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Libraries as a source of relevant information to support and enhance economic development for women

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ABSTRACT

Issues concerning women have assumed a wider dimension. Many activities have been carried out to alert governments, governmental and non-governmental organizations, political, social and economic and academic institutions about the problems of women in general. One of such activities was The United Nations Decade for Women 1975-1985, a period set aside by the United Nations to create a widespread awareness in the whole world on issues concerning women.

According to current statistics, women make up over half the world's population. In order to set the priorities right in the socio-economic development of the world, it is essential to ensure the participation of the entire active population, including women right from the decision-making processes.

Women have a high potential to contribute to rapid economic development of their societies. However traditional expectations and home-based responsibility limit women's mobility and opportunities for political involvement, education and information. Can Libraries be a source of relevant information to support and enhance economic development for women? This paper addresses the application of Information and Communication Technologies in libraries to supply information needs of women to enhance economic development.

Introduction

Information and knowledge are extremely important for education and development. They are also essential requirements for improving the quality of life of all inhabitants in places where the population has not reached a high degree of economic and social development. Hence

improved communication and rising levels of education and knowledge have provided more and more women with the opportunity to take part in world events (*UN/INSTRAW 2002*).

Libraries are tools for education and development but women education and development has lagged behind that of men. Why is this so? Is it because women do not have access to the tools for education and development? To some extent the answer is yes. There are volumes of information available on women and women issues, however much of it is not within the reach of women. Some of the factors identified as contributing to the unfavourable situation, included the lack of access to information resources and their inability to have access to Information and Communication Technologies. Poverty, cultural and traditional barriers are also listed as factors that militate against women's access to information (*Vittin 2000*). Women cannot have access to information because they cannot pay the fees charged at information service centres. As a result, women lack the relevant information about the activities in which they find themselves. Women can be made to contribute greatly to economic development if only they can be empowered by providing them access to relevant information and knowledge. Women need to be supported by providing them with information that is related to the roles that they play in economic development. Women are engaged in activities/jobs found in sectors such as agriculture, environment, health, water, and biodiversity to name a few. Our women are found to be living closest to nature. They are the people to be described as the best to manage and sustain our natural resources (www.wedo.org/monitor/health.htm 2002).

Women have a high potential to contribute to rapid economic development in their societies. Libraries are a potential source of empowering people by providing them with relevant information. This paper looks at the roles women play in the economic development of their societies and what should be done to make them contribute more. The reports reviewed for this paper on the status of women and information indicated that there is much information on the situation of the world's women and progress in recent decades. Women in the developing world come into the global debate on sustaining development from a broad range of entry points. Their contributions may take the form of collecting garbage for recycling like women from the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil, planting trees such as in the Green Belt Movement initiated by Wangari Maathai of Kenya to combat desertification and generate income for poor women (www.wedo.org/monitor/health.htm 2002).

This paper is organised in two parts. The first part contains a review of literature on available information on women and women's issues and why women need to have access to information. It also includes information on how the application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can empower women. The second part of the paper deals with challenges facing women in the information age and what roles libraries can play in the provision of quality information. Developments in technology are changing the way information professionals work and communicate.

Literature Review

The global community has already recognised the contribution that women can make towards economic development three decades ago. However, several factors seem to militate against the attempts being made by the develop their potentials.

Global Action on Women

The United Nations declared the period between 1975-1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women. The whole world observed this decade. During this period, governments,

governmental and non-governmental organizations, political, social, economic institutions were alerted about the problems of women in general. This widespread awareness was demonstrated in some countries in various ways. It saw the creation of ministries responsible for women's issues; the design and implementation of projects funded by such agencies as UNICEF, UNDP, UNIFEM and DANIDA (*Pietila 2002*).

Other activities included studies on the participation and contribution of women to the socio-economic development of their countries. Some countries saw the creation of information and communication networks to report and disseminate news on women. In some countries too, international, regional or national seminars and workshops were held on topics related to the problems of women. After the United Nations Decade for Women, some of the aforesaid programmes and activities continued along their normal course with the view to achieving their goals. Some of the goals to be achieved were to improve the lives of women in some areas; create a database on the contribution of women to the socio-economic development of that country; to improve women's access to infrastructure, public goods and services such as schools, drinking water, health services and social centres.; to improve women's access to credit and to increase their knowledge especially in the areas of income-generation and production activities (*Kpohazounde 1995*).

Over a period of time it was generally noticed that, with the exception of a few unusual cases, these activities did not achieve much of their goals. The objectives were not achieved for various reasons. In some cases the main participants in those programmes and projects (who were women) were not involved in the design and in the choice of projects and programmes. It was also realised that whenever women were persuaded to accept programmes, they lacked the necessary training to implement the project. There were also instances where the project managers lacked adequate system of communication and an efficient network to disseminate or communicate information to the women, who constitute the target groups. Meanwhile most of the women who should have access to the information on any topic are illiterate (*Kpohazounde 1995*).

Recent years have seen the creation of many new international women's organizations and networks that promote women's international cooperation and participation in politics at every level in the society. Publications in bulletins forms such as the "onlinewomeninpolitics" available at <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org> highlights Asia Pacific women's involvement in politics, governance, decision-making and transformative leadership. There are other online networking organizations, such as INSTRAW (International Research and Training Institute for Advancement of Women) at www.un-instraw.org and GAINS (Gender Awareness Information and Networking System) (www.un-instraw-gains.org are integrated knowledge and information management systems through the Internet). They both create effective network of national and international research institutes and individuals to facilitate the availability of knowledge building. This consists of global databases of gender-related resources and awareness raising of knowledge and information, which is presently fragmented and under-utilized by the United Nations and Member States.

The specific purpose of the networking organizations is to gather women, including those in government, to influence national actions within the United Nations system and other international organizations. A few initiated activities are directly related to the United Nations processes, which are aimed to advance the status of women. (*Pietila 2002*). The Beijing Conference for instance adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (PFA). This document set strategic objectives which included critical

areas of concern such as poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, armed conflicts, economy, power and decision making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, the media, the environment and the girl-child (*Pietila 2002*). Women need to be empowered to bring their own views to policy-making and the development of society, and to set their own priorities in accordance with their inherent values. The Beijing Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (PFA) is a collection of all the decisions that had already been made by the preceding world conferences on women and the world conferences on the environment (*Pietila 2002*). On environmentally related issues UNCED's Agenda 21, made mention of specific issues of concern of women dealing with environmental policy, such as the use of natural resources, consumer policy and sustainable development. The Preamble to Women's Action Agenda 21 declared clear points for women's actions on the environment thus: "As caring women, we speak on behalf of those who could not be with us, the millions of women who experience daily the violence of environmental degradation, poverty, and exploitation at work places. As long as Nature and women are abused by so-called 'free market' ideology and wrong concepts of 'economic growth' there can be no environmental society."

On the issue of policies, the Non-Governmental Alternative Global Report (*Pietila 2002*), mentioned policies the low and insecurity of many women's jobs, HIV/AIDS as well as armed conflicts since women are more vulnerable to violence. The report also stated that too few women seem aware of policies that are being put in place even by their own governments to protect and ensure their security.

Women and Information and Communication Technologies

Information and Communication Technologies act as enabler for information dissemination. However, issues of gender inequality have continued to create barriers between women and their access to facilities available in the new information society. The excitement about new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is tempered by long-standing problems of gender inequality in development processes. In most developing countries, women make up the majority of the population working in agriculture, but they are marginalized with respect to access to ICT for economic and social empowerment. Moreover, two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women, most of who live in rural areas of developing countries. This is so even after the international and national development communities have agreed and initiated actions that would empower the poor, broaden their social and economic opportunities; reduce their vulnerability to disease and hunger (*Hafkin. 2002*).

Today, we are in the information society where every activity is been driven by information. Information is increasingly used in all aspects of the human race, and many technologies are available to assist in providing information in various formats regardless of time or location. Information has become the driving force in every process be it political, economic, and social development. According to Odame *et al.* (2002) the way that information is accessed and controlled today leaves much to be desired. It is only a few people that can afford to pay for the information services. The information society has therefore been divided into two—the haves and the have-nots. However, Odame *et al.* (2002) emphasized that, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in spite of all the seemingly insurmountable issues can be used to address poverty issues to enhance rural livelihoods. The widely used acronym ICT connotes a multitude of equipment and services ranging from satellite and communication systems, telephone booths in the rural areas, CD-ROM, Radio, Television, the Internet and electronic databases, to e-commerce services via the World Wide Web (WWW).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can empower rural people by amplifying their voices (*Huyer and Sikoska 2002*). They are enabling tools that can help poor rural women and men to capitalize on emerging opportunities especially in education and income generation.

Education

On education and acquisition of skills Heeks (*1999*), said that women might be marginalized in their access to ICT by illiteracy, language barriers and lack of computer and information user skills. In the rural areas of developing countries, men are more likely to have formal education than women (UNIFEM 2002). Given their limited access to schooling, women, especially those in isolated rural areas, are much less likely to have skills to use computers and electronic information

Poverty and financial constraints

Concerning access to information, poverty and financial constraints have been identified as major drawbacks on women. Odame et al. (*2002*), said that poor women are less likely than men to own radios or televisions, or to have access to these devices when they want. They may not even have the money to pay to have access to information at the rural information centres or cybercafes. Women are less likely to have disposal income to spend for information-or they dare to use family food, education, and clothing money for information. Access to sources of information through established cost-sharing or free sources for women might be one way to provide women access to information resources.

Information Needs of Women

Specific roles have been assigned to women, hence their information needs are related to such roles. These roles include roles as mothers, homemakers, and providers of basic needs. Women are also concerned with inadequacies in living and working conditions such as food, shelter, income generating, water provision, health care and employment. Women are responsible for the collection of fuel, fodder and water and these activities take considerable amount of time. Women need information on sources of land, inputs, credit, and extension facilities such as education or any vocation training. Women have knowledge of how to use and manage natural resources, labour and skills, knowledge of traditional methods, indigenous people and their communities relevant to conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of biological resources. Women play a vital role in conservation hence there is the need to involve them at all levels of policy-making.

Reports have it that about half the world's food is grown by women (*Corral and Ramson 2002*) www.wedo.org/monitor/health.htm. In Africa women produce most of the food their families consume, while in Asia and Latin America women carry out key stages of producing and processing crops and are the main producers of vegetables, poultry and livestock for the household. Women's knowledge of local soil conditions and growing cycles make them central in conservation. Information and Communication Technologies can provide various opportunities for more women to actively participate in the information society and to also enjoy the benefits that follow. However it is sad to say that in some countries national cultures, religions and traditional barriers are seen to have worsened the status of women in the Information Age. Women and women's concerns are not represented in decision-making processes, which should not be the case. Women must be consulted and represented at all levels of development from the grass roots levels to boardrooms. As various countries strive to maintain policies and build the institutions needed to utilize the technology to promote social and economic development, the improvement of the status of women must be part and parcel of the modernization of development. There is therefore the need to provide and make

available sources and access to necessary information and knowledge to women. This will make women to be actors in development and not just objects of development (www.wedo.org/monitor/health.htm 2002).

According to Mottin-Sylla (2000), in general women have been confined to actions promoting development that are traditional and conform to their place in society such as literacy, health and income generating activities. However, recently, women have become more involved in areas of public management by participating in decision-making, politics and good governance. Today, there is a consensus that educating women is a central necessity for development, the fight against poverty and protecting the environment for future generations. Women and especially women's organizations working for sustainable development, make up the major category of potential strategic users of information and communication technology.

The application of Information and Communication Technology tools can impact largely on the rural folks (Zamaere 2000). The video for instance gives a community the conduit to share a little bit of themselves with the rest of the country and raise awareness. Most importantly, issues that are captured on tape are more self-explanatory since evidence of the problem is visual. The community can also use this tool again and again in the future, and that others can show on their behalf. Perhaps the most unique thing about the video is the fact that both the literate and illiterate can use it. According to Ochieng and Radloff (2000), women are creators of knowledge and are involved in naming and writing about their experiences. However, what has been lacking is the means to get women's information and knowledge visible and accessible. Information and Communication Technology provide tools for mobilization and participation in decision-making processes, advocacy and lobbying. There is the need to recognize and raise public awareness of the role of women in the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Women must be helped to build knowledge partnerships with institutions whose priority is in the area of rural development.

Role of Information

Information and knowledge are critical components of a successful and prosperous society. Information is needed to sustain economic development. Information they say is the oil that turns the wheel for development. The availability of timely and relevant information for the success of an organization cannot be exaggerated. ICT can provide efficiency in communication. Information is most important at the grass roots level. For the poor and disadvantage, it can be the difference between life and death. Access to information and knowledge therefore improves productivity, employment opportunities at work places, improves health conditions, enhances good participation in government and improves academic performance. Cooperation in terms of resource sharing and collection development helps to satisfy users' needs.

Lack of appropriate information and knowledge in any sector makes a society shortsighted. Information can stimulate thoughts and actions, can influence the decision-making process on the basis of the available knowledge, can help solve problems, can enhance what has been known, can change character and attitude and can even make people change their life style. Human beings do not live in isolation. We interact with each other. Hence information sharing is very important. People share experiences and exchange ideas and this leads to development of new ideas and solving of existing problems. Women need relevant information on topics like the environment, health, and agriculture to the women. Availability of information on these issues will enable them to engage in good practices that can lead to sustainability of our very existence-Mother Earth. The benefits of maintaining good environmental practices are many and these include improvement of food scarcity,

conservation of natural resources, which will in no small way lead to poverty reduction. Collection and dissemination of information for instance on environmental health hazards for women can be an important part of self-empowerment. As women are mobilized to articulate the health risks they are experiencing as individuals, it can become a powerful tool for helping them make the connection to environmental hazards impacting their lives. Women can be positive agents of change in both development and environmental causes, but are too often excluded from decision-making processes

Libraries as Enablers

Librarianship is critical in the information transfer process. Technology, particularly the Internet, has created new information professionals and also empowered the general user access to information. This has brought about information overload and sophisticated technologies, which are not making information retrieval easier without the intervention of information professionals. Since people will be overloaded daily with information, it is necessary for them to find answers to their needs in the light of which people must make (or fail to make) decisions. Librarians have the necessary skills to organize the information on the Internet. Lifelong learning is strategically important and libraries are spaces that facilitate the transformation of information into knowledge. Strategies are put in place to influence the readers and their ability to acquire knowledge. Interaction between the library and the users of the resources in the library paves the way for the active participation of the receiver, who thereby gains access to that which answers the needs of the client. Interaction helps the users to choose adequate information in a sea of resources (Corral 2000).

Potentials of Information and Communication Technologies in Library Services

There has been a massive explosion in information over the last 100 years, and it is increasing each year exponentially. This development makes it impossible for any individual to maintain contact with her/his own area, much less in touch with other subjects. Our own relatively simple library retrieval system shows how a computerized database can bring some order into the massive flow of written material into our library. The study of information systems show that microcomputers are essential in the technology and the process involved in the collection of data, its storage, analysis and presentation. Institutions providing information services can exploit the existing Information and Communication Technologies to enhance quality and effective management of information services.

What can Libraries do?

Libraries are tools for education and development. Libraries acquire various types of print-based materials, including newspapers, maps, pamphlets and books. Public libraries to some extent provide services free of charge to its clients. Some public libraries provide literacy programmes and also promote user education. Special services have been developed to serve the needs of particular groups such as children, housebound people and the visually impaired. Librarians in educational institutions such as the universities also develop a wide range of services to meet the educational objectives of their parent institutions. School libraries support the needs of the curriculum as well as the needs of the teachers and administrative staff. In short, Libraries can provide services tailored to meet the needs of every individual. They profile their users and provide the relevant information to meet their needs (*International Federation of Library Association and Institutions 2003*).

The Library plays a very important role in educational delivery. It provides support for teaching/learning, lifelong education and facilitates research in various fields of knowledge. The information society market is made up of new types of illiterates. These people have not

grown with the technology and therefore are at a disadvantage. These are some of the challenges confronting the libraries and Information centres and their clients. To meet these challenges some issues may have to be addressed. Libraries will need to offer induction courses on how to access personal computers and networks to clients. Personnel in the information centres must be equipped with knowledge in ICT issues. Library and Information training institutes should be equipped with the relevant ICT resources.

Where there is lack of information there is confusion and chaos. Libraries can utilize facilities provided by the Information Age to improve and enhance livelihood. Libraries can use ICT to collect, assemble, collate, organise, package and disseminate information to identified and potential users and identify relevant sources of information including books, websites, CD/Roms, images, slides etc. Libraries can provide information to bridge the gap between the rural and urban dwellers which can help break down barriers of literacy, injustices, gender imbalance, eradicate ignorance, poverty and discrimination. Provide information to improve women's lives, help motivate, encourage and mobilize them (www.un.org/womenwatch/forum 2002).

Communication tools are available to assist Libraries to reach those that need information anywhere around the world. The Internet for instance can bring the world into every library regardless of size or location. The technology that is developing facilitates data processing and requires competent handling and efficient management of information resources. It comes with the following assets such as, access to remote computerized information services; linkages to Online Public Access Catalogues; publish electronically on the Web Servers; communication via e-mail for reference services; change from book centred to information centred; from book collection and storage to access and provision of electronic information service; from paper –electronic formats; electronic networking; creation and maintenance of Union Catalogues for Co-operative cataloguing and fosters Inter-library lending for resource sharing.

Librarians can also use Information and Communication Technologies to provide an appropriate convergence between information and communication. This will allow for the dissemination of information among researchers, and promote exchange of information among childcare and child protection organizations. Librarians should acquire skills to manage Websites and develop content, as these tools tend to be good vehicles that enhance sharing of ideas, information exchange and promotions of library services through publications, including newsletters, and other means such as meetings, workshops, seminars and conferences. The World Wide Web is a valuable source of information, promotes marketing of products and organizations also used to create awareness on activities of organizations and Libraries. Furthermore websites are channels of information dissemination and exchange of ideas.

The powerful nature of ICTs could be harnessed to connect needy women with those willing to help. For example, information about food and water scarcity can be heard before it is too late to avert disaster. Information Communication Technologies can provide services of e-mail, e-phone, e banking, e- trading and e-marketing. In making information available to the women they will become informed and knowledgeable and will get empowered to demand action –ask for better ways of doing things. For instance they will demand for better cooking practices and improved kitchen ventilation and better stoves for cooking that will reduce indoor air pollution (www.un.org/womenwatch/forum 2002). The lack of written and audio-visual information about women and from the available ones is unknown. There is lack of

contact and/or communication among indigenous women. It is in this context that women should have access and control over information technology without losing their own indigenous knowledge, identity, culture, and control their territory and resources and without surrendering their right to self-determination. Information should be made available to women so that they will have access to decisions made, which have direct impact on their lives. The method of communication should integrate different ways of communication that are oral, informal and formal. Spaces that allow women to empower themselves should be facilitated by information and technology. In this regard all documentation which deal with women should be elaborated and disseminated through appropriate means of communications such TV, radio, paintings, stories in the language of the people according to their information needs and with gender perspective. The existing information on women should be disseminated to as many people as possible. The women can be helped to develop the capacity to organise themselves and to promote and strengthen the appropriate means of communication through the establishment of networks and centres of communication and information on women.

Women need advocates that would make concerted efforts to influence policies of communication to safeguard their rights. They are under threat and may lose their identity, culture and access to resources. Libraries can make available information that denounces abuses and violations of women rights and promote international solidarity in the defense of their rights. Maintain databases of information and disseminate through networking partners using facilities available on the Internet, such as e-groups, list servers and e-discussion lists. Develop partnership with Non-Governmental Organizations working in all the sectors in which women are actively involved (*Martinez and Reilly 2002*).

Summary and Conclusion

Women, Libraries and Economic Development

Economic Development benefit people including women. People are actors and beneficiaries of the outputs of economic development. It is people-men and women, who undertake economic development projects, and they also benefit from it. Men and women have equal potential to bring about increase in economic development outputs. Women have not been able to contribute to economic development because of lack of empowerment, which is as a result of lack of information. They have not been involved in even projects that would benefit them most. The low economic status of woman is a barrier to women's access to information. Libraries can be equipped with information and communication technology facilities in order to provide relevant information to women at affordable rates. Women should be enabled to use information and communication technology tools to improve their livelihood and those of their families and community, and to amplify their voices at local and national levels. Where libraries are located in rural communities life learning skills can be provided for the semi-literates. Information resources can also be provided in audiovisual formats to meet the needs of specific target groups. Libraries can cooperate with Radio and Television stations, Information Services Departments to disseminate information to women in both the rural and urban areas.

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