

Naomi makes
her first call
in Kpunyai.



PHOTO BY JOHN DADA

Gender Research in Africa into ICTs
for Empowerment (GRACE)



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GRACE explores the ways in which women in Africa use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to empower themselves, the external, structural barriers as well as the internal factors which prevent them from using and effecting ICTs to their advantage, and the strategies they employ to overcome these impediments. It is a two-year research and capacity development project implemented by the Association for Progressive Communications through its Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) and funded by the International Development Research Centre, Acacia programme (IDRC).

"In thinking through what ICTs can mean for women's empowerment in Africa, we will turn to the women who can give us their perspectives in their own words, while being grounded in our contexts and understandings as African researchers." Ineke Buskens

GRACE comprises fifteen projects, reflecting fourteen research sites in twelve countries and one multi-country research project. While coherent with the general aim of the overall research initiative, the projects differ from each other greatly in terms of target group and research focus. Likewise, the concepts of gender and empowerment which frame the initiative's general direction and commitment, may not have unequivocal meaning within the projects.

The projects aim to contribute to the debates focusing on women's empowerment and ICTs through finding their own understandings

of what "empowerment" and "gender" may mean in multiple African ICT contexts. The lessons learnt will be shared with local and national policy makers and educators in the form of contextualized and local-specific recommendations.

An important focus of the overall initiative is capacity building. Researchers are provided opportunities to develop research capacity as well as capacity to use ICTs effectively. The project has made provision for intensive training and ongoing mentoring and support. It intends to integrate the research and the ICT aspects into a holistic capacity building experience for the participants. GRACE is quite unique, according to Research Director, Ineke Buskens: "African researchers focusing on Africa, while living and working here, doing qualitative research on such a large scale together.... I do not know of any other research of this scope, or with this kind of a perspective."

RESEARCH REFLECTIONS

Ruth Meena, Tanzania

"We have just embarked on the journey, it's a tough one, for the women who are in the business sector, affording their time, it's quite a mission ... I feel this is also an inspiring part of our research process, that there are women who are willing to invest in this process by sharing their personal lives with us. We have just started with one participant. As she started sharing her life history we were extremely touched by her opening up her life to us, and trusting us ... the most inspiring part of this project is the methodology we are using, "life stories," as it builds a unique relationship between us as researchers and those we are



Aissatou Kadry is in the Design business, Douala, Cameroon

researching. We consider this time a precious gift from the woman participants to the GRACE project.”

John Dada, Nigeria

“We are always mindful of imposing any methodologies or culturally incompatible views on the various groups of women we work with. This rule applied to a group of Muslim women from Kafanchan. They are all in purdah and are all involved in various income generation activities, often through a third party.... One of the women summed up her view of how this modern technology will make her less dependent on third parties. She said with the mobile phone she will now deal directly with her customers, while still preserving the integrity of her purdah status.

“We were in a focus group discussion with Chenchuk women, and one of them observed that the mobile phone may lead to less need for face to face contacts with her extended family. She was not sure if this was such a good thing. The close bonds of the African extended family serve as a safety net and source of mutual assistance. Will the mobile phone lead to an erosion of this vital cohesive factor that has kept the communities intact for many years? This is an issue that our GRACE team is grappling with and watching carefully.”

Own and Associates, Kenya

“In some organizations where there is no recognized formal gender policy, the career women in ICT have been recruited and given space to actualize their potentials. They are equally competing with men and achieving their goals. What really works (the gender dynamics) in such organizations headed by women is an area we are still

investigating. Is it a policy working or something else is in place for the whole system?

“Some ICT firms headed by women CEOs have an affirmative action gender policy where, for example, 75% of employees in certain sections in the organization have to be women... To us the basic questions are: how is this policy working and perceived by others; what are these women who have been recruited doing? Are they just doing secretarial work and thus have no chance of empowering themselves in ICT, or are they also involved in technical and other challenging duties where their ICT skills are put into use?”

Gisele Yitamben, Cameroon

“What excites me is being able to bring business support and training institutions into a dialogue that seems never to have existed with those who use their services. What is striking is the distance that these institutions have given themselves, and the disdain that they have for certain economic operators to whom they provide training and owe their existence. The Chamber of Commerce, Mines, Industries and Handicraft (CCIMA) acknowledges that they don't have any specialized programmes earmarked for women entrepreneurs, but they have inappropriate programmes coming from abroad for problems currently arising elsewhere.

“What is absent is truly grounded field work and reflection that would enable the development and adaptation of products to meet the needs of business women. This could be the origin of the incoherence between programmes and needs, and be contributing to the appropriation of local structures and indigenous businesses. The availability of different partners to participate in this research process indicates the usefulness of our work in progress.”

GRACE PROJECTS

Cameroon

Is the internet an empowering tool for Douala business women, international traders in the textile sector?

Egypt

Can information and communication technologies improve the livelihoods of Egyptian women artisans?

Kenya

The impact of ICTs on women's career progression and networking in Kenya: The experience of IT professional women

Kenya

Use of cell phones by women business owners to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in their micro-enterprises in Kenya

Mozambique

Women's use of ICTs in Manhica and Sussendega: A tool for empowerment?

Morocco

How do legal centres and associations, as well as women victims of gender-related violence, use ICTs in Morocco?

Nigeria

How women in rural Nigeria use mobile phones to meet their communication needs

Senegal

Ownership of mobile phones by businesswomen in Senegal

South Africa

Rethinking energy access: Integrating information and communication technologies and gender for sustainable solutions

Tanzania

The effects of mobile phones and/or internet services on women entrepreneurs' socio-economic condition

Uganda

ICT liberalization in Uganda: The impact of mobile telephony on women's socio-economic empowerment

Uganda

Uptake and impact of the CD-ROM "Rural Women in Africa: Ideas for Earning Money" on grassroots women entrepreneurs in Uganda by Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

Zambia

Cell phones and women's advancement in Zambia

Zimbabwe

Women and online learning in higher education in Zimbabwe: A study of the extent to which women students benefit from online learning at the University of Zimbabwe

Meta-project

How women in Africa use ICTs as networking tools



PROJECT PARTNERS

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian Crown corporation that works in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable and more prosperous societies.

www.idrc.ca

The Association for Progressive Communications is an international network of civil society organisations dedicated to empowering and supporting groups and individuals working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies, including the internet. The APC Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP) is a global network of women who support women networking for social change and women's empowerment through the use of ICTs.

www.apc.org

For more information about GRACE, please contact: africa@apcwomen.org or visit www.apcwomen.org/grace

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