

Zambian women empowered via ICTs

by: Henry Kabwe

For a long time, Zambian women have lagged behind in new developmental trends, especially in areas of technology, politics, and economy. To help mitigate this trend, women in Zambia came together 20 years ago to form the Zambia Association for Research and Development (ZARD). This occurred when many people, including a number of women, thought the fight for women empowerment into leadership positions was an affront against culture.

Many years down the line, this fight is now gaining momentum with the coming of the 100,000 Euros (K392 700 000) that the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) funded the Women In Development Network (WIDNet) programme.

The funds were allocated for the period of May 2004 to May 2009 for payments towards capital investment, purchase of computers for ZARD and its partners; erecting a radio mast for Internet connectivity as well as operational costs.

“During its implementation phase, WIDNet is expected to raise its own funds via the website,” says ZARD Programmes Coordinator Milika Mwela.

Ms Mwela says since information is power, access is empowerment and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) gadgets such as cell phones, computers, Internet, radio, and television have to be placed in the hands of women for them to have improved livelihoods.

“We have had slow but steady progress because many of our partner organisations fail to understand the concept as they have staff changes where we have new members every time. People are beginning to appreciate since we are filling up the identified information gap,” says ZARD Executive Director Priscilla Sichone Mpundu.

Being the most hit with vices such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, illiteracy and social abuse, women have no option but to enhance their capacity to communicate to each other using ICTs.

Ms Mpundu says for any organisation to thrive, they must make ‘noise’ using any ICT tool available for other organisations to appreciate what they are doing.

She says the women’s capacity to use information makes it essential for them to express what they are doing to help widows, orphans, and to support them to develop proper business connections through information sharing with market areas.

Through its Capacity building component, WIDNet has played a role in imparting ICT skills not only to its partners but also to walk-in clients at ZARD.

ZARD Programmes Coordinator says through the WIDNet News newsletter, the articles drawn from activities of their partners, who have a presence in the rural areas, are highlighting activities of women.

Ms Mwela disclosed that the January and March 2006 issue covered articles of FAWEZA's adopted Schools in Mumbwa town in Central province of Zambia and how boarding houses have been built to enable young women who live far away from School to attend classes on time.

Early this year, ZARD shared the 7,705 Euros (K29.5 million) with other eight partner organisations to empower women to have access to ICTs for sustainable development.

ZARD Executive Director says the money would go towards connecting Internet access and maintaining a discussion group in the WIDNet project.

"The facility will help us get connected to each other and the rest of the world. It is important to share what we are doing to avoid replication. We should make our organisations known to make people, including policymakers know the programmes we are embarking on," she says.

Zambia Alliance for Women (ZAW) Projects Officer Ceasar Katebe says their mainstreaming of agriculture to empower women in four provinces has made it possible for them to engage in the ICTs usage.

"When women get their produce, they use cell phones to SMS whether their products are fetching at good prices, instead of guessing. It actually starts from seed planting because we also give seed packs of maize, groundnuts and beans, and we have to keep them informed about the weather patterns," Mr Katebe disclosed.

Mr Katebe says his organisation, which benefited from the funds, is currently operating in Southern, Central, Eastern, Northwestern, and Lusaka Provinces.

"So every woman will be empowered about latest information from whatever will come out of the discussions. They may not be connected to the Internet, but our connection will make us get the information on their behalf and take it to them whenever they need it," Mr Katebe says.

The other partner, the Girl Guides Association of Zambia, has been a long time service provider for girls across nine provinces, the association hopes to enhance its capacity by providing information to their members and making the girls learn computer skills.

The girl guides' instrumental focus on preparing girls for future leadership has stood the test of time says the programme officer Linda Chiumya.

"Since we have a lot of computers in our organisation, girls will also be taught how to access information for them to use," she says.

Justice for Widows and Orphans Project (JWOP), another partner of ZARD, has been instrumental at making sure that the rights of widows and orphans are upheld especially after the demise of their beloved ones in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

JWOP Information Officer Felix Kunda says his organisation has helped widows in Chingola District on the Copperbelt Province to open up e-mail addresses and trained them in basics Internet usage.

The organisation would soon get to Chipata town in Eastern Province , Kabwe town in Central Province and Monze Districts in Southern Province this year to train them in Internet skills Mr Kunda disclosed.

Apart from imparting basic ICT skills to widows, JWOP would also allocate some funds for them to use at any business centre to have access to any information sent from Lusaka.

“We send them the emails and call them to go and download whatever we have sent and print it before sharing it with other members. It is difficult to send hardcopy documents to a far place but at a click of a button, it can be done,” says Mr. Kunda.

Other organisations that benefited from the funding include the Society for Women and AIDS in Zambia (SWAAZ), Women Entrepreneurs Development Association of Zambia (WEDAZ), the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Women for Change and the Forum for African Women Educationists in Zambia (FAWEZA).

ZARD works with Information Officers and information gatekeepers of partner organisations to enable them participate fully in the information-sharing programme through capacity building workshops that are organised. WIDNet have formed a D-group, which allows a frequent and consistent flow of information regarding meetings and current issues in the nation among the partners.

The WIDNet News, a quarterly electronic newsletter launched in November 2005 is another medium for highlighting issues and efforts being made by NGOs regarding the situation of Zambian .

One challenge being faced under the project is that WIDNet is still in its implementation stage and is faced with difficulties of getting buyers into the programme.

Lack of access to required information is one of the major problems that contribute to gender inequalities, while women in Zambia are heads of households, with the task for children, and other essential livelihood activities falling on them. The lack of opportunities to generate or receive income leads to their inability to sustain the family and overcome poverty.

WIDNet hopes to bridge some of these inequalities through using ICTs in providing information awareness, lobbying, and advocacy for policy change. The Zambian ICT policy includes a section on government’s plans to counter gender imbalances by implementing measures to counter gender imbalances affecting women’s participation and benefiting from the information society at all levels.

This clearly shows the relevance and timeliness of the WIDNet programme and emphasises the vitality of information in decision-making and how ICTs could be used in empowerment process.

The creation of online discussion forums and soon the website are practical examples of how women's organisations can be better coordinated and speak with one voice to be heard.

Although access to ICTs has expanded worldwide, the process still excludes the majority of people mostly women in developing countries such as Zambia. Many women still fail to have access to ICTs usage to promote their social, economic and political interests. The WIDNet Programme is there to enable women have access, control and feel ownership of the process and use ICTs freely for their socio-economic empowerment. Formulation of the WIDNet website is meant to act as a one-stop shop for information on the situation of women and girls in Zambia.

With more years to realise an empowered womenfolk holding cardinal leadership positions in the political, social, economic, information sharing, and subsequent empowerment might just leapfrog the desired end of development. It is not about women fighting to take over from men, but women fighting to get out of the status quo of poverty, vulnerability, illiteracy and backwardness for the whole nation to benefit.

For further information contact the iConnect team: editor@iconnect-online.org

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