

Information Accessibility in the Digital Age: Empowering Women for Poverty Eradication

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Abstract

In recent times, there has been an increasing awareness of the need to empower women to improve their socio-economic status, cope with their economic situations, and contribute effectively to economic development. The contribution of women to economic development is germane and this necessitates the incorporation of gender equality in the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5). With that in mind, access to information is imperative to empower women in this digital era. However, there are perceptions, beliefs, and challenges about the use of information technology tools in women's information accessibility; hence there is gender inequality in information accessibility. Therefore, this study examined how women should be empowered in a manner that enables them to have access to information in the digital age, and the challenges faced in accessing information for economic development. A qualitative approach was used for the study. A review of relevant literature was done to examine how Nigerian women are empowered to have access to accurate and timely information. The study found that there are initiatives like Information Communication Technology (ICT) training skills, education, and financial support that are strategically planned to empower women, but this is still at an undesirably low rate. The study concludes by suggesting that policymakers ensure that

information be provided for women in the format that it will be easy for them to access, younger women should be encouraged to be literate, and organisations should collaborate with library professionals who are trained to disseminate information to a diverse population of women so that they may access the information they need.

Keywords: Women, information accessibility, digital age, empowerment, poverty

Introduction

The lean nature of the economic status in developing countries is affecting all social strata; women in particular are affected more by the unequal distribution of opportunities. This inequality occurs due to ‘societal beliefs, a lack of education, a lack of security, economic disadvantages, financial tools, a lack of quality, and most especially the timely information’ they need to succeed (Oxfam International 2017:5). The involvement of women in tackling poverty cannot be overemphasised, as it is one of the worst features of social life, which has ultimately led to women participating in minimally paying jobs, businesses, and various unpaid work to contribute to their quota towards poverty eradication in their household and the society at large. Women usually invest a higher proportion of their income than men, especially in matters relating to the family and social life of the community (Showkot & Adie 2017).

Women empowerment is part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eradicate poverty and bridge the social, financial, and educational gap between gender. However, one of the important elements that can be used to achieve this objective is the availability of information, although it is not as impactful as having access to it, which would allow necessary decisions to be made. It is also a tool that provides the power to ensure that social services reach ‘the most disadvantaged and marginalised people, support true social accountability, promote political and economic empowerment, and protect ones’ rights’ (The Carter Centre 2016:18). The availability and accessibility of information would allow better judgement for social, economic, and political decision-making, since the general perception of the society about women suggests that they are endowed with

untapped potential. However, gender stereotypes, feminism and masculinity result in the way women are treated in developing countries.

The penetration and advancement of information communication have provided opportunities for women to acquire knowledge and make better decisions for their social and economic status (Authur, Dukper & Sakibu 2019). Presently, women are recognised for their participation and effort in tackling poverty, hence one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) which agenda five (5) focuses on is the equal rights of women to economic resources and the use of enabling technology to promote women empowerment. Cummings and O'Neil (2015:16) posit that information is believed to be valuable and effective when making decisions, building self-assurance, and enhancing economic power. The information that women need includes health, literacy, skill acquisition, and economic-related information (Mammani & Esievo 2013). Having access to this information would be of immense benefit and would ultimately contribute to their overall development.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is becoming a valuable tool for accessing information in the present digital age, and its positive effect on all areas of life is encouraging women to launch into using it to access information. The availability of information cannot have a positive impact on women if this is not accessible, and this is heavily dependent on ICT, especially in this era of a global village. ICT use is necessary to access information stored in different formats. Studies show that the use of ICT, which is characterised by the digital age and information societies, is not being used equally by men and women (Sorgner & Krieger-Boden 2017:1). Women face different challenges accessing information by means of ICT, hence the various initiatives set up by the government and non-government organisations have focused on the identification of these problems to proffer a solution. The identification and assumption that women can alleviate poverty when empowered with information in this digital age should be a target for policy makers, organisations and individuals to be more committed and respond faster to this challenge. Therefore, in this paper, information accessibility in this present digital age is discussed as a means of empowering women to bring about poverty reduction.

Developing nations are characterised by poverty, unemployment, insecurity, unpaid jobs for women and the scarcity of basic social amenities, depreciation and scarcity. Therefore, efforts have recently been geared towards eradicating poverty by using the framework of Sustainable Develop-

ment Goals (SDGs) and other enabling structures, whereby the fifth (5) goal focuses on gender equality and economic development. Domestic involvement and efforts from women can target poverty eradication in their space. Information-based economies and globalisation are therefore critical if women's businesses and national economies are to gain comparative advantages and be free of poverty (Odoemelam 2016:2). Information is assumed to stimulate and enhance economic growth while sustaining development; therefore, accessing information in the digital age is inevitable (Mammani & Esievo 2013). The extent to which Information Communication Technology is used among men to access information is high and it is also essential for women to have equal use, to contribute their quota effectively to national development, thereby reducing poverty. However, women are digitally divided, preventing them from accessing the information needed for their empowerment (Oyelude & Bamgbole 2012:2). The digital divide influences important areas like level of education, income, literacy level and the cultural beliefs of the society. However, the strength of each will determine how women with access to information in the digital age will contribute towards sustainable development goals.

Moreover, Information Communication Technologies can be deployed to promote access to information to tap into the wealth of information globally. Because literature regarding women's accessibility to information for empowerment in the digital age and tackling poverty is scarce, this study is therefore essential to examine and review its effect on women in tackling poverty.

In light of the above, this study examines how women are empowered to access much-needed information and the effect that this access by women will have on poverty reduction and empowerment.

Theoretical Discourse

Friedman's (1992) theory of alternative development provides the basis for this study. Existing literature has adopted this theory as a framework for their studies (Calvès 2009; González 2008:15; Education for Sustainable Development Research Center 2005:50). The theory is based on the argument that poverty should not only be perceived in material terms, but also as a social, political and psychological weakness. The theory is focused on presenting an alternative development that is committed to empowering

the poor in their communities and mobilising them for political participation on a wider scale. The underlying factor of this alternative theory is to support the imbalance of ideas towards human rights, citizens' rights, and human flourishing. This shows that everyone has the right to encourage an improved standard of living for themselves and their families. It is not enough to see poverty only in terms of material things, but also in the political, social culture, and psychological powerlessness. Empowerment of these will eradicate poverty amongst women and ensure a lasting solution, as well as self-reliance, which is also needed to enforce development and a better life. Access to the necessary information to make decisions is a human right, irrespective of age, gender and class. However, excluding any members of the family from these, either because of stereotypes and culture, is a violation of that human right. Human flourishing refers to a human being's capacity of being fully human, in which case these rights mentioned make human flourishing possible (Friedman 1992). This theory identified other forms of poverty and suggests empowerment as a solution, especially at family and community level. The shortfall of the theory is that it underplays the importance of raw materials. However, this study aims to employ an alternative development pertaining to this imbalance of human rights. Access to information is a right of all citizens so that they may make impactful decisions; the shortfall of the above mentioned negates human rights and as such disempowers them.

The alternative theory is strengthened by the diffusion of the innovation theory (Roger 1995), which also guides the study as a theory that seeks to explain how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technology spread. Roger (1995) argues that diffusion is the process by which innovation takes place over time among participants in a social system. The innovation referred to here is ICT and its adoption by women in eradicating poverty. The use of information is seen to be common to all and sundry. The most common ICT tools are mobile phones, televisions and radios, which even illiterates can easily operate. However, if poverty must be tackled, these common tools alone cannot empower women. Information always comes in different formats; it can either be in print or non-print. However, it is worthy to note that an individual has the right to have access to the information he or she needs to make a choice and live an independent life. Information accessibility in this context implies that users can identify and use the information resources in whatever format they wish.

Women's Empowerment in Tackling Poverty

Women of any race, culture or society are assumed to play an important role as home-makers, but with little or no resources to achieve this role. This concern has earned women various empowerment efforts by the government and non-governmental bodies. The Broadband Commission (2013:35) mentions the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Bank, and the United Nations (UN) as some international organisations that focus on female empowerment. Banks at international and especially national level are not left out in empowering women; access to financial tools is provided to women by micro-finance banks to help many people, especially the women, start new businesses and expand businesses from subsistence levels, giving countless women voices in their homes and communities (Ernst and Young Global Limited 2015). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2014) submits that organisations recognise the potential of women and they engage in striking a balance between genders by giving women equal opportunities at work (Cumming & O'Neil 2015).

Empowerment is described as a process of personal and social change through which women or men gain power, make meaningful choices, and take control of their lives (O'Neil, Domingo & Valters 2014:1). The World Bank (2017:17) is explicit on the three most common aspects of empowerment. Economic empowerment involves improving the ability of women to access resources and employment, increase productivity and earnings, and increase income, and assets. Social empowerment refers to women's status in society, which depends on social norms and gender roles within the household and the community. Kabeer (2001:19) defines empowerment as the process by which those who have previously been denied the ability to make choices subsequently acquire such ability. Empowerment is concerned with the process by which people become aware of their interests and how these relate to the interests of others, for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision making and to influence decisions (Rahman 2013:9). Empowerment, as described by the World Bank, is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate, negotiate with, influence, control and hold institutions that affect their lives accountable (World Bank 2002:14).

The World Bank (2014:17) sees women's empowerment as creating the condition for women to be able to make choices. Individuals can choose if they are empowered financially, academically or with information, thereby authorising an individual to think, act, control and work in an autonomous way (Bhat 2015:188). Empowering women as perceived by Mammani and Esievo (2013) is a multidimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, political, social, psychological, and legal circumstances of the powerless with the intention of taking apart the cultural, traditional, and social structures that devalue, disempower and dispose of women. The three major areas that can be targeted to empower women (Newman 2016) are social, political and economic. It is important to mention that information and access is extremely relevant to all these areas. In an attempt for most women from the developing world to become more involved by providing for their household, they become engaged in informal employment. This, according to Hearle, Baden and Karlse (2019), is because of a lack of education, gender-based discrimination, capital, skill deficits, a lack of social protection, infrastructure, and relevant, accurate and timely information. It is therefore necessary that women are empowered with knowledge and all the skills that will facilitate their transformation. However, the place of information in empowering women cannot be overestimated, as this is essential and crucial in decision making.

Kabeer (2001:1) submits that the empowerment of women requires the understanding of the constraints in different socio-economic contexts in a bid to understand how these can be transformed. Interventions from organisations support this position; hence, their involvement in designing different strategies that focus on any sphere affecting women. Gender inequalities in poverty are rooted in unequal distribution and access to economic resources. The overview of social-economic empowerment in tackling poverty, as posited by Adekanye (2014:5), implies that women will be financially independent through their engagement in income-generating activities and that this will also allow them to develop their talents. This will not only affect women, but also society. One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is the promotion of Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (GEWE), yet there are still income gaps between men and women.

Building the 'power within' is a necessity for women and girls to have a voice and influence over their own lives, within the family and the society at large (Nikkah, Redzuan & Abu-Samah 2011:3). Self-confidence

in women therefore improves and women overcome the psychological barriers they may face when using ICT. The use of digital ICT can support women and girls' personalities and increase their political consciousness (Women 2020; and Beyond 2005:19). Women in Baduria, West Bengal, India gained more respect in their local communities because of the technology-based training acquired at the ICT centre, where learning how to use a computer and accessing and distributing information to local people took place. That said, younger women were able to approach the job market with confidence. The coming together of women at the centre resulted in sharing of information about their experiences and problems, thereby creating a sense of unity among them as well as bringing forth leadership qualities (Division for the Advancement of Women 2005).

Women's participation in literacy programmes is seen as a means of empowering them to make key decisions and take charge of their lives. This, in essence, translates to motivation, self-esteem and confidence. They are motivated to seek information on income generation and employment opportunities; they have more confidence to exercise their political and economic rights to participate (UNESCO 2012). The study revealed the capabilities and efforts of women in tackling poverty and ensuring a good life for their families. However, for this to be impactful, the understanding of the social, political, and economic sphere of women must be considered so that the expected result can be achieved in empowerment programmes.

Women Information Accessibility in the Digital Age

The digital age, according to Dalia et al. (2010:41), is referred to as an 'agora', a place where ideas, new concepts and technology are conceived and exchanged, where connections between people from any part of the world are not just possible, but become a reality. Recently, the digital age in an information society is making a shift from the traditional ways of accessing and using information, thereby creating social changes (Sutton 2013:10). Oyelude and Bamigbola (2012:107) identify workshops, talks, enlightenments, campaigns, counselling, and outreaches as a means for women to access information before the invention of information technology. Hafkin (2017:77) defines access to information as an enabling environment that allows individuals to access, use and share information and further develop their capabilities to apply this information meaningfully in their everyday

lives. This study is about access to information as a fundamental right, which allows the public to access information held by governments and often by private entities that perform public duties or receive information. This submission is from a political point of view, as it is focused on and targets political empowerment.

Accessing information is a key foundation to achieving digital inclusion (Kuroda *et al.* 2019:2). Accessibility, according to Kulkarni (2019:92), is the extent to which a product, device, service, or environment is available and navigable for persons with disabilities or persons with other special needs or functional limitations. The Carter Centre (2016:19) mentions the importance of access to information as allowing women to make more effective decisions, enable women to know and exercise their full range of rights to participate more in public life, to bridge gender gaps, to help shift power, and to provide opportunities for women's increased economic empowerment. Access to information allows people in general to gain opportunities to think about alternatives, to use whatever capacities they have and to mobilise resources to initiate development interventions in their development process. Baroi and Pandey (2015) further support this, being one of the most important elements that determine empowerment, as people's ability to make their own choices, the lack of which will likely degrade, resulting in social exclusion, marginalisation, isolation, and humiliation (World Bank 2003).

Different schemes by the government, non-governmental agencies as well as the public and research libraries ensure that women have access to their unmet information needs. Beyond Access Libraries Powering Development (2012) points out some schemes carried out by the government; these include UNESCO strategy on gender equality, ensuring ICT access for girls and women in addition to training, which helps them to gain access into technical professions. The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (n.d:5) reveals how the organisation provide education and training for women and girls to imitate transformative change in society. To ensure and bridge the gender gap in ICT and access to information, consideration is given to a safe and comfortable environment to access information on a computer using the internet. Recently, there are configurations of some mobile phones that enable accessing information with internet enabling functions, though this is expensive.

The study by Badran (2014) reveals that the use of and exposure to

ICT by girls in his study, was based on their level of education; however, many were not fortunate enough to be educated. Efforts are made by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) that are partnered with the government and media houses to broadcast information to the public, especially women and girls, about issues that affect them and their offspring. Information is distributed to them in their local languages and in the format that will be accessible to them; yet the shortfall of this method is that women only have access to the information made available to them. It will be more rewarding to be able to have the technical know-how on how to search for their information needs.

Capacity building can also potentially enhance women empowerment. Nkemnyi et al. (2017:231) affirm that the capability of women to contribute to development and poverty alleviation has been hindered by social, cultural, economic, and political factors. He further mentions that the provision of services alone cannot empower women; efforts must be geared towards capacity building that can boost the potential of women to participate in generating income and decision making. It is submitted that if women had access to information in this digital age, the emphasis should be on education. The study of Badran (2014) found that women and girls in urban areas, with a fair income level, tend to use their computer and internet-enabled mobile phones more than women from rural areas with little or no education. The recognition of the social-economic and geographical location as a barrier to the use of ICT to get information has led to the collaboration between NGOs and the Egyptian government to eradicate illiteracy. The internet and multimedia devices are used to teach girls at home, thereby equipping them to have the skills to access information in any format using any of the devices. Access to information and knowledge resources to empower women in agricultural production were investigated by Odoemelum (2016), as spacing, mix-cropping and intercropping information were needed by the respondents. Nevertheless, it was noted that age, education, income and sex were factors affecting information accessibility. To empower the women to have access to information that will be useful to them, the government must ensure the provision of vocational training, education and information in different formats that can aid easy access to information.

Academic libraries are not exempted; the study of Ugah (2008) investigated the easy accessibility of information sources and the use of

library services. It was proposed that the more accessible information sources are, the more users are likely to use them. Clients also tend to use information sources that require the least effort to access. The library should therefore ensure that proper indexing and cataloguing are done, that an effective loan and circulation system is in place in addition to an adequate guide to the library's arrangement, thus removing administrative and physical barriers. The library should also ensure that the provision of computers, overhead projectors and other software that will allow ease of access are also made available. Therefore, for easy access to information in the digital age, it has been discovered that education is key and training women in the use of technology cannot be overemphasised.

Empowering Women with Information and its Challenges

The progress in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) development towards information-based economies and globalisation is considered critical if individuals, businesses, and national economies are to gain comparative advantages (Odoemelam 2016). Accessing information in the digital age, the provision of quality technology, internet connectivity and trained staff to help girls and women, allow for the gain of benefits associated with ICT (Mammani & Esievo 2013). Oral channels of disseminating information are cannot meet the challenges of information explosion in the digital age. This method, according to Oдини and Kiplangat (2012), will not allow women to attain apt, precise, germane and adequate information for their empowerment. The impact of access to prices and product information, in the supply chain option, by women as mentioned by Authur *et al.* (2019), will not only aid their power and competition but also increase their earnings, which will enhance prosperity and economic growth.

Women are empowered the most, especially during an economic recession, to improve their socio-economic status to cope with the challenge and contribute effectively to society. However, studies have revealed that women are at disadvantage, hence why they are being forced to look for alternative means of generating income to take care of their families, especially their children. Digital divides, lack of access to needed information, poverty, discrimination, low wage jobs and insecurity were identified as factors that can prevent women from accessing the information needed for their empowerment (Oyelude & Bamigbole 2012; Castellani

2014; Showkot & Adie 2017). Oyelude and Bamigbola (2012) also identified cultural, religious, and sometimes sociological factors as part of the factors hindering women from accessing information, thereby making them face inequality. The obvious divide has overshadowed the benefits that came with the use of ICT to access relevant information, this was supported by the view of the Economic and Social Research Council (2012) that the unprecedented opportunities of ICT on education, political participation and employment also came with its discrepancies in the access to, and use of ICT, causing a digital divide. The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (2014) argues that 70% of the world's extreme poor are women and girls, due to where many of them live and subsist on small-scale productive activities. The major challenge pointed out by Vidisha, Urvashi and Vidisha (2017) hang on poverty and its ripple effect, affecting access to higher education and financial services. This translates to women not having the skills and tools to access the necessary information for both economic and social empowerment.

Cummings and O'Niel (2015) mention structural barriers to women and girls' access to and use of ICT in accessing information. Meanwhile, in meeting women's socio-economical needs, access to information is inevitable where social access is heavily dependent on ICT. In this information society, the required skills to access information in any format cannot be neglected. This gave rise to strategies by governments, organisations and individuals to tackle and eradicate poverty, targeting women and girls through some of their initiatives and strategies. Availability and accessibility of information will enable rural women to make rational decisions to reduce their uncertainty concerning farming businesses (Odoemelam 2016).

Affordability was identified as one of the major challenges faced by women in accessing information in the digital age. Affordability is a challenge for all, but disproportionately affects more women and girls than men and remains one of the key hurdles in accessing ICT and bridging the gender gaps in the Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (OECD 2018:5). The submission by Sorgner and Krieger-Boden (2017) shows that current gender inequalities may prevent women from fully benefiting from opportunities offered by digitalisation. The absence of women from leadership roles in information technology has resulted in a lower diversity of opinions and quality of decision-making throughout the

sector; it is also submitted that women's involvement and participation are germane to cross this hurdle (United Nations University 2019).

Information literacy, which is the ability to access, locate, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources, was linked with a lack of autonomy in personal participation in social life. To Davaki (2018:17), illiteracy translates into a lack of increased opportunities to enhance autonomy in person and participation in social life and widens the gap between information-rich and information-poor even more. Space, lack of content, control, violence, women's negative attitude, gender bias, stereotypes and financial obstacles were identified by Hafkin (2017) as challenges to women's information accessibility in the digital age. Authur et al. (2019) categorically point at the limited access to relevant, accurate and timely information as the most important cause of poverty among women. Therefore, for them to be empowered to eradicate poverty and gain economic freedom, Information Communication Technology tools are necessary ingredients for their economic development. However, 'access to basic education is recognised as a vital transformational tool and a formidable instrument for social-economic empowerment' (Policy Department for Citizens Right and Constitutional Affairs 2018:8).

Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined women's information accessibility in the digital age and how information empowerment has a positive impact on the eradication of poverty among women. The emphasis was placed on empowering women, as one of the SDGs was born out of the realisation of women's efforts to eradicate poverty, even when faced with both financial and societal challenges. It was observed that information is key, and women must be informed to make necessary decisions. Information is also one of the alternative developments that are required to make informed decisions that can pave the way for women politically and economically. However, the availability of information is seen not to be as impactful as information accessibility. For that to be possible in these times, technological tools are important, while accessing the necessary information is subject to digital literacy. Accessing information tools was seen to be another bottleneck for most women and girls, and these limitations pose great barriers to how women access information and use it for their empowerment. The

stereotypical nature of society must be addressed to enlighten men about gender equality and to become more orientated towards women's internalised belief of inferiority and incapability. Collaboration between governments, non-governmental organisations and libraries should be encouraged, since they are trained to provide information to a diverse population as well as to package that information in a format that will be easily accessible to women.

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