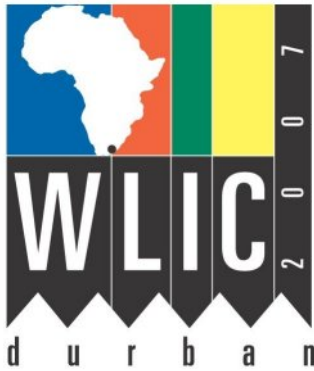


Date : 08/06/2007



Access to information as a driver towards closing of the gender equality gap: the emerging scene in Kenya

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Meeting:

149 Women, Information and Libraries

Simultaneous Interpretation:

No

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL
19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa
<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/index.htm>

Abstract

The paper looks specifically at information in its dimension of content and on issues related to education, employment, political representation and governance, health and nutrition, economic empowerment and security. Information not only empowers people to make choices in all areas of development but also opens up doors for communities. It is important that the MDGs have recognized the importance of achieving gender equality, and especially the creation of a specific Goal 3, which provides a great opportunity towards its advancement. Under Goal 3 of MDGs, indicators of the goal provide for: 1. Equality of the ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education; 2. Equality of the ratio of literate females to males for persons in the 15-24 years old age bracket; 3. Equality of the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector; and 4. Equal of proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament. At the current pace, it is possible that gender equality and the empowering of women will not be realized by 2015 in most countries in general, in Africa, and not least in Kenya. The future is promising however, especially if information specialists play their part to ensure that information continues to be articulated in new forms that ameliorate the gaps.

Introduction

The paper looks at the improvements that access to information has made in bridging gender equality and empowering women within local communities in Kenya. It demonstrates how the usage of different communications methods has brought about some independence and empowered women and advanced issues bridging the gender gap. Community level interactions include *barazas*, the Internet, the media (radio, television and newspapers) and Government policies.

The paper looks specifically at information in its dimension of content and on issues related to education, employment, representation in politics, and also in health and nutrition, economic empowerment, security and governance. Information not only empowers people to make choices in all areas of development but also opens up doors for communities. It is important that the MDGs have recognized the importance of achieving gender equality, and especially the creation of a specific Goal 3, which provides a great opportunity towards its advancement. Under Goal 3 of MDGs, indicators of the goal provide for: 1. Equality of the ratio of girls to

boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education; 2. Equality of the ratio of literate females to males of persons in the 15-24 years old age bracket; 3. Equality of the share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector; and 4. Equal proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament. At the current pace, it is possible that gender equality and the empowering of women will not be realized by 2015 in most countries in general, in Africa, and not least in Kenya.

The future is promising however, especially if we information specialists play our part. The calls for gender equality under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, just to mention a few, has yielded some results. But the manifestations of the equality gap proliferate in the lack of access to resources and socio-economic opportunities. Examples are: lack of access to economic assets such as land and property by women; lack of income and employment; lack of access to political representation; and lack of security. Other gaps take sexual connotations of inequality. Rape is prevalent in Kenya. Discrimination of widows in many parts especially on issues related to succession and inheritance is of spouses or family assets are prevalent. However information continues to be articulated in new forms that ameliorate the gaps.

Definition of Gender

Gender equality is defined as the equal valuation by society of both the similarities and differences between women and men, and the varying roles that they play. It is achieved when women and men enjoy the same status in society: when women and men have equal conditions (including access to resources and opportunities) for realizing their full potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development and to benefit from the results.

The role of information

Information is power that drives any development be it economic, social or political. A community can only thrive if it has access to information and appreciates the power of information. Hence information is an indispensable component for the development of any nation. It can be defined as an assemblage of knowledge or data in any comprehensible form which can facilitate communication and this impacts knowledge to the user. Then there is the method of passing this information, the way it is disseminated in the information infrastructure.

How does information empower and equalize

Access to information on education, leads to literacy and more and this builds confidence besides the knowledge it impacts on any gender and especially the women. Information Literacy implies the state of being able to read and write. In library terms this can be interpreted as the ability to receive information and make effective use of it. Information is a great equalizer. The fact that people can get information without hindrances and interpret it for their own use is of great significance. Access to education in Kenya has facilitated the enrolment of children in Kenya primary schools as 102 girls to 100 boys. In secondary schools are 89 girls to 100 boys and only 30percent girls to 100 percent boys at university level.

As a first and important step toward easing long-standing inequalities between women and men, in Kenya the gender gap is closing though slowly especially in relation to primary school enrolment. The government policy initiatives towards achieving the 3rd millennium goal have included abolition of user charges in primary education in 2003. (Onsomu, Kosimbei, Ngware). During this year, Primary gross enrolment reaches 7.2 million pupils (48.6% Female) having risen

from 5.4 million pupils in 1989 (48% Female). Interventions aimed at promoting girls education, include taking affirmative action in support of girl-child education; expansion and improvement of classrooms, boarding facilities and water and sanitation facilities to create a conducive and gender responsive environments, particularly in Arid and semi-arid lands(ASALS); and providing support to non-formal education institutions (Government of Kenya, 2005a, 2005b)

The ratio of literate females to males for persons in the 15-24 years age bracket in Kenya is 75.5 percent of male to 68.6 per cent of women who are able to read, write and compute. However there is discrepancy in different areas. Nairobi province has the highest literacy rate at 87.1 percent, while north eastern has the lowest at 8.1 per cent. Urban adult population that is literate stands at 79.9 percent compared to the rural adult population at 58.7 per cent (Kenya Economic Survey 2007). It is estimated that 4.2 million adult Kenyans are illiterate; two thirds of that number are women (republic of Kenya and UNESCO, 2004)

Of all female employees in the modern sector there are currently 405.7 thousand female employees (Economic Reviews 2007). The share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector in almost all developing regions, women represent a smaller share of wage earners than men and are often relegated to insecure and poorly paid jobs, often “non-jobs”. In Kenya the share of females in wage employment remained at 30.3 percent (Economic Survey 2007). The number increased by 2.8 percent from 547.0 thousand in 2005 to 562.2 thousand in 2006.

Kenya lags behind the other Eastern African countries in the number of seats held by women in the National Parliament at 12 per cent compared to Rwanda at 48 per cent. However access to information has contributed to the fight for democratic space. The era of monopoly of political power by the few and especially the male gender is slowly but surely becoming a thing of the past. Since independence in Kenya in 1963, the state supervised directly all aspects of life of its citizens. The power of the government was assured because of its monopoly and ability to collect information on its people and manipulate it the way it would benefit its leaders. But something was changing. The change become evident in the 1980s, when because of advances in information technology the government found it difficult to have total control over information by the state.

The facsimile machine, satellite television, satellite telephone, the internet, all quickly and in short order, largely made state censorship of the media irrelevant. It is well known that the fall of the President Moi was partly because of the ability of the public to access information. Challenges arose from the resulting information permitting citizens to compare themselves with other countries rather than relying on government information channels.

The present government has passed rules that women occupy 30 percent of any position in any sector within the government. Though unchallenged, it is now under strict scrutiny from a skeptical public that makes it look like it is at loggerheads with the rules. The development has emerged because access to information has called for a culture of great openness in the management of public affairs. Women still lack equal representation at the highest levels of government and representation falls below the world benchmark of 16 percent of parliamentary seats.

Information empowers economically when people learn new ways and opportunities of generating income, especially in rural areas that carry most of the population. Information leads to financial and economic opportunities. At rural community level, far-reaching impacts take

place on population when investment in farming methods enable women to increase cash crop production or food to cater for families or information on how to start a small business etc.

Information is an equalizer when a woman is empowered by becoming aware that it is illegal for her husband or anyone else to abuse her and is able to seek corrective information, to take the appropriate action against such treatment

Information is empowering and equalizing when it leads to women getting access to information on employment opportunities. It was observed that for young women, early marriage and early motherhood often curtail educational and employment opportunities and are likely to have a long –term adverse impact on the quality of their lives and the lives of their children (Beijing Declaration, 1996). Information on safe and effective family planning methods enable women to decide on when and how often they want to have children

Methods of communication of relevant information is an essential step in enabling people to make informed decisions which should bring about change in peoples lives. But change itself cannot be brought about by information alone. There has to be a combined effort of information providers and the “tools of the trade” to disseminate that information that can bring positive change. The question of how well information is utilized depends very much on how well it is communicated. The main reason for failure is in the mode and the management of the delivery of information.

Information Infrastructure

This refers to the way information is presented. Communication channels include the latest development in postal services in telephone, mobile phones, satellite carriers, e-mails, networks, internet service including wireless connectivity.

The media (radio, television)

For along time, the communities in Kenya especially the rural community and the illiterate have relied on information from each other and information passed by the government on issues government through barazas. But in recent times a lot has changed owing to the communication channels especially the growth of FM radio stations especially those that broadcast in local languages like Kameme FM, Coro FM etc, and various other channels that broadcast in local languages. These radio stations disseminate diverse information of importance to education, health, politics, economy etc. Because this dissemination process is not gender-designed, it changes traditional channels of information that is concentrated on males. Especially for women or girls whose numbers in any level of education have been lower than that of the boys, the information is a major equalizer for opportunities and control of their lives. The stations also discuss issues and individual achievers of both genders who have succeeded not because of the gender but because of hard work or genetic disposition. This creates good role models. Programmes are also available that broadcast issues such as credit facilities, primary health care, agriculture, nutrition, HIV/AIDS and family planning. This information is able meet the needs of the listeners without bias of their basic literacy level this is the same with television. However the television has been powerful in bringing to the community experiences from other communities within and outside the country

The Print Media (newspapers)

The newspapers are available in English, Swahili and many local languages. They are the least costly of the print media and their contents cover day to day happenings which touch on peoples' lives including security, transport, politics, education social events and adverts. One newspaper can be read by a number of people and at their own time. In magazine women are able to see items that change the way they dress, feed etc which builds their confidence. They can go to places, meet others including the other gender and address people and issues without fear. This is empowering.

Repackaged information

In addition, the power of repackaged information in the form of brochures and posters are used now than before by the literate because they educate people by giving them information that they need without a lot of effort. For example information on how to vote, the availability and use of Constituency Development Fund, and information on health for example e.g. use of condoms etc. The information is empowering to the women especially because they do not have to rely on their spouses for information. Women receive information directly, not passed to them such that they are able to interpret it to their own advantage.

Information Communication Technology

These have proven to be a major boost in bridging inequality in that information has come to the people, to the women at their work places, usually their homes, through advertising, mass media, and through the information communication technology sector. Women now receive information directly, not as passed or interpreted for them, such that they are able to interpret it for themselves and for their own benefits and to their own. The mobile phone for example has played a great role in bridging the equality gap especially because of its affordability. For the literate the internet has brought a lot of knowledge and has facilitated the building of networks among other things. "The Kenya Government plans to set up 'digital Villages' throughout the country to ease access to information for its citizens. Information Assistant Minister Mr. Koigi wa Wamwere said recently that the villages to be set up in all 210 constituencies, will facilitate easy access to information that would trigger economic development in those areas" (Daily Nation, April 30, 2007)

Conclusions

Information its availability and uses has proved to be a basic right. Its importance for example in availability of information on education, employment, politics and health information, nutrition and, information about where to get treatment, medicine, etc. has indeed helped to bridge gender equality gap as both men and women become knowledgeable about how to look after themselves and their families. Improvement in the quality of life has been witnessed in many parts where women are exposed to information, as much as men. The results are far-reaching in the improvement of overall development in general and in education, health and nutrition in families in particular.

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