How Gender and Cultural Issues Affect Access to Global Information as a Tool for Development Particularly in Developing Countries

By

Goshie Rhoda Wusa
Federal University of Technology Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.
Email: mamawusa.77@gmail.com
Phone No: +2348035054080

Jimada Aisha
Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U.), Samaru, Zaria.Nigeria
Email: shatuindo@gmail.com
Phone No: +2348066968840,

Abdullahi Hajara
Ahmadu Bello University (A.B.U.), Samaru, Zaria.Nigeria Email: hajjo.abdullahi@gmail.com
Phone No: +2348036878328

Abstract

Access to global information has several dimensions that will facilitate an inclusive society. Therefore, infrastructure of internet connectivity and the use of internet is an essential access channel for global information especially in developing countries. Gender is the relationships between men and women while culture is a system of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. Issues of gender inequality and culture such as cultural gender norms such as patriarchal structure, economic dependence on men, domestic roles and responsibilities poses hindrance to accessing information, Inadequate or total lack of information makes women and girls have limited influence over resources in society and this has been a serious barrier when trying to get a clear picture of access to global information in developing countries. However, the author critically examined gender issues such as digital divide, cost of the internet and exclusion of women in terms of technology utilization. It further discusses critically on cultural issues as a way of life and believes of people in relation to access to global information society. The paper also highlighted the impact of information Technology on women work such as helping the women to advance in technology and also creating new job through the information and communication technology. The paper went further to discuss the obstacles of women's access to global information such as low levels of education, illiteracy, low economic status and language. The paper also listed the economic empowerment of women through information and communication technology such as farming, trade and entrepreneurship and the paper concluded by discussing the challenges and issues to the access to global information in developing countries such as lack of electricity, Inadequate ICT infrastructure, maintenance and expansion of computer networks, maintenance and expansion of computer and lack of holistic approach to infrastructure creation.

Key words: Gender, ICT, digital divide, culture and globalization.

Introduction

The World Bank's 2016 world development report listed women's access to information Communication technology (ICT) as the third most important development issue for women after poverty and violence against women (UNDP, 2017). In line with this, access to information (for women and girls) contributes to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls. There are several legal instruments that seek to protect and promote access to information as a fundamental human right irrespective of gender. (Both article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,1966) state that 'Everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information'. The same language is repeated in the (Kenya constitution,2010) articles 33, 34 and 35. Access to information is essential for development. IFLA's Statement on Libraries and Development notes: Access to information is a fundamental human right that can break the cycle of poverty and support sustainable development. The library is the only place in many communities where people can access information that will help improve their education, develop new skills, find jobs, build businesses, make informed agricultural and health decisions, or gain insights into environmental issues. Their unique role makes libraries important development partners, both by providing access to information in all formats and by delivering services and programs that meet the needs for information in a changing and increasingly complex society. (IFLA,2019) Information access denotes to the ability to identify, retrieve and use information effectively. Information is essential for social, political as well as economic development (Tuominen, M., Reunamaki, & Honkanen, 2017). While the value of information access has been demonstrated in many settings, the adoption of the UN SDGs and the corresponding UN 2030 Agenda provides an opportune moment to consider the broader

relationship between information and development in an inclusive society. (Garrido, F. & Lucas, 2017). Information is an intangible resource that can be applied in myriad ways to improve life and impact development. Global access to information encompasses the rights and capacity to use, create, and share information in ways that are meaningful to each individual, community, or organization. Promoting global access to information will strengthen a bottom-up mechanism for development that is fundamentally community-centered, customized, and localized. (Surpriya, J., 2020)

Internet connectivity and IT resources have become crucial to unhindered access to global information. If the absence of connectivity or equipment can highlight the digital divide and the ensuing knowledge gap that separates developing and developed countries, groups within a country can also become further marginalized by their inability to access information. Gender is the relationship between men and women. (Newman, 2018) state that in general terms, "sex" refers to the biological differences between males and females, such as the genitalia and genetic differences while "Gender" is more difficult to define, but it can refer to the role of a male or female in society, known as a gender role, or an individual's concept of themselves, or gender identity. Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, activities, attributes and opportunities that any society considers appropriate for girls and boys, and women and men. Gender interacts with, but is different from, the binary categories of biological sex (World Health Organization, 2017). Culture can be defined as the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. Culture influences thinking, language and human behaviour. The social environment, in which individuals are born and live, shapes their attitudinal, emotional and behavioural reactions and the perceptions about what is happening around. The same applies in the case of assigned/assumed roles in society based on gender.

Globalisation is shifting gender roles and norms: Increased access to information, primarily through television and the Internet, allows countries to learn about social mores in other places, which can change perceptions and promote the adoption of more egalitarian attitudes. (World Bank, 2006). Today, the Internet, as the backbone of our global information and communication systems, enables different hardware and software tools to come together as a massive global network. The resultant social phenomenon is often referred to. as the 'information society' or 'network society'. (Gurumurthy, 2014) state that the information society is not gender neutral, it has different implications for women and men, girls and boys, and for the relationships between them.

In this modern times, women and girls have made great progress towards increased access to information and attained undeniable levels of development in terms of their abilities and knowledge in utilizing information, however they are still faced with a wide range of issues that prevent their access and effective use of information for development in general. According to (IFLA, GroupTechnology and Social Change, 2017) these barriers are most prevalent in the continued pervasiveness of sociocultural obstacles, some are general to all forms of information seeking while others are more specific to the access and use of ICTs.

Gender equality and empowerment through unrestricted access to information can foster development in developing nations. Cultural gender norms such as patriarchal structure, economic dependence on men, domestic roles and responsibilities poses hindrance to accessing information. Inadequate or total lack of information makes women and girls have limited influence over resources in society. Such barriers hinder women from access, use and create and share information with regards sustained development (Diallo & Calland, 2013). .Gender Inequality in Information

Access. Women's access to and control over ICTs is not equal to that of men. The ability to make use of the technology as well as the information and knowledge by women is biased. Without the access to Information technology leads to difficulty in accessing information globally for economic development. Effective use of information technology by women and girls may leads to advanced social development goals.

While some developing countries are fast gaining information technologies, women are a gender that whose location, demographic composition, poor education, low economic status, and occupation hinder their access to fully access the existing information sources and channels for advancement of communities. Lack of or absence of information infrastructure altogether adversely affects the proper access and use of the information technologies. Consequently, development, participation, exposure, connectedness and fast access to and utilization of relevant information are unattainable mainly by women.

However, despite the importance of access information being a fundamental right to all, (SIDA, 2015) notes that all aspects of social interaction, including access to information are gendered and there exists an information divide between men and women boys and girls on access, content and use of information and information resources. (Neuman, 2015), further notes that despite its benefits as an ingredient of development, enjoyment of the right of access to information is limited to half the population and the situation is even worse for women living in rural areas of developing countries.

Sociocultural Issues

The most commonly known issues especially in developing countries are social and cultural issues. These issues are mostly rooted in traditional believes or customary law and gender stereotypes that

limit girls' and women's access to and use of information. They appear at the societal level as well as in the family and can include denial of the right to use technology, the prevention of women from leaving home without permission to seek information, families favoring the education of boys and giving boys preferential use of ICTs, and many other barriers. These issues are numerous and they vary from one cultures to another. Among some of the aspects of patriarchy and paternalism that affect girls' and women's access to information are male attitudes that women need their permission to leave the house to seek it. (Neuman, 2016) reveled that in Guatemala, Liberia, and Bangladesh, majority of men shared that belief and that women feared reprisal from both their families and authorities by seeking information. Women seeking information also suffered from negative attitudes of men in public office, leaving them afraid to ask for it. The control also extended to women attending literacy classes. "The problem is like some men don't believe that the women are going to the seminars ... they think they are going somewhere different" (Jones, 2009).

Cultural issues

Cultural issues refer to those factors that explicitly impel certain groups to censor their speech and behavior, or exclude themselves from particular activities, in the belief that these are not intended for them. These cultural issues actually limit women's and girls' participation in the access to global information Society. (Primo, 2013) .Therefore, research conducted in developing countries like India and Egypt shows that women believe that internet is not appropriate for them or that their families would disapprove and that their accessing information in an online environment will not be beneficial to them. These type of believe are normally derive from cultural background.

Cultural Norms Favoring Men

Technologies are often considered to be within the purview of men and gender norms about men's control of technology, information and knowledge limit women's opportunity to learn, use and benefit from technology (Hafkin & Taggart: 2001). More than two-thirds of the world's population still lack access to the Internet. Evidence has indicated that some cultural norms actually restrict women access to global information (Intel, 2013). As a result this, women become increasingly marginalized as social connections are increasingly fostered and maintained online. (Melhem, M. & Tandon, 2009) assert that cultural factors limit women's access to shared ICT facilities, such as tele-centres, which tend to become meeting places for young men, and hence deter women's absorption and adoption of ICTs to access information and knowledge.

Gender Biases and Stereotype Issues

Throughout the world, there are problems in attracting young women to science and technology studies. Particularly in less developed countries, people still hold obsolete views that girls can't think or work scientifically and that science is too mechanical and technical for girls, thus discouraging female students. Girls are frequently encouraged to take any job or get married rather than seek higher education. Other gender stereotypes can get in the way of schoolgirls and information access such as earlier curfew hours for girls at boarding schools further constrained their use as expressed by (Gadio, 2001). In India in the well-known "hole in the wall" experiment, the aggressiveness of boys pushing away girls prevented the girls from using the computers (Mitra & Rana, 2001).

Negative attitudes about women and technology

In general, "attitudes" could be defined as "people's global evaluations of any object, such as oneself, other people, possessions, issues, abstract concepts, and so forth" (Petty, Fabrigar, & Wegener, 2003). Some research suggested possible differences related to attitudes toward technology across cultures and societies. The use of technology would not occur in a vacuum, but instead, in broader social and cultural contexts. For example, (Collis & Williams 2001) discussed that cultural and regional difference was one critical factor in influencing people's acceptance and use of Internet-based learning resources. According to (Hussen et al., 2016) in Mankosi, South Africa, women were central to the establishment and operation of a community telecommunications network, but their contribution was not recognized because it was somehow considered part of their domestic duties.

Obstacles to women's access to global information

A series of factors, including education and information literacy, infrastructure and location, capabilities, mobile telephones ownership and use, language barrier, gender stereotype in science and technology, digital divide, domestic burden, civil conflict and gender blind information policies of facilities, social and cultural norms, and women's computer and information search and dissemination skills constrain women's access to information technology.

Education and Information Literacy

The (World Bank, 2015) statistics indicate that girls in developing countries are less likely than boys to attend school and have a higher dropout rate than boys. Consequently, this trend has led to high female illiteracy rates estimated at two thirds of the world illiterates. The same statistics indicate that 99 per cent of the world illiterates are women from developing countries. Illiteracy is a big impediment to information access since using information resources requires basic literacy

skills such as reading and listening in a common language. Lack of education also affects other information related information skills such as information literacy and digital skills. According to the (United Nations, 2015) two-thirds of the world's illiterates, numbering about 500 million, are female, and 99 percent of these are found in less developed countries, a share that has held steady since 1990 despite increasing rates of primary school education for girls. In Eastern and Western Asia, females make up nearly three-quarters of the illiterate population

Infrastructure and location

In nearly all of the developing countries, information and communications infrastructure is weaker and less available in rural and poor urban areas, where women are the majority of residents. In many of the less developed countries, internet connectivity is frequently available and affordable only within capital and major secondary cities, while most women live outside these cities (UNIFEM & UNU/TECH, 2000)

Capabilities

(IFLA, Group Technology and Social Change, 2017) state that capabilities refers to an individual's ability to learn to use information and communication tools and resources, and to apply information in meaningful ways. It is an essential component of information access, and as such comprises one dimension of the development and access to information framework. Capabilities are also highly dependent on the setting. The challenges and resources of individual communities (social, economic, demographic, cultural, etc.) influence the opportunities, demands, and norms that shape who possesses which skills and how capabilities are developed. Capabilities here simply refer to how an individual understands and make use of ICT infrastructure to access and use global information for national development. Nadia, H. & Raúl Z, 2007) state that addressing illiteracy is an important step to building people's capacity to use ICTs, as well as the provision of training

to build people's, especially women's, typing skills and ability to use different software. Since the content of the web is still predominantly in English and other non-local languages, another important consideration is whether men and women have opportunities to learn other languages, or whether content can be developed in local languages.

Mobile Telephone Ownership and Use

The mobile telephones have become the most accessible and universal sources of information and communication in the contemporary world. However, according to (ITU, 2016) there is a wide gender gap in both mobile phone usage and ownership in developing countries. This gap greatly affects girls' and women's access to global information. The situation is further complicated by cultural and gender dynamics surrounding mobile phone use and ownership ranging from mild control to extreme violence and death. (Net Hope, 2017), a humanitarian IT connectivity NGO paints a very gloomy picture with the following extreme criminal incidences involving control of mobile phone use. Moreover, access to information via mobile phones is also affected by affordability of handset and credit (data), connectivity and information literacy which generally low among women in the developing countries.

Poverty

According to (SIDA, 2015) women are more exposed to poverty than men. They earn lesser, have limited access to financial assets and credit. This limits their possibility to utilize most forms of information as it cost some money in terms of transport to access information, library membership/ subscription fees, photocopying, books, air time and wifi subscription. Women living in poverty are also less likely than men to own radios and televisions, mobile phones, or computers. As a result of the above situation, women are likely to spend their little income on basic household needs such as food, education, child-care and clothing at the expense of information resources.

Language Barrier

Closely related to literacy is the language barrier but it goes beyond literacy. The major language of information on the internet, print and other information resources is English (Sturges, 2015). Many women in less developed countries neither read nor speak in English yet few information materials are available in native languages hence difficult to access. Despite the call to support cultural diversity by allowing more people to have a voice despite its global reach, the internet has tended to reinforce the dominance of English. Statistics show that about 56% of web content is in English whereas 75% of the world's population does not speak English (Historical trends in the usage of content languages for websites, 2019).

Gender stereotype in Science and Technology

Gender biases toward women studying or using information technology has served to push girls and women away from ICT as source of information. There has been a stereotype that science and technology is predominantly a male discipline. There is a gender gap in Internet access, as well as mobile phone ownership and digital skills. The Internet access gap is growing worldwide, and is highest in Africa (ITU, 2015). In some cultures girls are frequently encouraged or even forced to take any job (including domestic work) or start families as soon as they reach (after initiation) puberty rather than seek higher education (Hafkin, 2017).

Digital Divide

(The Glossary of Key Terms on Internet Governance, 2012) defines digital divide as economic, social and cultural inequalities between groups, in terms of access, use and knowledge as a result of the national or international distribution of information and communication technologies (ICT). In developing countries, ICT infrastructure is weak or non-existent in rural and poor urban areas, where women are the majority of residents. Internet connectivity is usually available mostly within

capital and major towns, while most women live outside these towns (UNIFEM, 2000). The few public libraries and information centres in the rural areas where most women and girls live are not connected to the internet. For example in Kenya the laying of the optic fibre cable which provides a reliable internet is yet to reach the rural areas.

Domestic Burden

Women and girls in traditional societies are over-burdened by domestic chores as opposed to men and boys (Neuman, 2016). These chores include but not limited to childcare, farming, fetching water, firewood and such other duties. These chores limit women's mobility and time to access information facilities such as libraries, cybercafés or even browsing their mobile phones.

Civil Conflicts

Developing countries, especially Africa, have been dominated by armed conflict (Chant, 2003). Women and girls bear the highest burden of the conflicts as men and boys join the militia to defend their communities. As women take the role of caring for the family, the numbers of female-headed households increase as a result of male deaths (or incapacitated) in the armed conflicts. (Wakhungu, 2010). The environment created by these conflicts extremely limits the opportunities for women and girls to access information.

Gender Blind Information Policies

Information policy frameworks and initiatives have failed to take gender-specific cultural barriers into account thus failing to close the gender divide in information flow and access (Net Hope, 2017). The lack of gender awareness in information policies and projects constrains girls' and women's access to information. Gender analysis of national policies is often missing owing to various factors such as lack knowledge of gender aspects by the policy makers, ignoring cultural

factors in the society, lack of sex-disaggregated data for planning and monitoring and the attitude that information is gender neutral yet all aspects of human interaction are gendered (IFLA, 2017).

Gender economic empowerment through information technology

With economic liberalization and the decline of the role of the state in providing social assistance, women will have to face issues such as job security, insurance, maternity leave, and healthy and safe working conditions. (Ramalingan, M. 2014). Information technology help to assist women in their current economic activities, including farming, trade, and entrepreneurship. For instance, women farmers could greatly increase productivity using information on improved technologies, agricultural inputs, weather, and markets. (Abdalhakim, H. 2009)

Challenges to the access of global information in developing countries

"Poor people need good health, not computers," said Bill Gates, Chairman and Chief Software Architect, Microsoft Corporation and world's richest man. "Poor women face a double disadvantage in access to resources and voice they are poor and they are women. Do poor people in developing countries need information technology? While Bill Gates and others believe that providing basic needs must come first, many others feel that IT can help meet basic needs and can provide access to resources to exit from poverty. In considering whether information technology can help poor women, the relevant questions are how (are there ways to overcome the constraints that prevent most poor women in developing countries from using these technologies now?) and for what (are there ways in which information technology of all kinds can be the most cost effective means of helping poor women in developing countries meet their basic needs and exercise their fundamental rights?).(Butler,J. 1998)

No Telephones, No Electricity. A project has started in Andhra Pradesh, India, using packet switching to route Internet data and telephone calls through the spare capacity of railroad cables

to areas presently without telephone service. If successful, it would provide connectivity at rates below those of any other option. For areas where there is no electricity, the Pondicherry project in India combines power supply from the grid with battery backup and solar power. India's one billion oxen drawing water have been suggested as a potential source of 40,000 megawatts of power a year.

Conclusion

The benefits of information access to girls and women are and far-reaching on both individual and collective levels and in many in terms social, economic and political development. In this regard, there are several legal frameworks at local and international levels that and advocate access to information as a human right. However there exists various gender and cultural issues, embedded in customary law, traditional practices and gender stereotypes that limit girls' and women's access to and use of information and information resources. These impediments appear at the societal level as well as in the family and can easily be overlooked as they are propagated by the underlying historical gender inequalities in various cultures. These obstacles are so numerous and with such variation between cultures that it is difficult to list them all. The net effect of the obstacles is that women and girls are less likely to seek information whereas they need it most. However, all is not lost as various deliberate initiatives governments, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies and information related institutions such as IFLA have employed strategies to break these barriers. These strategies have started bearing fruit and will eventually ensure that the right to information is enjoyed by all irrespective of their gender or place of domicile.

Recommendations

- Telephones and electricity should be provided.

- Wireless and Satellite Connectivity should also be provided. This is a low-cost solution including computers, to recurring monthly costs.

- Inexpensive Multiple-User Computers should also be provided in the rural areas. There should be availability of inexpensive Internet access devices that could be installed for public access.

- Interlinking Technologies should also be provided. Information technology does not have to be computers and Internet. Radio, television, embedded chips, and links between old and new technologies are important IT tools that should reach the poor people in developing countries.

- Social and Economic Constraints Literacy Interfaces should also be provided in developing countries. This is a development that has to do with using icons, graphics, touch screens, and voice recognition for the illiterate and neo-literate.

- Language translation software should be to bridge both literacy and language barrier.

- Access costs should also made available. There should be provision of public access centers at affordable cost to the rural poor.

- E-governance should be made available to poor women who can benefit greatly from having access to government information online, such as land registration through the Computer-aided Administration.

- The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) should be provided to organizing women in the informal sector. the various cooperatives working in different sectors and areas.In the second phase, the centers will also support the education of girls.

- Gyandoot/DharOrganized should be organized often to link the intranet to the internet that connects to some rural information centers.

- Health and Education Information should also be provide to bring health and information directly to the rural, poor and especially the women

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