

Information, Communication, and Power:

Mobile Phones as a Tool for Empowering Women in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Mobile phones open up opportunities to improve the dissemination of knowledge and the facilitation of communication in Sub-Saharan Africa. Harnessing this technological change could be key to empowering the region's women economically and politically.

In the 21st century, the pervasiveness of mobile phones in Sub-Saharan Africa has drastically increased (Fredriksson et al., 2009, p. 4), making them the most-used information and communication technology (ICT) besides radio (Gillwald, Milek, & Stork, 2010, p. 23). SMS and voice calls are the most-used mobile services in the region (African Mobile Factbook, 2008, p. 7), whereas mobile Internet is still only used by a small minority (Fredriksson et al., 2009). In some regions, more sophisticated applications such as mobile banking experience wide-spread use (Haas, Plyler, & Nagarajan, 2010). Both NGOs (Kreutz, 2008 and Ekine, 2010) and for-profit ventures such as Grameen Phone (Camp & Anderson, 1999) are using mobile phones in projects aiming at economic and political empowerment of women. Such projects often take for granted that mobile phones are an appropriate technology for Sub-Saharan African communities (e.g. Waruzi, 2010, p. 138), an assumption that the outcomes of some pilots seem to question (Naidoo, 2010). In contrast, it can be argued that existing constraints such as illiteracy, unequal distribution of power, and poverty (Ngolobe, 2010, p. 105) render the influence mobile phone technology can develop relatively small (Haack, 2008, p. 79). This essay, however, will argue that mobile phones – when utilized appropriately –

can provide opportunities for the empowerment of women by enabling access to information and facilitating communication within and across communities.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, lack of access to information and communication technologies seriously constrains access to information for large parts of the population, but mobile phones promise to bridge this gap. Fixed-line telephony, Internet and broadband subscriptions in Sub-Saharan Africa are among the lowest in the world. In 2008, Internet penetration in Sub-Saharan African countries was at an average of four percent (Fredriksson et al., 2009, pp. 100), far less than the average of 15 percent in developing countries (p. 8). The underlying reasons are interrelated and include prohibitively high prices for fixed-line connections (p. 9), which are in part caused by state monopolies in the communications sector, a lack of fixed-line connectivity in rural areas, and a lack of broadband capacity (Horezky, 2009). Mobile phones effectively contrast this picture. Second only to radios, they are now the most prevalent communications technology in Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, they have already surpassed fixed-line telephony and Internet in penetration, with an average of 36 subscriptions¹ per 100 inhabitants in 2008 (Fredriksson et al., 2009, pp. 96). Where mobile phone density is underdeveloped, state monopolies are often a constraining factor (p. 4). Individual device ownership is also restricted by wide-spread poverty, as even simple, used phones can be prohibitively expensive for many of the countries' poorest. However, pay phone operators, e.g. through Grameen Telecom's "Village Phones" initiative (Camp & Anderson, 1999)², enable those who do not own mobile phones to purchase single calls³. A study by Samuel, Shah, and Hadingham (2005) thus found that in Tanzania 97% of the population have access to a mobile phone (p. 45). Taking these

findings together, the current development suggests that the mobile phone is on its way to becoming the first ICT with blanket coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The impact mobile phone technology can develop on the situation of women in Sub-Saharan Africa is limited by various constraints. Ngolobe (2010, p. 105) finds that "use of ICT continues to be governed by power relations whereby women frequently experience relative disadvantage". More specifically, illiteracy, poverty, and power imbalances are major factors that disproportionately affect women (World Bank, 2010) and limit their use of mobile phones (Gillwald, Milek, & Stork, 2010, p. 13). Nevertheless, Samuel, Shah, and Hadingham (2005) found that in Tanzania and South Africa, women use this ICT as much as or even more than men (p. 45); Gillwald, Milek, and Stork (2010, pp. 12) report equivalent findings for a range of countries. Based on similar studies, Haack (2008) argues that mobile phone use currently does not have an influence on improving gender equality, as women and men employ mobile phones similarly (pp. 73). In the light of the constraints cited by Ngolobe, however, this conclusion takes too narrow a view. On average, women have a lower social standing, are less educated, and generate lower incomes than men, factors correlating with their lower access to communication infrastructure such as fixed-line telephones and the Internet (Gillwald, Milek, & Stork, 2010, pp. 18). In comparison to other ICT, the even distribution of mobile phone use across both genders thus suggests an improvement in women's access to information and communication.

Mobile phones significantly decrease the cost of accessing information in Sub-Saharan Africa. In economies that often largely rely on agriculture, information on

market prices for crops and on more efficient farming methods is of significant importance, and mobile phones are increasingly used to access this information. Aker and Mbiti (2010) report that the introduction of mobile phones in Niger halved search prices, enabling farmers, consumers, and merchants to access both quantitatively and qualitatively superior information. Using mobile phones, traders can better respond to surpluses and shortages of goods. Subsequently, price differences for grains across markets in Niger decreased by 15 percent over the span of six years, while traders' profits increased. In some projects, mobile phones are used to specifically empower women farmers. In an instance of "m-agriculture" shared by Ngolobe (2010, pp. 106), the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) harnessed mobile phone technology, among other ICT, to support women farmers. In the EAAI project (Enhanced Access to Agricultural Information), the NGO sourced or produced content, localized it and disseminated it to women farmers using SMS, but also radio and other media. Ngolobe concludes that the project "improved the livelihoods of women through providing [them with] relevant agricultural information." These case studies show that mobile phones enable remote access to market and price information, and can be used to offer farmers access to relevant agricultural information.

Mobile phones do not just provide access to information, but also facilitate communication among members of a community, and across communities. Benkler (2006) has described the emergence of a "networked public sphere", which is characterized by "the shift [...] to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes, [and] the practical elimination of communications costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries" (p. 212). Goldstein and Rotich

(2010) apply this theory to the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. They show that in the violent aftermath of Kenya's 2007 presidential elections, mobile phones were used to incite riots (pp. 127) as well as to call for peace (p. 128), and to document human rights violations (pp. 129). Goldstein and Rotich conclude that "mobile phones have lowered the barriers to participation and increased opportunities for many-to-many communication."⁴ (p. 135) There are several instances in which this capacity has been used to support women's rights. Ngolobe (2010, p. 109) writes that women's organizations in Uganda use mobile phones to organize meetings and workshops. Charles-Iyoha (2010, p. 117) concludes that "mobiles have the potential to socially empower women in restrictive cultures", because they enable them to better organize and coordinate campaigns and advocacy.

Mobile phones have quickly found their way into African societies, and particularly into the hands of women. The new technology offers novel solutions to long-standing problems in areas such as education, health care, or banking, and opens up an opportunity to improve gender equality. By utilizing them to enable women's access to information that was previously out of reach, and to facilitate their communication across and within communities, mobile phones can be used to position women more powerfully within their societies. Yet the situation is not one-dimensional. While endorsing mobile phones as a tool for women's empowerment, the author acknowledges Ekine's caution that social change is brought about by people, not technology (Columbus, 2010). As the situation in Kenya after the election 2007 showed, mobile phones are a tool that can be used both in support and in violation of essential rights (Goldstein & Rotich, 2010). How a technology is, and can be, used is to be decided upon by manufacturers, legislators, and

individual users; it is in their hands to shape mobile telephony as a tool that can be used to improve gender equality. Where women are enabled to appropriate mobile phones for their needs, however, they can develop disruptive social power, as Ekine says: "To a large degree, women's access to mobile telephony is about their independence; the extent to which they can negotiate their daily lives without having to depend on others." (Kinoti, 2010)

Endnotes

¹ see James & Versteeg (2007) on the difficulties of measuring mobile phone pervasiveness.

² Camp & Anderson (1999) refer to the situation in Bangladesh, but Grameen Phone has since expanded its operations to several Sub-Saharan African countries.

³ for a critique of the sustainability of Grameen Phone's business model in Bangladesh, see Shaffer (2007).

⁴ on a second line of thought based on Larry Diamond's (2001) distinction between 'civil' and 'predatory' societies, Goldstein and Rotich (2010, pp. 134) argue that in a Sub-Saharan African context, the emergence of a digitally networked public sphere might not go along with development towards a more civil society. The author acknowledges this caution, but deems it too broad to include in this essay.

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