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"Africa's Women/Africa's Women Journalists:
Critical Perspectives on Internet Initiatives"

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Linking African Women: E-initiatives and development

Africa's women journalists are expected to do more than just report the news. Having climbed some of the barriers to entering that traditionally male-dominated profession, they are considered duty-bound to address and help alleviate the problems of women in every level of society. "Women media workers," as they are often known across the continent, have been an important part of the development process; they have played an important role in championing legal rights, and advocating for women's increased access to education and other resources. Now, they are attempting to reap and share the informational and networking promises of the Internet. For all women, the Internet is another promise that they can transcend obstacles of culture, education and poverty to take their rightful places in their countries' economic and political sectors.

The world has gone Internet crazy. There is no question that the latest revolutionary medium in a century of telecommunications milestones will continue to transform the way people communicate and live their daily lives. Multinational investors and international lending institutions (and their vested interests in opening markets) are pouring staggering sums into projects to wire the developing countries to the global network. Whether the promise of the Internet will be delivered to women is another question. Dutton[1] notes that the new media are being developed and implemented in ways that follow and reinforce prevailing structures of power and influence. Since African women--indeed, women worldwide, in both poor and wealthy nations to varying degrees--are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies, there are vast implications to any efforts to wire Africa into the global cyberspace network.

This paper is a work in progress that is attempting to first gauge the growing use of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by women journalists and women's development organizations; to investigate cooperative e-initiatives that seek to advance the legal rights, participation in the public sphere, and quality of life for African women; and to ask questions of access and equity. It also takes a critical feminist perspective in looking at these interlinking areas, in that it tries to lend insight into the complex problems faced by women of all classes, races, and nationalities who are encountering the changes produced by global capitalism and global telecommunications. Feminism in its many forms has contributed to an understanding of

asymmetrical power relations focusing on gender.[2] Both capitalism and patriarchy have played large roles in the subordination of women around the world. The Internet has the potential both to bring women into fuller participation in the public sphere and to increase the divide.

Media women, and women in the media

In recent years, as more African women gain access to higher education, they have entered formerly all-male professional bastions. The many new commercial newspapers and broadcasting stations started during Africa's wave of democratization in the 1990s have opened the door of the newsroom to women journalists. The crusading agenda of women journalists is apparent in the extensive reporting they do on women's issues, bringing news about women's problems to the public at large, and disseminating important information. However, their work goes beyond their journalism jobs to their actual personal involvement in planning and carrying out projects that help women, for example working with a rural legal clinic (as in Uganda), providing housing for battered women (as in Tanzania), or helping rural women go online and start their own businesses (as in Mauritania).[3] Now, the tremendous growth of online resources is offering a powerful new conduit for the dissemination of information, the sharing of resources, and networking among women in country and across the continent and the world.

In recent years, an explosion in private mass media in countries that have turned to a market economy has opened up new possibilities for the educated African woman. In the journalism profession, not that long ago considered a man's domain in which women reporters were vilified, this increase in commercial media outlets has forced editors desperate for trained talent to hire women *en masse*. As a result, women are changing the face of the newsrooms. However, the rising number of women in journalism does not address the distribution of jobs and assignments in the newsroom, which mirrors the situations of formally educated African women in all the professions. A survey of the employment status of women in the southern African media, conducted by the Federation of African Media Women,[4] confirms that women are greatly outnumbered by men in senior-level posts. Problems faced by female journalists included their continuing confinement in low-paying jobs, negative gender-related attitudes, sexual harassment both in the office and on assignment, and relegation to covering trivial stories. In a 1995 survey conducted by the International Women's Media Foundation[5] women journalists identified "balancing work and family" as the number-one obstacle to their advancement. Women said they had to be twice as good as male journalists to be recognized. A lack of role models and mentors in top positions was the second major concern. In 1995, a global media monitoring project to determine women's participation in the news found that even though women comprised 43 percent of journalists worldwide, they accounted for only 17 percent of interviewees, of whom 29 percent were victims of accidents, crime and war. In stories about politics and government,[6] only 7 percent of interviewees were female.[7]

Therefore, despite recent advancements by women journalists in general, their continuing marginalization has serious implications for both the quality and quantity of information disseminated about women--and, by extension, for the creation, planning, use and content of the new media. In a 1999 online discussion sponsored by the United Nations Development Program, one journalist[8] detailed persisting negative representations of women in the media. She noted that while more stories about women could be found in Malawian newspapers by 1997, these often focused only on their work as housewives and mothers. Stories about women seldom were found on the front page; when they were, they focused on women as victims of rape or battering, or as recipients of government awards. Stories about prostitution or rape treated these serious problems lightly; for example, a cartoon of a man chasing visibly terrified women accompanied a story about a serial rapist. Discussion participants agreed that very little has changed in the portrayal of women in media since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995 in Beijing, whether in advertising or news media. At the turn of the millennium, negative, stereotyped, inaccurate, and violent images of women are pervasive. Some groups of women are simply invisible, such as those from minority populations. Women are described in terms of appearance rather than abilities. A summary report noted:[9]

Moreover, the increased commercialization of every medium has intensified the visibility of negative images, from billboards to television to newspaper. New media are perpetuating and accentuating much that is negative about the portrayal of women, notably computer games and music videos.

Activists believe that one way to alleviate chronic negative representation of women is to advance the status of women journalists. The African Women's Media Center in Senegal (awmc.com) notes that while male journalists often enhance their visibility and career opportunities when they socialize with colleagues after work, this kind of networking is still considered inappropriate for women in Africa. African women who go to bars may be seen as sexual fair game. To counter this situation, the AWMC found that new media associations for women journalists are creating opportunities in which they can to discuss common work concerns and develop strategies for overcoming personal and professional obstacles.

Over the past decade, a number of such women's media organizations has been formed to offer members training, more access to resources, and a unified voice to counter mainstream journalists' unions, which are dominated by men. For example, the Zambia Media Women Association (ZAMWA) monitors media coverage of women, and conducts training on gender issues. The African Women's Media Center lists a number of other women's media networks that have been formed in Africa over the past decade or so, including the Tanzanian Women's Media Association, the Association of Media Women in Kenya, and the West African Media Network. The AWMC itself was formed in 1997 to conduct workshops and conferences, and as a clearinghouse for information. It has sponsored cyber-conferences to address the lack of women in media leadership roles, and held workshops to help women journalists improve their computer skills, explore how to use electronic resources in their jobs, set up e-mail accounts, and design web pages. The organization's use of the Internet is just one example of the many new groups with an online presence that offer information and networking to those with access to the Internet.

Development needs, and going online

Some 40 years after independence from colonial rule for many African countries, international organizations such as the United Nations, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) note that the continent's chronic problems of poverty and lack of literacy, education, healthcare, and employment are still prominent. Meanwhile, newer ills like AIDS have broken down traditional family and community networks of support and caused much suffering. These organizations have been paying particular attention to women due to their crucial role in subsistence agriculture and family life, and therefore to overall development planning. A report issued by the Africa Policy Information Center[10] notes that any discussion of women's access to and use of the new technologies in Africa must take into account the gendered nature of the social, economic, policy, and technology systems which frame opportunities for women:

> Women's place in African society is markedly distinct from that of men in almost all parts of life. Views of women's capability, purpose, and needs are strongly held, defining the boundaries of what women expect of themselves and what they are expected by the rest of society to achieve. Šgirls and women take on second-class status in the home, developing fewer skills used outside the home, setting more limited goals for themselves, and gaining less access to education and health care. For this reason, a strongly articulated issue for African women is the need to change traditional attitudes, and for women to recognize within themselves the capability of transcending the limits socially ascribed to them.

If meeting basic needs and addressing the lower status of women are still top priorities in Africa, why focus on expensive new technologies? Those who advocate Africa's embracing of the new media say access to and control over information are central to positive change, especially for women. Despite access and connectivity problems, and the expense of the new technologies, the online sharing of information and the creation of new cyber-communities are seen as crucial to women's education, organization, and action. The senior communication adviser at the ECA has called the emergence of an international information society an opportunity for Africa's

women to overcome some of the systemic and traditional disadvantages they have faced.[11] In 1995, Section J of the Beijing Platform for Women, which focuses on women and media, identified the need to help women gain access to and use the new technologies of communication. However, Sophie Huyer of Women in Global Science and Technology (WIGSAT) notes that most of the positive effects of the information revolution so far have bypassed women.[12]

> The 'information highway' is still predominantly male-oriented, and often a forum for gender discrimination, intimidation, and even harassment. The profound, gendered implications of (information and communication technologies) for both men and women in employment, education, training, and other productive and personal development areas of life mean that women need encouragement and support to take their place in the information revolution.

Addressing problems in training women to use the new technologies, Fontaine[13] notes that there are psychological as well as educational and economic barriers, due to a general perception of technology as a male domain. This has caused ambivalence at best, and an overall lack of confidence about mastering the technologies. In her analysis of women and ICTs, she found a lack of training and guidance about usage, etiquette or communication techniques. She quoted one researcher, who said that "Women tend to experience technology differently... and if those experiences are not addressed... then women are more likely to feel intimidated by new information technologies and resist learning about them and using them."[14]

Huyer finds that men are crowding out women's access to training in the new technologies. Women's work with computers is concentrated in clerical work, endangering the chance for participation in employment or political networking. The report stresses that the Internet and World Wide Web are important not only for the distribution of equitable portrayals of women, but for the sharing of information, and for women to find allies around the world. Huyer gives one of many examples of this kind of use: a woman in South Africa working on a campaign for women's reproductive and health rights posted a message to a women's mailing list. Women responded with information about legislation and resources that could help the advocacy campaign in South Africa.

Another area of great concern is the increasing consolidation of multinational media corporations, the fusion of telecommunications and media backed by powerful economic interests, and the resulting gobbling up of local media and subsequent self-censorship. The decentralized and instantaneous nature of the Internet is seen as a way to circumvent this situation, and an inducement for women to publicly articulate their views. As an example, Huyer details how the Internet was used as a tool for networking--and for the subversion of Chinese government restrictions--at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women. Web sites set up to disseminate information about the conference received some 160,000 requests before the conference even began. Mailing lists and electronic conferences connected hundreds of thousands of women around the world. Meanwhile, Chinese organizers attempting to restrict and control access were met with an immediate negative global response that ended in a reversal of the restrictions. The report noted:[15]

> (The new technologies) allow the exchange of views, opinions, and news that might not be possible in other media under government censorship and control. They have also been used to protect unpopular leaders in authoritarian countries: through publication of their ideas, up-to-the- minute status reports, they provide a vehicle for international expressions of concern and demonstrate to authoritarian governments that their actions are visible to the world. For example, during apartheid, the reporters of Africa Information Afrique (AIA) in South Africa (many of whom were women) used modems and computers to transmit news reports out of the country.

Barriers to women's connectivity

The barriers to access and use of the new communication technologies for both men and women in Africa are many and well documented. Huyer[16] cites the cost of equipment and online access, and the lack of training, technical information, and computer parts and repair. These barriers are worse for women because of their lower

economic and social status, lack of training and lower literacy levels, concentration in lower-level and entry-level employment, and lack of autonomy and time. The relevance of new technologies for women in the South also has been hotly debated. However, there does seem to be some consensus that it is not an either-or situation. Different media forms are seen to be complementary; therefore, the Internet should not be a technology just for the wealthy and the North. Observers call for new outlooks to provide access to women.[17]

> Strategies for women should focus on e-mail and listserv/conference systems. Studies worldwide show that women tend to use e-mail more than other Internet services, for reasons of time, cost and level of technical ability. The African situation lends itself more to e-mail services generally... but again, women's situation and income tend to cluster them in the simpler technology systems... The majority of women who have access today do so from research institutions, governments and some businesses. Access among poorer and rural classes is currently non-existent, but critical for Africa's development.

A South African journalist notes that the profile of an Internet user in Africa--educated, wealthy, and male--has not changed since the continent went on line a decade ago. African women have been marginalized, she writes, because technology has not been packaged for or presented to them. Women have not participated, "because women have not been to school, they are the majority of the poor, and they have no money to buy computers. It is a problem of the status of women in society."[18] The late 1990s saw a slew of new initiatives being developed and instituted to address these problems. For example, the African Gender Institute's WomensNet initiative[19] set up an e-mail information exchange among librarians and documentarians working in gender equity and justice information. The Healthnet network in Uganda was beginning to examine women's use of and access to health information. Other projects aimed to provide women with access to information about natural resource management and food production. According to WIGSAT,[20]

> Currently, it is only middle-class and professional women who use (e-mail and the Internet). In order to facilitate access for women from other classes and sectors, (these technologies) will need to be located in local institutions to which women have open and equal access, such as health centres, women's (nongovernmental organizations), women's employment centres, libraries, women's studies departments and institutes, and perhaps even churches. The location in these types of contexts also pertains to the practical, specific kind of information that women require as a result of their time constraints. For example, placing Internet access in a local health centre will facilitate women's access to the health information they need for themselves and their children, by providing access to information for which there is a specific need at the same time as making a health-related visit. When women can understand and experience the benefits of ICTs, they are quick to use them.

Other individual programs are addressing the paucity of women computer users in Africa. For example, new centers across the continent are beginning to teach women how to start their own businesses, and how to read, type, and use computers. The African Women Global Network[21] links institutions that work to improve the living standards for African women and their families. In South Africa, a community radio pilot project conducted by WomensNet[22] worked with community radio stations and women's organizations to teach participants how to use the Internet as a research tool to generate gender-sensitive programming, to prepare radio- and Internet-ready content, and to develop partnerships with other community radio stations and women's organizations.

On a macro level, international organizations in collaboration with individual governments have been experimenting with telecenters, multi-purpose communication sites in areas with limited telecommunications. For example, in Mali, a pilot center[23] has 11 computers and serves a regional population of 200,000 people. It offers copying, telephone, fax, and Internet services. It also helps local artisans set up web pages to sell their art and crafts in global markets. The telecenter serves a wide range of other community groups, such as teachers, rural radio workers, students, and librarians. Support for health care is another focus, with health workers trained to use the Internet to do research, and to communicate with doctors in outlying areas. The three-year project, which began in 1998, is run by technical staff and a steering committee that includes the mayor, business people,

artisans, librarians, health workers, women's associations, and other members of the community. Ultimately, it is hoped that the center will expand to other rural areas, and be operated entirely by community members. A similar project has been providing ICTs to women in Ghana.

While such efforts are an attempt to provide access to the Internet for women, researchers warn[24] that while there is the potential to offer women's organizations important opportunities, the telecenters are male dominated, with the criteria for establishing them largely determined by men, often in isolation from women who live in the communities the telecenters are meant to serve.

Women journalists and development

In late 1999, an online working group to discuss women, the media, and new technologies was sponsored by Women Watch, a United Nations initiative created after the1995 Fourth World Conference on Women; and Women Action, a network of organizations focusing on section J of the Beijing Platform for Action. Section J urges that women be trained in and encouraged to use new technologies to disseminate information, produce content for the mass media, and strengthen women's participation in policy-making. Participants agreed that women's organizations must work with and through the media to get out their messages, for example, information about reproductive and sexual health (including family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention and care), inheritance rights, participation in government, and violence against women. They noted that such organizations often lack the savvy to gain access to the media in the first place, and then to provide usable information and story ideas to the press. Women journalists were seen as crucial partners to help these groups strengthen their communication and advocacy skills and define their messages, audiences, and media; and to show them how to use e-mail and the Internet to strengthen partnerships, find sources of funding, stay linked internationally, and learn from sister organizations.

One participant offered her experience with networks of women journalists working to promote debate about such problems as HIV/AIDS and legal rights, and to disseminate other important information. She found that these initiatives helped foster a sense of community and collective responsibility for the women journalists, nurtured a serious interest in and understanding of gender-media issues, and helped them work to counter sexist representations of women and poor coverage of women's issues.[25] The director of the Washington-based Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press[26] wrote that the Internet has allowed her organization to quickly communicate internationally with its associates, bypassing slow, expensive, and often unreliable "snail mail" and telephones. Also,

> The Internet has allowed the greatest expansion of our voices. This media discussion we are engaged in is truly a dream come true: a way we can communicate globally about what needs to be done, about media and democracy, about how we can communicate with each other about the issues vital to our survival. These discussions and initiatives will help bring about changes that will affect women globally.

A journalist from Zambia shared her experience in development work, and the need for online networking:[27]

> Information is power--power to influence, educate and form public opinion... the Zambia Media Women Association (ZAMWA) is working to advance the status of women at all levels by increasing their access to media and developmental information. ZAMWA promotes the use of media to sensitise society on gender issues and works with other women's rights organisations to advocate and lobby for legal changes that favour the rights of women and children. (However), women still have inadequate or no access to the media and are not reached by development information. Due to the high poverty levels and low literacy levels in women, there is a general lack of appreciation of information technologies...

She went on to describe a consortium of women's nongovernmental organizations created to use the new information technologies, and to get information out to women living in poverty or in rural areas.

The use of the new technologies to strengthen women's participation in the democratic process also was addressed on the discussion list. It was noted that women and women's groups in many countries use mailing lists to organize around particular issues and, sometimes, to promote or prevent a change in the law. Women's organizations have used mailing lists to organize demonstrations, sign petitions, stimulate public discussions and do strategic planning across huge geographical areas. One such initiative is Women'sNet,[28] a program to help women use the Internet to find the people, resources, and tools to promote women's social activism. In Mali, the Panos Institute and Media for a Democratic West Africa have attempted to upgrade women's status in the media and reinforce their position as journalists and producers of information. The project[29] collects data on women's status in the media, identifies obstacles to their equitable representation and promotion, and conducts training. It also has set up a data bank and directory of women journalists in the region. The Acacia Initiative[30] is an "international effort to empower sub-Saharan African communities with the ability to apply information and communication technologies to their own social and economic development." Among the resources available at the Acacia site is a report on supporting women's use of information technologies for sustainable development, which includes case studies on African women's use of ICTs.

Discussion

Much positive work has been done to democratize the new technologies for African women at all strata. However, basic micro-level problems of access and training persist alongside the chronic macro-level economic, political and cultural problems of poverty, powerless, and illiteracy that a gender analysis uncovers. In the report, "Information and Communication Technologies: A Women's Agenda,"[31] the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) notes:

> We are convinced that globalisaton and the emerging information society will either advance the status of women in society or reinforce their marginalisation. If we do not engage and harness the tools which ICTs offer us, we will further marginalise women's concernsŠWe believe that it is essential to engage more women in accessing and using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for equality and development in Africa. We believe that women should be able to use ICTs strategically in support of women's empowerment and agendas in order to facilitate networking and information exchange; support solidarity campaigns and collaborative actions; mainstream issues of concern to women; and ensure that women are able to participate equally in civil and public life.

The organization--a global network of individual women and women's organizations that develops and disseminates information, provides regional support, and lobbies for policies that consider gender--notes that the development of the new technologies takes place in a global context of gender inequality:

> Gender intersects with many other differences and disparities, which also shape women's ICT needs and experiences, such as race, ethnicity, class, culture, age, history, sexual orientation, geographic location, and disability. Poverty, war, and endemic violence against women are ever-present realities in the lives of many women living in Africa.

The new technologies have the power to bring profound change, influencing how people know and understand the world. They change the way we work and the ways we communicate. They affect how we access and share information. They are also an important source of power. By acquiring the equipment and skills to use them, women gain access to that power. Groups such as APC that bring a gender analysis to the situation warn that if African women are not actively present at all levels of policy and implementation, new forms of marginalization could undermine other advances made by women over the years. While the information and communication technologies have great potential for women around the world, there is a danger of deeper exclusion for those who do not have access. The changes are taking place so fast that there may not be enough time to grasp their implications and respond with adequate policy measures. Women must take on these issues themselves, appropriating and using the technologies to access information, share knowledge, and form new communities in cyberspace.

Even so, are women being sold a bill of goods? For example, the privatization in the telecommunications sectors that has fueled the growth of the Internet in Africa took place due to the structural adjustment programs demanded by the international lending institutions. Critics claim that poor women especially have paid the price for structural adjustment as they have lost access to publicly funded education and health services.[32] Such institutions as the World Bank and governmental organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International development (through its Leland Initiative) are behind the many initiatives to wire Africa and bring ICTs into wider use. Multinational investors also have heralded the "information superhighway," and technology-driven optimists argue that the computer revolution "will have an overwhelming and comprehensive impact, affecting every human being on earth in every aspect of his or her life."[33] But access to the Internet, or indeed to any modern technology, can be predicted by the structural inequalities of any society. These inequalities reinforce the economic and cultural disadvantages already experienced by the disadvantaged. They also magnify the level of disadvantage in a global marketplace that, if the West is any indication, offers greater choice, but at a price that only the rich can afford.[34]

As Fontaine notes,[35]

> While efforts are underway to increase ICT access, improve capacity and enable usage for all (or at least for more), questions are arising about how well those efforts are reaching women in developing countries. It's the same old story, in some ways, with a high-tech twist. Early returns suggest that women are neither participating in nor benefiting from the efforts at anywhere near the same level as men. The familiar and still formidable constraints are again rearing their ugly heads ‹ poverty and illiteracy, lack of time, insufficient skills ‹ with "technophobia" and male-dominated, corporate control of technology added to the list.

She concludes that a lack of a gender perspective in planning for the new media will result in women being less qualified for employment, unable to access more education, and unable to create and control the technology.

> We'll be virtual second-class citizens [and] our struggle for equality will be set back and much, much more difficult This is the boy's party of the century, girls, and we are not invited.

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Endnotes:

1. 1996, 5.

2. For a discussion of critical feminist perspectives, see Robins, upcoming.

3. The list of organizations and projects cited in this paper is by no means exhaustive. Readers can begin their own investigations by following the links supplied.

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31. For an overview of the uneven effects of structural adjustment on women in Tanzania, for example, see Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, 1995; Mbilinyi 1994; and Robins, upcoming, ch. 4.

32. Webster 1999, 140-141.

33. Mudhai, upcoming; Dutton 1996, 229.

34. Fontaine 2000.

35. Ibid.

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