

ICT and phones change women's lives

Overcoming the socio-cultural boundaries imposed on women, this project put women on the forefront of the group seeking knowledge and information through ICTs.



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Women farmers in the rural areas of Nigeria are responsible for a major percentage of all the food produced in the country but their contributions are often overlooked and their voices ignored in community decision-making”, writes Seember Nyager in the first blog post¹ of the recently finalised project Majelissar Mata Manoma: A meeting place for women farmers connecting with radio and mobile phones.

The project was carried out by the African Radio Drama Association (ARDA², Nyager's organisation) during 2009, and was supported by the Gender, Agriculture and Development in Information Society (GenARDIS) small grant funds. GenARDIS³ has been supporting rural initiatives that seek to empower women through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the African-Caribbean-Pacific regions since 2002. GenARDIS is run by the Association of Progressive Communications on behalf of a number of innovative development organisations and in its latest round (2008-2010), has supported fifteen initiatives in as many countries.

Everyday, women face more challenges than men

The women of the Gbagyi ethnic group from Nigeria's impoverished north-central region face numerous challenges. On the one hand, there are problems related to agriculture, such as lack of fertiliser, improved seeds, tractors and other equipment. On the

other, the workload for young girls and women is disproportionately heavier than that of their male counterparts. It includes farming, food processing as well as caring of children and the elderly.

A typical Gbagyi woman's daily activities start at 5.00 in the morning and end at 11.00 at night. A man's day starts at 7:00 with breakfast a woman has cooked and then farm work until an early evening return, dinner and relaxation with friends and bed time.

These inequalities are also reflected when it comes to access of information. According to the project baseline analysis, women rely mostly on their husbands and the church when it comes to agricultural information. Men, on the other hand, also turn to friends, colleagues and the radio. Culturally, they have better opportunities for exposure to new ideas and adapting information through both formal and informal interactions at social gatherings or daily meeting places.

Getting community buy-in

In order to address this information gap ARDA adopted a holistic approach – taking up “new” and “old” media (mobile



phones and radio respectively), involving everyone active in the community including local leaders and government officials and using theatre (to make explicit a number of cultural and gender questions that could have hindered the work – for instance through theatre, women were encouraged to participate and men to understand the importance of such participation).

The listeners' club

A listeners' club for women was set up. Once a week women met to listen to a locally-produced radio programme that dealt with issues that they (the women) had previously identified as important. They could send in questions via mobile phones or record them to be aired the following week and an expert was available to give advice.

Some listeners raised concerns about the use of farm inputs such as improved seed varieties, herbicides and pesticides for storage. The usual practice was to go to the village market and buy whatever was offered there. One listener called the show and told the audience how he lost a bumper harvest after an incorrect application of fertilizer. Zakaria, an agro-chemical expert, advised farmers to be very careful when using chemicals on the farm, which needs detailed directions from agricultural experts. Other participant, Hannatu Yusuf, shared low cost strategies for preserving beans in storage explaining how dried pepper and other spices had worked for her. Telephone numbers of experts were read out on the air and they received calls from listeners, especially from women from the listeners' club.

A radio show on ICTs and why women seem to be left behind in the use of information devices took up the issue. Many people own mobile phones and most owners are men (two women in a group of 25 had a phone of their own). Not only are women culturally biased to look at technology with a certain reservation, they are also more prone to spend their own money on food or school fees than men are. One woman listener recounted how her husband refused to let her have a mobile phone for fear it would make her "promiscuous". In the show women were encouraged to come together and collectively buy phones.

The listeners' club was given a phone and women were trained on how to use it. The main aim was to provide them with a means of actively seeking information: farming tips from other farmers, government representatives, agricultural extension workers, colleagues from other markets and of course, the radio station. It was also used to generate income for the club by placing a charge on received and dialed calls, which brought mixed results.

Poor telecommunications infrastructure

In part, the mixed results are due to serious infrastructure issues. Though Gwagwada (the village where the listener's club was



Women at the listening club, learning how to use a cell phone

Photo Credit: ARDA

set up) was a former train station post and only 50 kilometers outside Kaduna towards the Nigerian capital, land-lines are not available. The wireless signals of only one out of Nigeria's seven mobile phone service providers reach Gwagwada. Most people find themselves having to climb the nearby hill-tops to get a signal. "Companies boast about expanding their coverage," says ARDA. "But the poorer rural locations are not in their plans due to commercial and poor infrastructure."

A change in the position of the women in the community

Nyageris are now proud to say that gender relations towards farming information actually changed after the intervention. "Men confessed their appreciation for women who they now believe have access to concrete farming information because they are in touch with agriculture specialists who they came to know about via the radio programme. Men are now more confident to ask advice concerning farming from women because they are more knowledgeable than they were in the past", Nyager said.

Another direct consequence was the setting up of an adult literacy school. Many women were illiterate and unable to send text messages (by far the cheapest means of communication) and wanted to change the situation. They persuaded the church to form a literacy school for them and they are being taught to read and write in Hausa.

Recognising from the onset the value of achieving strength in numbers, the female members of the listeners club expressed an interest in evolving into a vocational, development group or a farmers' co-operative. ARDA staff helped assemble the information and set guidelines for formalising the group and the footwork required to deal with red tape. With their assistance the group has registered with the local government as the Agbada Association.

The women have shown their commitment by forfeiting their weekly meeting refreshment allowance and using it to pay for the registration of their association and open a bank account as the first step to leveraging investments to their enterprises. Thanks to the association many women managed to get a certificate from the local government, which enables them to have access to more farming information free of charge from the state-run agricultural development programme.

Information and Communications Technologies were successfully integrated into women farmer's lives by taking into account women's needs and concerns from the very beginning. Technology was combined with theatre and music and after some initial reluctance women could manipulate and feel confident using different devices.



Photo Credit: ARDA

Women from the listeners club filmed themselves and gained confidence through the use of technology.

Technology for fun

“During the club meetings, the project staff always asked permission to video record sessions and take photographs with a digital camera. Soon the younger members started showing interest in the recordings and immediate photo feedbacks, so they were given an opportunity to handle both cameras and to record themselves”, says ARDA. Almost all the women got some hands-on experience of filming. The demystification of filming and taking photographs was a confidence booster and continues to ensure a light-hearted, fun and playful experience for these women during the meetings.

GenARDIS is currently supporting other fourteen initiatives that are empowering rural women through ICTs in Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zambia.

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References:

1. <http://womensmeetingplace.wordpress.com>
2. <http://ardaradio.org/>
3. <http://genardis.apcwomen.org>

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Women and Mobile: A Global Opportunity – Special Report

This report, published by GSMA and Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, is the first detailed global study of its kind, and attempts to understand the nature of women mobile subscribers in low and middle-income countries such as Kenya and India, and highlights the barriers facing women's adoption of mobile technologies.

It also shows that, by extending the benefits of mobile phone ownership to more women, a host of social and economic goals can be advanced. The

report reveals for the first time the extent of the gender gap in mobile usage in many low and middle-income countries. It shows that a woman in a low or middle-income country is 21% less likely to own a mobile phone than a man. Closing this gender gap would bring the benefits of mobile phones to an additional 300 million women, empowering and enabling them to stay better connected with family and friends, improving their safety, and helping them obtain paid work, in line with the third

UN Millennium Development Goal on gender equality. The mobile phone as documented in the report is an effective productivity and development tool which creates education, health, employment, banking and business opportunities. From the GSMA website, <http://gsmworld.com/>.

