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Women's information needs for economic development

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ABSTRACT:

The world has slipped almost unheralded from the Industrial Age into the Information Age. This emerging information society puts a premium on intelligence; value added knowledge, and the application of knowledge to all processes, products and services. This replaces raw sheer physical strength as an economic asset in today's economy.

Information and communication knowledge have therefore become critical components of a successful and prosperous society.

The paper discusses the vital role information can play in the economic development of women in developing countries. It analyzes how women can realize economic development through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT); one of the ways this can be guaranteed is for information centers especially public libraries in developing countries to automate their systems, form networks for resource sharing and take advantage of the numerous benefits of IT, especially data sharing capabilities and the Internet.

The availability of information and its use is of vital value to women who form half of the world population. The paper discusses the information needs of women for

economic development and the significant impact of information producers for the achievement of this.

The peculiarity of information needs of women required to promote economic development goals was analyzed.

KEYWORDS:

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1. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in Africa and their access to decision-making structures, adequate health care, education, housing, income generation and so on, remain far behind that of men. This is in spite of evidence of the long-term positive effect on the development of the nation when girls and women have access to education and training, health care, housing, and adequate food and nutrition. (ECA, 1998)

The information society is where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life. Librarians are information keepers and the ability of the information keepers crucial to the overall ability for all to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge.

Libraries provide a gateway to information worldwide and some businesses have always looked to libraries for information but, for many in developing countries considering libraries as an important part of the local "support system" for business and economic development is new.

According to Olorunda & Oyelude (2003), information needs of people differ depending on what they intend to utilize information for. The information needs of women are one that should be of concern to most because women are the bedrock of any society. They determine in a sense and are a mould for what a people or race eventually become.

Siitonen (2003) after stating that a particular reason for us to discuss globalisation and economic information for women is that knowledge is power, thus also economic knowledge is power, asked the following questions; Do women have economic power? Do women have economic knowledge? Do women have access to economic information? Do services that provide economic information specifically for women exist?

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the information needs of women that will enhance effective economic development.

2. To observe if adequate provision of information has any implication on the economic development of women.
3. To determine how adequate the information provided by the information managers, government etc is.
4. To ascertain the extent information impacts on women and the need to generate information in-house?

Information Needs of Women

Women possess needs that vary from personal; health, financial; spiritual; professional to economic. Olorunda & Oyelude (2003) believes, "because they need to maintain themselves and their families, they have economic information needs. They need information about their social and economic environment".

As noted by the IDRC Gender and Information Working Group, most of the positive effects of the "information revolution" have bypassed women. "There has been little research done on women's information needs and access to appropriate information in developing countries. While this is changing, the "information highway" is still predominantly male-oriented, and often a forum for gender discrimination, intimidation and even harassment (Huyer, 1997).

Due to the sheer numerical population advantage over men in the world, women form the majority in work force in the labour market, thus the provision of vital information at the right time makes women more efficient at work and earns them acknowledgement as worthy professionals and gets them promotion in their places of work.

Access to adequate and timely information is thus a great priority of women who are inclined to economic development. Easy access to information and communication technologies, adequate training in their use and provision for participation in policy and decision-making for professional women is of utmost importance. As women become involved in making the policies affecting new technologies, then it is easy for them to be integrated in the development process. (Olorunda & Oyelude, 2003)

When information needs of women are geared towards developmental information and economic information is generated, there will be socio-economic and political growth. Development Information is the information, which derives from the attempt of people to build up and create a better environment for them.

Women's needs with respect to Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs, then, do not concern only access to education and training that will support their participation but the social and policy acknowledgement that what women already do is technology, appropriate and worthy of recognition, and further, an important resource for development (Huyer, 1997).

Women's Information needs be they personal, religious, social, domestic, professional or medical are thus an important factor in determining the quality of life they live, their output professionally or socially, at home and to the world generally. Their information needs should therefore not be overlooked but means should be devised as a matter of deliberate governmental policy to satisfy them.

Economic development: the value of information

The significance of information to enhance economic development cannot be overemphasized considering the fact that information is power. The ability to have accurate and timely information will enable efficiency and increase skill. Thus, there should be conscious effort by all stakeholders to strive to add value to information and to make it more relevant to women. A clear communications strategy that would raise public awareness, influence women in their businesses and careers would produce positive change in the world.

According to Brandin and Harrison (1987) 'information wealth is now a new type of capital described as knowledge capital'. There must be adequate information flow that includes the production, dissemination, collection, storage, retrieval, and utilization of information.

Information that will enhance economic development must be exact and precise; it must also add value to the receiver. The ability of information providers; be they governmental or private organizations must exhibit continuity and consistency in order to eradicate bureaucracy.

Achieving a viable economic growth - the vital contribution of women

The ability of women to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge is essential to both a growing and established economy.

The underlining issues like culture, marital and religious issues however makes the participation of women in serious policy making like economic matters minimal if not impossible, thus there ought to be a conscious effort by women to guarantee women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

This will enable women's organizations in the decision-making process and adaptation of policies to include a gender perspective.

Women have to be provided the opportunities to air and share their views, the use of ICTs will help them develop confidence and experience in expressing their viewpoints publicly by allowing space for experimentation and enabling them to find allies across communities, nations and regions.

Information is produced and processed to improve its availability and accessibility for target groups, namely the users. And sometimes the users are the producers of the information at the same time. Thus, women's groups or organizations such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their regional counterparts, women's welfare centers should endeavor to generate relevant information that are gender sensitive. Academic and research groups such as research institutes focused on women's issues, women's research centers at the universities, and professors and students not only involved in the women's studies programs but also in cognate subject-related departments such as social sciences, family, welfare, education, economics, politics, humanities, should be encouraged to engender information as well.

Women especially those in developing countries should be encouraged to contribute information about their activities and experience in order to have information banks for other women.

In addition, electronic networks facilitate the participation among women in different sectors and in different regions. They can create the information women need to improve their own well being (personal information needs) and that of their families and be available to more efficiently fulfill their triple roles as mothers, wives and professionals (Olorunda & Oyelude, 2003).

Women's Information Needs and ICT

According to the World Summit on the Information Society – Declaration of Principle “Education, knowledge, information and communication are at the core of human progress, endeavor and well-being. Further, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have an immense impact on virtually all aspects of our lives. The rapid progress of these technologies opens completely new opportunities to attain higher levels of development. The capacity of these technologies to reduce many traditional obstacles, especially those of time and distance, for the first time in history makes it possible to use the potential of these technologies for the benefit of millions of people in all corners of the world.

The usage and deployment of ICTs should seek to create benefits in all aspects of our daily life. ICT applications are potentially important in government operations and services, health care and health information, education and training, employment, job creation, business, agriculture, transport, protection of environment and management of natural resources, disaster prevention, and culture, and to promote eradication of poverty and other agreed development goals.

The use of ICTs would also contribute to sustainable production and consumption patterns and reduce traditional barriers, providing an opportunity for all to access local and global markets in a more equitable manner. The applications should be user-friendly, accessible to all, affordable, adapted to local needs in languages and cultures, and support sustainable development. It would thus be necessary for the government to local authorities to play a major role in the provision of ICT services for the benefit of their populations.

In all this it is important to note that recommendations by researchers on women and ICT strongly point in the direction of women becoming involved in ICT policy formulation. The starting point for participation in this process they say will be to make women aware of the importance of the information revolution. Women must understand their own information needs and develop sufficient technical knowledge to be credible advocates of their views in policy debate (IDRC, 2000).

Networking as helpful tool for economic development

The producers of information includes government channels, which produce policy documents, reports, white papers, statistical data, institutional channels such as research institutes oriented social science with a focus on women's issues, women's studies research centers, universities, women's groups or organizations, and media groups, which produce research reports, working papers, proceedings, etc. and

personal channels such as individuals interested in women's issues, who produce reports, literature writings, etc.

Information in the public domain should be easily accessible to support the Information Society, and be protected from misappropriation. Public institutions such as libraries and archives, museums, cultural collections and other community-based access points should be strengthened so as to promote the preservation of documentary records and free equitable access to information by all especially women.

In Arizona, USA there has been an effort by 28 public and community college libraries throughout Arizona who have created Economic Development Information Centers (EDIC) to help provide the information local businesses and economic development practitioners need. EDIC was initiated by the Economic Development Library Committee, as a joint effort between the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records (ASLAPR) and the Arizona Strategic Planning for Economic Development (ASPED) coalition. The committee includes volunteer members from the business and economic development communities as well as information specialists from libraries throughout the state.

The main aim of EDIC's in libraries throughout the state is to:

- expand access to current business information resources available to small business owners and community and economic development professionals, especially in smaller communities throughout Arizona.
- build partnerships among libraries, businesses, the community and economic development professionals and, as a result, improve services to the business community
- make libraries a part of the "support system" for local economic development.
- provide an opportunity for library staff members to regularly communicate what is available to the business community and economic development professionals
- provide a "Gateway" to the Internet, the world wide computer network and other electronic information services.
- lay the foundation for other innovative library services.
- expand the public's views of the library's role in the community.

Initiatives like that of EDIC must spring up across the continent to bridge the glaring digital divide with the rest of the world and the greater disparity of opportunities between the men and women of Africa to information.

According to Nwalo (2000) the libraries need to be at the vanguard of technology transfer from the developed world to the developing economies of Africa. To meet this expectation, African libraries must provide a link between local researchers, teachers and scholars and their counterparts in other parts of the world.

He also reports that as development issues, especially science and technologies are international, there is need for African countries to access and utilize information for development, no matter the format, no matter the source. The challenge to do this is more for libraries in Africa and their sponsors as indeed; it is for governments and stakeholders outside Africa.

The work of women employed in economic development must be valued and the value of women's work must be recognized. The Kansas Women's Leadership Project, (a project designed to address the issues concerning women leaders in rural communities) was geared to 1) expand understanding of the special circumstances under which women in rural areas become successful community- based leaders; 2) address the specific needs of women leading community and economic development activities; 3) provide opportunities for women to explore and develop their own leadership capacity; and 4) facilitate the formation of a network of women in similar positions.

There would need for such initiatives in developing countries to enhance adequate information.

Women's Information requirements for economic improvement

To understudy this subject a group of 50 participants randomly selected was put in place. The predominant information need of the 50 participants in this study is geared towards the type of information considered crucial for their businesses, vocations or careers to boost the economic development of their Nation.

- 75% of the respondents in this study chose self-employment as a route to financial independence and economic revitalization within their communities.
- 80% of the respondents would want programs developed to support and involve grassroots non-governmental organizations, particularly women's organizations, working to develop women's capacity for organization, policy/program formulation and networking in order to enhance economic development.
- It is interesting to note that majority of the information respondents considered crucial for their business and career is the capacity to have business opportunity and international business contacts in order to participate in the global market.
- The ability to be acquainted with current market prices and have a grip on the exchange rate was considered by 65% of the respondents as being fundamental to economic development.
- The mass media namely the television, radio, newspapers was only considered by 45% of the respondents as a useful tool for information since majority of them implied that household tasks leaves little time to be focused on the media. They relied mostly on information passed on from business associates, friends and relatives, 20% of them obtain their information from the internet and this shows the low level of exposure of the cyber world in developing countries. They rarely sought information from governmental specialized agencies, libraries and information centers. 80% of the respondents think there are inadequate information centers to visit and also expressed the indifference of information officers to provide right and timely information.
- 85% of the respondents consider whatever information obtained about their business as adequate while the remaining 15% would want a more global reflection on the information they acquire so as to always be up to date in their vocation.
- The rating of information as a parameter for enhancing their business vocation or career goals was very high, 75% of the respondents considered that they

are ready to pay to get hold of cutting edge information that can enhance their business vocation or career goals.

Conclusion

According to the observation of the respondents, women in developing countries have lost ground and cannot hope to cope by learning all that had been. The time has come to start to use the cutting edge technologies available in today's world. Women in Africa will need for instance to frog leap into modern ICTs if they are to stay relevant in the present day world.

There must be a few consideration in other to establish a welfare society based on equality between men and women; research into and survey of women's problems with a consciousness raising aimed at equality need to be met. There ought to be an increase in women's social and political participation in other to advance women's lives and the development of women's capabilities.

There is a need to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making process; promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace; generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation.

Women's participation in grass-root organizations and indigenous community organizations, and particularly women's organizations in the decision-making process and adaptation of policies to include a gender perspective should be actualized. Women should be encouraged and even induced to join Women groups and associations and support networking, so that information can be dispensed centrally, which will flow to individual members.

The need to promote and strengthen networking capacities among civil societies and women's organizations in other to identify the most pertinent issues and concerns of women in economic development issues is significant.

Programs must be developed to support and involve grassroots non-governmental organizations, particularly women's organizations, working to develop women's capacity for organization, policy/program formulation and networking.

The need to also develop research and actions with African women for the construction of an endogenous model of governance is crucial. There must be a support grass-roots woman's organizations and networks towards the reinforcement of endogenous networks as well as the development of contacts outside Africa, for the promotion of global citizenship.

There ought to be a reinforce networking actions within and outside indigenous and women's organizations, including through the use of ICTs, to develop research and comprehensive actions on the issues of peace protection, conflict prevention and post-conflict situation management, along the lines of traditional processes and women's roles, and based on current techniques of communication and information.

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 [Back to the Programme: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm](http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm)