

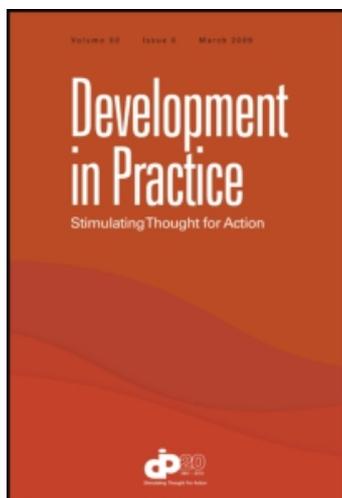
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## African Women and ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment

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**Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb (eds.)**  
*African Women and ICTs: Investigating  
Technology, Gender and Empowerment*  
Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2009, ISBN: 978 1  
86888 5619, 222 pp.

*African Women and ICTs* starts very unusually with a meditation – but then this is quite an unusual book, with its emphasis on introspection and self-analysis. If this seems strange for a book on technology, it is quite deliberate. ‘We had to start by centring ourselves’, say the editors. To understand the women they are researching, they have to understand themselves so that they

are aware of the values and assumptions that they themselves bring to the research process. The researchers are exhorted to 'listen to themselves' so that they can listen between the lines to what the women are really trying to express and to speak to the respondents as active agents, not victims of their situations. 'Listening to women, really listening to women, means listening to what is said and how it is said, but also listening to what is not said and what cannot be said.' The idea of the research is to cause change: change for the women and perhaps change too in the researchers themselves. This, on the whole, seems to have had the effect of making the researchers, five out of 30 of whom are men, very sensitive to the women to whom they talk.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One is about women whose lives have been somewhat changed by ICTs, but in circumstances where they are passive recipients. In fact, some of the women interviewed have moved beyond this very passive stage, but most of the respondents are illiterate, rural women who do not speak English and have 'no time' to learn new technologies for which they see no purpose. Mobile phones are therefore more useful than computers and more easily shared, and even non-literate people can learn to recognise particular numbers. Nevertheless, the costs are high, and often men have control over the mobile, a fact which only emphasises gender inequality.

Part Two considers women in 'female-only' ICT spaces, or those who would benefit from such spaces, although this definition is somewhat stretched. Lack of gender awareness at the University of Zimbabwe means that female students are literally pushed off library computers by male students, behaviour which they accept as normal. A female-only space would encourage them to make greater use of computers. In Egypt women have to be kept away from men, but women-only computer classes have given them a new lease of life. Sitting less easily under this Part Two umbrella, but fascinating nevertheless, is a chapter on the use of mobile phones by

women in Morocco to report domestic violence. The prevailing culture of community and family dictates submission, but a mobile phone connects women to a legal centre where they can get help and advice: '*There is God and the mobile phone*'. In Zambia the research looked at networking and found that there is potential for the mobile phone to enhance communications between them, but also the potential to cause great disharmony in households. Women are faced with the dilemma of adapting their use of ICTs to fit cultural norms, or adapting culture to fit their desire for emancipation.

Part Three shows us women who use technology to give them more control over their lives. We see, for instance, fisherwomen in Senegal using mobiles to run their businesses. Unlike many other African countries, lineage is more important than marriage, so they are more able to run their own businesses. In Uganda, by contrast, women are the property of their husbands, because of dowry payments, so entrepreneurs are much more restricted and less confident. However, after CD-ROM based training, they became much more confident and were able to make life-improving changes. Mobile-phone usage in Kenya is enormous: in 2006 there were 6.4 million subscribers, and 94 per cent of entrepreneurs use mobiles to conduct their business. Women entrepreneurs in Nairobi use mobile phones to run their businesses, but it is revealing to note that they are often forced into micro and small enterprises by external pressures, whereas men are able to run businesses with larger turnover and larger profits. In 2005, 40 per cent of girls had never been enrolled at school, and this lack of education is a serious impediment for entrepreneurs: women are also much more likely to have to close down their businesses, due to family commitments.

Part Four introduces us to women who are controlling ICTs and using them to their advantage, and here we follow career women from Kenya and Tanzania using ICTs to empower themselves. Of the five women interviewed in Tanzania, two are also the researchers for this chapter. All

these women have had a better start in life; they have been sent to school and encouraged to make the best of themselves. They have had good mentors and are mentors themselves to other girls. They understand how lucky they are in this respect.

The research for this book took place over three years in 12 countries. Humanity shines out of it: the researchers and the respondents all come alive, and their stories fascinate. Researchers in other books often hide behind dry facts; here they are integral to the research, sometimes slightly intrusively so. Nevertheless, there is an honesty in this approach which is refreshing, as is the acceptance that people are complicated and do not fit into easy boxes. This book is about women and their lives in the information age.

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