

The effects, challenges and future prospects of ICTs on gender divides in Ghana

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In this essay it will be explored how the adoption of ICTs in developing countries can affect the already existing gender inequalities. Ghana is chosen as primary country to focus on, as it is one of the development countries that first started with an active policy to bring more ICTs into the country. With the arrival of ICTs and new services the position of the women is on the line. Different scenarios are sketched, some in which women will be empowered and others in which the divide between men and women will only further increase.

ICT in Ghana

Ghana is a developing country located in sub-Saharan Africa. Going back in time, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to become independent in 1957. After becoming independent, Ghana became one of the most prosperous countries of sub-Saharan Africa. However, this does not mean that Ghana is a very prosperous or wealthy in comparison to the wealthy countries in the west of Europe. Ghana is still very much a developing country, where the majority of the inhabitants is active in the agriculture sector and the average income is between 1.50 and 10 dollar a day. Just as in most other developing countries, gender inequality is very visible in Ghana and women often enjoy less freedoms than men do. Whereas young men enjoy more freedom and are allowed to make some money for themselves, young women are often obligated to participate in the house chores and share their income with the household (Williams, 2017). The lower position of women can also be found back in the statistics, as women generally have a lower literacy rates, lower income and are less likely to pursue a business career (Steeves and Kwami, 2012).

Because there is less wealth in developing countries, the digital infrastructure hasn't evolved in a similar way to the wealthier countries in the world. This has been recognized by Ghana, and since in the early 2000's there have been many efforts, from the government as well as standalone initiatives to bring the ICTs to the people of Ghana (Agbenyo, 2018). The goal is to bring socio-economic growth by creating a better digital infrastructure. The main focus around these ICT projects has been on creating better telephone and radio networks. All of these initiatives led to an increasing digital development, where different ICT services were setup. These ICTs bring extra wealth and business to Ghana by replacing old ways of working and creating new opportunities. However, it seems that the development of ICT in Ghana can further increase the already existing inequality between men and women. Steeves and Kwami (2012) describe that the ICT deployment plans from Ghana did include notions to account for gender inequalities. However, those notions were primarily just

theoretical and did not provide rigorous measures to actively help women in accessing those ICTs. So in the actual implementations there were no signs of gender considerations.

ICT and gender divides

Since the arrival of ICTs, there exists a debate about the roles that men and women have in the ICT world. Some studies have claimed that men are simply more interested in ICT, as they generally are more “tech savvy” (Fallows, 2005). This would mean that it is very logical why there are less women that work in the ICT sector. However, Hilbert (2011) performed a large data comparison study with 25 datasets from Latin America and Africa, and found that the sole reason why fewer women work in the ICT sector is because of their inferior position to men. In comparison to men, women often do not have much money and are less likely to buy a cellphone. Women also often get the old phone of their husband, that might not be fully operative anymore.

Thus, the divide between men and women in the ICT is a direct consequence of the already existing inequality. This is too bad, because Hilbert (2011) furthermore shows that women generally have a great affinity for ICT. When it comes to the usage of ICTs, think about phone calls or texting, women are often more comfortable than men. Also in adopting new technologies, women are often more enthusiastic. At the core, using ICT may also be more natural for women, as they are often the better communicators. This holds a promising combination, as ICT usage is generally correlated with economic growth.

An interesting difference between men and women shows their intentions when it comes to using ICTs. Men often are more interested in entertainment, as in playing games or searching for enjoyable content. Women are more information driven. They search for things to educate themselves. This seems very promising, as ICTs in this way function as a stepping stone for women to empower themselves. For example, women in developing countries are often less literate, so with access to digital material they could become more literate and help themselves into a better position on the market.

However, even though it turns out that women are very suitable to be active in ICT, accessibility remains a very real problem. As many women still have less money and freedom in comparison to men. Kwapong (2008) shows that willingness to pay for ICTs was predominantly determined by income. Especially in the rural areas, the poorer women were not able or willing to pay as much for basic ICT services opposed to men. This might be troubling, because the longer it takes for them to adapt to ICTs, the larger the digital divide with men will be. Since, most of the women that live in rural areas are active in agriculture, ICT services that could benefit their harvest would be of greatest value to them. The study suggests to adequately change the policies to have more focus on ICTs reaching the rural areas. However, the study also concludes that ICTs only form a small part in larger landscape of determination factors for women's empowerment. Inequality can also be large determined by education, age, and membership of a community organization. In conclusion it can be said that ICTs offer a great tool for women to empower themselves.

To truly help empower women and girls through ICT, a big change should be made in the policy making. Current policies about ICT facilitation are currently gender neutral, not

favouring men or women to be included in the projects. But, because men are currently in charge and many biases about women in combination with ICT are existing, the men are currently favouring themselves. Policies should therefore become more feminist, specifically requesting females for the positions in which women are likely to excel, such as communication.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that ICTs offer a great tool for women to empower themselves. The digital divide that currently exists originates from the already existing inequality between men and women. Making ICTs accessible for women is key. Future projects should therefore focus on actively engaging with women and giving them functions in which they can excel. However, the empowerment of women should always be viewed in a holistic way. ICTs can only form a small part of all the factors that influence the position of women, but, lets at least make sure that it will be a positive factor.

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