yet to experience all the opportunities they can draw from their internet access to improve their daily lives, their general condition, or to promote their rights.

Action steps

MPCTs are likely to play a vital role in rural Cameroon when it comes to the promotion of women's rights. Appropriately used and designed ICTs could help otherwise vulnerable groups to move out of the disadvantage of "information exclusion". To serve this purpose, we suggest the following steps:

- The local authorities and the MPCT managers should organise campaigns to reach the most vulnerable sectors in their respective localities to let them know that information and services are available and intended for them and their well-being.
- Free training campaigns targeting women's groups for the use and mastery of ICTs should be organised on a regular basis.

7 According to the results of the third general population and housing census (GPHC) in 2010, Cameroon's overall population is estimated at 19,406,100 inhabitants, with a rural population of 9,314,928 inhabitants, 4,745,697 of whom are women.

8 Women's Rights Programme, Association for Progressive Communications (2012) Going Visible: Women's Rights on the Internet. www.apc.org/en/pubs/going-visible-women%E2%80%99s-rights-internet

- MPCT managers should regularly update the centres with information and advice, both in hardcopy and electronically on a centre's website, on rural women's concerns, and information related to the protection of their rights.
- Financial or technical assistance should be extended to women to facilitate access to and appropriation of ICTs by providing credit, training and education to rural women in Cameroon.[9]
- The government should increase the number of MPCTs as many in rural areas find them far from their home. The quality of their equipment should also be upgraded.
- Groups of women leaders should be identified and trained on the use of ICTs. The same groups will have to convince other women on how the internet can bring to light the violation of their rights and represent a platform where they can converge to inform the public and the government, and in turn, influence policy. ■

9 APC (2006) Gender Evaluation Methodology for Internet and ICTs: A Learning Tool for Change and Empowerment. www.apc.org/en/node/2835