

# Gender Sensitivity and the Acacia National Strategy for Senegal

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Facilitating access to, and exploitation of, information and communication technologies (ICTs) for marginalized communities, especially women and youth: this is the main objective of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s Acacia Initiative, which has launched a project to ensure massive representation of women in all aspects of the program, and to incorporate gender sensitivity into the design, implementation and evaluation of projects that are part of the Initiative.

The project, coordinated by [Fatoumata Sow](#), a journalist by profession who specializes in gender issues, is designed to make gender sensitivity a permanent characteristic of the Acacia National Strategy using studies, consultation, and information activities to raise awareness — paving the way for adoption of a plan of action to support women in the process of making ICTs a part of community life. The project is the first stage in a process designed to reverse the trend toward marginalization, ensure equitable access to ICTs, develop tools and mechanisms tailored to the needs and characteristics of women and their position and role in society, and strengthen their capacities and power.

## **Women and ICTs**

In Ms Sow's view, "ITCs can be a great thing for women, in the sense that they can help them get the information they need on subjects as varied as health, education, income-producing activities, the environment, human rights, and so on. In Senegal and in Africa in general, most women are handicapped by illiteracy and ignorance, which severely curtails their ability to access the information and skills that could help them improve their situation, speed their emancipation, and expand their participation in development. We must enable women to enjoy the benefits that ICTs bring, by placing them at women's disposal in ways compatible with their social context and their individual needs."

According to Sow, the first step in the strategy for implementing the project was to set up a scientific committee consisting of experts in development, in ICTs, and in gender issues drawn from a number of sectors to advise and assist IDRC on its implementation. At the same time, a team of women consultants familiar with women's issues, development, and ICTs were developing work methods that were discussed with the scientific committee and incorporated the latter's suggestions.

## **Two stage process**

All the work was done in two stages. "The first involved field studies carried out by the women consultants in seven of Senegal's ten regions. This provided the basic data which was then used in the second part, namely the development of grids and tools for the integration of gender sensitivity into the Acacia Strategy."

The field studies included: assessment and analysis of experiments and projects in the field of women and communication; assessment of structures involved in ICT and gender issues; qualitative and quantitative assessment of women's needs with respect to ICTs; and finally, outlining ideas for pilot projects. The main points of the action plan were as follows:

- inform women and raise their awareness of ICTs and related issues, and of the importance of their being involved in all activities in this area;
- set up community information centres offering access to ICTs, which are responsible for providing equipment and training women to use the technologies;
- set up servers to provide information on women and development, to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and experience, and to produce local programming that meets the needs of the target audiences;
- make the argument for the education of women, especially in the scientific and technical areas.

### **Source of power**

The IDRC Working Group on Gender and Development has identified access to information as a source of power: those who have it can monitor policy applications, join pressure groups, learn, cooperate, militate, and react to proposed legislation.

To sum up: the main activities carried out in the first phase of the project include field studies, the production of a report on *Women, Communication and ICTs: Needs and Prospects*, and two devolution workshops in Dakar with representatives from the regions of Thiès, Saint-Louis, Louga, and Dakar. The second workshop was held in Kaolack and attended by people from Tambacounda, Kolda, Ziguinchor, and Kaolack. The workshops provided an opportunity both to sensitize participants to the Acacia Strategy and ICTs, and to discuss, enrich, and validate the findings of the report. Following this initial consultation, the project moved into a second phase, which concerns methods and tools to ensure that women are involved in the process from start to finish. To provide follow-up and evaluation of future actions, a study using the analytical grids for gender as applied to ICTs has been launched. According to sociologist Marie Pierre Chaupin, who will be leading the study, "taking gender issues into account from the start of the project is important inasmuch as this factor will have a major influence on the orientation and content of project activities."

### **Expected outputs**

As Sow points out, to assist IDRC and its Acacia partners, the national mechanisms in place and the project participants, "the project is expected to produce a number of guides or tools (analytical grids, in particular) that can be used at various stages of the project, from design through implementation to evaluation, to get a handle on the position and activities of women and men, their respective responsibilities in the various processes, their particular needs and desires, both immediate and strategic, the impact of relations between men and women in the activities to be carried out, and the benefits and spinoffs from ICTs for women and men."

The study now being finalized proposes a number of grids, such as the Harvard grid and the contextual analysis grid, and identifies indicators specifying that they must be precise and measurable. "It is important to note the innovative nature of this study, which is one of the first to specifically target tools and grids that take gender into account in projects involving ICTs," says Ms Chaupin. "We know that work has already been done on gender and environment, gender and

health, and so on, but nothing had yet been done on gender and ICTs, and in particular, on the design of appropriate grids. Very little has been done so far in this area."

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