

Debunking Stereotypes: Empowering Women and Girls for the Digital world for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes are not just harmful, but they can be fatal if not debunked and addressed to alleviate the suffering of victims who in most cases are feminine. While human thinking capacity knows no gender, societal constructs have been instrumental in the female gender struggles that have been around for centuries. In the past thirty years, activists in this field have contributed to the evolution that has seen many women regaining their autonomy. Amid these developments, the girl-child has received attention in the role out of these interventions with the aim of empowering and preparing her for meaningful participation in this digital world. There is evidence that as female gender adopts and utilises these tools, they can manage and overcome their constraints. This paper draws from nego-feminist ideologies as it exposes stereotypes against females and articulates ways that can be adopted by the society and women in their effort to empower themselves and the girl-child. The concept of empowerment is questioned prior to its engagement in the context of global disparities in gender issues. The conclusion draws from the discussions and makes explicit its holistic approach to sustainable development of female gender through digital technologies.

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Introduction

A woman is the most resourceful being even at her worst because with little resources and formal education, she can impart skills, values and knowledge to her offspring that later become part of the society. The same society conspires and turns against her through its established and yet unwritten rules in some cases that it operates from. It is interesting that these noble woman attributes feed into the demeaning stereotypes that many cultures across the world do not acknowledge and cherish. Most of these women enjoy playing their roles as home executives and support their families even in their worst circumstances. It is these attributes that the society finds reason to constrain and associate woman's existence to them so it can exploit, punish and exclude them from contributing to the development of the world they are part of. This behaviour is contrary to the norms of the emerging digital world that we are fast approaching.

Several international organisations have teamed up to alleviate the suffering faced by women and girls under patriarchal elements. Amongst these is the United Nations Women that has made a commitment to thwart gender inequality in every part of the world as it moves towards sustainable development by 2030. The 5th Sustainable Developmental Goal (SDG) of the United Nations Assembly speaks to women empowerment through Information and

Communications Technology (ICT). This goal supplements the Millennium Development Goal 3 which advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Gatherings such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, World Summit for Children, Dakar International Conference on Assistance to African Children and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) amongst many other local ones have converged to try and come up with strategies to empower and protect the vulnerable of our societies. The plight of the girl-child for instance has been proclaimed internationally through organisations like UNICEF by giving resources and more attention to the special constraints and needs of the girl-child as a separate area of concern.

While the plight of women is a global pandemic, this paper upholds the African values that advocate for collaborative engagement in resolving strife in any setting. It exposes men and women's practices that originate from gender stereotypes, a phenomenon that does not promote inclusivity in any society's development in the digital world.

Conceptual Clarification

Stereotypes

Hilton and von Hippel (1996:240) describe stereotypes as "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviours of members of certain groups". If these attributes are aligned to our natural features; those that we have no control over and those that assign us to our 'intended' roles, such stereotypes are unavoidable and are to be upheld. It becomes unfortunate when such stereotypes are attached to negative undertones that make other species of the same kind have dominion over the other in their attempt to deal with power dynamics within groups of people. If these attributes are not addressed, societies, communities and families transcend from generation after generation, these traits continue to the demise of the victim physical, emotional and psychological being.

While stereotypes help in reducing cognitive engagement, they empower the dominant at the expense of the subservient's freedom (McLeod, 2015). Such tendencies make us not appreciate each other's individual differences that may help us see and bring about the best in all of us as people. This leads to prejudiced attitudes where we see each other as in or outside the categorisations. These negative attitudes have the potential to destroy confidence in people as the person is made to perceive the label as a true description of himself or herself by others (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This is the plight of the female gender and as this happens, the dominant's (male) position is engrained in every fabric of the group. Ultimately, it becomes difficult to unravel the stigma on the woman and the girl-child's development and empowerment, even in the digital era.

The Digital World

The influx of digital technologies in all spheres of life has brought about inevitable change in communication, production, education, business transaction, and others. This infiltration of ICT elevates the status of those who have uninterrupted access and know how to use them as tools for efficiency and effectiveness. This scenario creates a digital world that reinforces a status quo which benefits those who have the resources and time to operate in these exclusive circles as citizens.

Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal (2011) describe digital citizens as people who use information and communication technologies in order to participate in the society, politics, and

government. Survival in this world demands digital citizenship where inhabitants must keep up with what it takes to be part of the system. If not managed these digital participants can easily exclude themselves from the rest of the conservative world, thereby widening the divide and the breeding of stressed and unsociable citizens (Keenan, 2015) who, in the context of this paper are likely to be the female gender found in patriarchal societies.

Debunking Stereotypes

The suppression of women has involuntarily and at times voluntarily given them second-class citizen status in the society in order to be accepted and considered as true representations of the female gender. In worse scenarios, women who do not live up to these set standards are not seen as attractive to men who fear that they will rule over them if ever they get married. These efforts by women to empower themselves through education are frowned at as they are considered as plots to attract educated men. Contrary to that, Kyi (1995) argues,

“the true development of human beings involves much more than mere economic growth. At its heart there must be a sense of empowerment and a sense of fulfilment. When this is achieved, culture and development will naturally coalesce to create an environment in which all are valued, and every kind of human potential can be realized”. (1995:18).

In such a case, stereotypes incapacitate the ability of women to empower themselves. In fact, this attitude towards women diverts focus from humanity to materiality that Nnaemeka (2004) objects to in her critique of globalization trends.

A study conducted by Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady in Brown, (2017) discredits stereotypes that devalue educated women. In their findings, women who were reminded of their ethnicity as Asians performed better in a test than those who were reminded of their female identity. It is therefore important to appreciate that the physiological difference in man and women has nothing to do with their mental capacity or their urge to advance themselves. Both should work together as they engage their minds to build safe and competitive societies.

The impact of “discrimination and negligence at early ages of a child has a lifelong downward spiral of deprivation and exclusion from the social mainstream” (Alumanah, 2005:1). Because not much in terms of academic achievement and projects that have social-economic impact is expected from girls, they do not make an effort to advance their capabilities. This is evident in their selection of subjects at school. Most challenging subjects that demand deep thinking are usually left for boys to tackle. This happens through narratives and recommendations in girl’s surroundings (at home and at school) that instill these oppressive dispositions from an early age.

Some of these gender-based stereotypes are considered as ‘culture’ rooted in archaic ideologies and yet when civilization or modernization was at its lowest, queens were crowned, and great women leaders were given and respected for their positions (Schwarz-Bart, Schwarz-Bart & Dodson, 2001). Certain men today regard themselves as being masculine when they physically and emotionally abuse their wives. At times these feuds arise as devices used to restrain women from challenging or questioning what men do and entering in their territory as ‘heads’ of families. On the other hand, there are many homes where a woman is respected and treated as a queen. Such men do not beat women as that is a sure sign of weakness. Supposedly, the weakness is in the failure to contend with the woman’s assertiveness in the relationship.

Women are therefore made to feel they are useless, incapable of thinking and therefore only good for bearing children and managing homes. Culture is “dynamic and it needs constant and close scrutiny to separate reality from invention or trace invention’s transformation into reality” (Nnaemeka, 2004:374), otherwise it is not serving the unit (community) that it is subordinate to as a mechanism for stability.

Although the intervention to address these stereotypes, has been introduced and driven by the western feminists in their world, it should take into cognition what cultural attributes are valued in Africa for instance. In the Zulu culture, we say, *inkosiyinkosingabantu; izandlaziyagezana; ubucubuhlengobuhambangabubili* and many African tribes have theirs to. All these emphasise how important it is to work together and support each other as people, regardless of one’s gender. It extends to the community where every adult is responsible for any child they meet. In fact, the child does not call an adult by their name but by their family name, for example, baba for dad, mama for mother and so on. In a case like that, one would not harm a representative of their family member that they respect.

Nnaemeka (2004) recommends that we should build gender-based interventions from the indigenous otherwise we are irrelevant to the problem we want to redress. Ake (1988) describes indigenous as what we value and as an authentic expression of ourselves that helps us capable of breaking barriers to change that might be portrayed in people’s behaviour. It is irrational then how members of a society can ascribe to a value at macro levels and drop it completely at home in order to secure their positions.

Nego-feminism as defined by Nnaemeka (2004) as ‘no ego’ feminism or negotiation feminism is characterized by *negotiation, compromise* and *balance*. In her ideology, a challenge is negotiated, and, in the process, the solution is reached through compromise. This is found especially in the giving of *lobola* or the dowry which is a negotiation between the future bride and groom’s families. Without reaching a compromise, this process cannot succeed, and marriage cannot happen. In the case of handling male versus female conflict, Naemeka (2004) states,

“It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mine; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts.” (2004:378).

In this context, the woman uses critical thinking skills to solve her challenges with the male gender. He is not viewed as the other, but as part of what should make a human being whole (Naemeka, 2004:380). It is therefore not ideal that the woman would try and resolve gender issues in the exclusion of the male counterpart. This view foregrounds the approach that will be taken in suggesting how women and girls can be empowered in this discussion. While it argues for an inclusive approach, an attempt will be made to focus on female empowerment that scholars like Nkealah (2018) justifiably problematizes.

The Digital Divide

The empowerment of women through digital resources demands that there be a disruption of broader societal norms prior to the implementation of these goals as one of the strategies. In some Sub-Saharan communities for instance, patriarchal constraints limit their freedom to move at will so they can access digital resources available in their areas. As a result, “most people who

are offline today are women from poor communities especially those from rural areas”Web Foundation (2018:6).

Potnisi Perryman and de los Arcos, (2016) divides constraints to women’s ICT ownership and digital involvement into micro-level (individual), meso-level (related to family or group) and macro-level (regional or national), with reference to related literature (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016:166). What Potnis (2015) may refer to as the individual’s barrier may refer to the woman or girl’s incapacitation brought about by stereotypes which lead to what Bourdieu (1991) would refer to as symbolic violence. As they grow up, girls learn ways of surviving under the explicit and implicit instruction that draws parameters for what they can do and what they can own.

As they grow, girls are not given the experience of handling finances as they learn to depend on the one in authority or power in their lives. By the time they become women, marriage becomes the graduation in this meso-level (the home) whose instruction leaves an indelible mark in their lives. The possession of ICT becomes a luxury they get at the mercy of their husbands. Women, especially those with no privilege of handling finances cannot own, access, later alone use digital technology in cyber cafes as their call of duty in their households demands that they stay indoors or work in the fields. This justifies the reason why men seem to be more equipped to participate meaningfully in political, economic and educational spheres as they have the time and resources to access information through ICT. Such predispositions inform attitudes that promote barriers at macro-level. Web Foundation (2018) argues,

“Failing to connect these offline populations will result in a loss for everyone: the longer these billions remain unconnected, the less we will all benefit from their collective knowledge, talent and contributions to economic prosperity.” (2018:7).

Table I below demonstrates how one level of barrier impacts the other and by so doing giving women and the girl-child little chance to escape the entrenchment orchestrated by socio-cultural, economic, demographic, psychological and geographic circumstances they find themselves in. The micro-level represents the individual and how the barriers impact on the woman. At meso level, it is the external influences that the woman lives with and can be the family or the community. Macro level represents influences that the woman has no control over like the government and civil society. It is for that reason that empowerment of women through ICT cannot be treated in isolation if implementation of the 5th SDG goal and the Millennium 3rd goals are to be achieved.

Table 1: Barriers reinforcing the digital divide (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016:166)

Inequalities and Respective Barriers	Micro-Level	Meso-Level	Macro-Level
Socio-cultural (e.g. oppressing gender roles for women in male-dominated societies; religious beliefs and practices) (Bourdieu, 1986; Hafkin and Huyer, 2008)	Women's lack of freedom to make decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhood with high crime rate of poverty. • Membership of organizations facilitating access to new media. 	Social norms (e.g. parents saving money for the education of their male child but for the wedding of a female child).
Economic (e.g. inflation, lack of economic opportunities) (Annafari, Axelsson& Bohlin, 2013: Rice and Katz, 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of employment. • Inability to afford ownership of ICT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low household income. 	High fees for ICT-based services.
Demographic (e.g. lower caste, less education) (DiMaggio and Cohen, 2003: Zainudeen, Iqbal & Samarajiva (2010), Dijk, 2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illiteracy. • Lack of knowledge and/or skills. 		
Psychological (e.g., beliefs creating an inferiority complex among women) (Madinou and Miller, 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse attitudes toward ICT (e.g. apathy about ICT adoption). • Lack of self-efficacy to own and/or use ICT. 		
Geographic (e.g. rural vs. urban location, poor transportation infrastructure) (European Commission, 2005)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long distance to ICT facilities. 	Lack of ICT infrastructure (e.g., poor signal strength).

Interventions aimed at supporting women should therefore take into consideration the existence of the above five barriers. In these circumstances, women affected by these constraints are most likely to participate in the digital world if ICT can be brought to them and reliable infrastructure is constructed so they can remain connected and become producers of knowledge.

Empowering Women and Girls in the Digital World

This paper's view is that if empowering women to succeed and be sustainable, both gender types should be involved, otherwise resistance or disempowerment as Nkealah (2018) argues is inevitable. The two elements (empowerment and disempowerment) should be expected as both are reinforcing forces. All involved should participate in this collaboration, given that the force from those disempowering (barriers at all levels) is strong enough to bring the empowerment effort to a halt. Nkealah (2018:49) argues that a definition of empowerment should not be simplified as it is difficult to make clear what we mean as questions of "which women have the power to do *what*, *when* and *how*" need to be answered first, otherwise inappropriate interventions may result in undesirable outcomes.

In India for instance, it is the bride's parents who pay dowry, and this is the reason why girl births have been frowned at by this community. How then do you empower Indian women

who live in areas where different types of atrocities are committed against them as a way of disempowering or destroying them? Is it possible to intervene in the absence of the male gender? It is pleasing to note that India and many other nations that are known to have treated women unequally and treated them as of no value are transforming in response to national and international programmes that educate all communities on adapting to the reforms.

Kabeer (1999:435) defines empowerment as the “process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability”. Karl (1995) further expands its meaning by adding that it is “a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action.” Nkealah (2018:49) argues that a definition of empowerment should not be simplified as it is difficult to make clear what we mean as questions of “*which* women have the power to do *what*, *when* and *how*” need to be answered first, otherwise inappropriate interventions may result in undesirable outcomes. However, her definition is helpful in this context as it says, it is a “*process by which women – individually and collectively – gain autonomy and mastery over their own affairs*” (2018:50). This definition will be decoded and used to suggest ways of empowering women and the girl-child as follows:

Process – the empowerment involves a number of changes to the individual who has perhaps grown up knowing nothing else but that she is nothing; she can be attacked any time; she deserves abuse in any structure of the society – at home/ school/ work, and it is okay as she will not be believed or protected anywhere; she must rely on the man for economic well-being as evidence that she is subordinate; it is wrong to be educated as she will be empowered to challenge man; she can be offered for marriage to someone she does not love, but because it is culture, it is okay. These and many other socially entrenched evils against women cannot be eradicated overnight as Nkealah’s four key questions imply. This paper adds a fifth one which is, *why* is it not right to be treated as such as they reflect about how to recreate self-worthiness (I deserve better) in some of our girls and women who have gone through severe experiences of abuse. ICT can be used here as tools to share content that is empowering the victims as they begin to participate in the digital world.

Individually – empowerment at individual level is critical to the success of the intervention. Both the mind and the heart need to change, and the question is how much it takes for an individual who has been destroyed from an early age to rise up and say, ‘this is enough’. Engagement with digital technology in addition to interaction with support structures can assist one to move from the trance. Sharing stories created by the victims can open avenues through which support can be solicited at all barrier levels. The affordances of digital technologies such as accessibility, reflect, communication and collaboration (Conole and Dyke, 2004) can mitigate in most of these cases to try and engage and provide guidance on these issues through ICT.

Collectively - older women have a social obligation to hold the girl-child’s hand from the time they are born. The proverb, ‘prevention is better than cure’ is most appropriate in this case. Networks should be formed for woman to women; women to girls and for girl to girl interaction. A powerful girl like Malala Yousafzai was shot in October 2012 for having spoken up for the right of girls to be educated. It takes a self-respecting girl who does not only see herself as of value, but all in her gender. Some girls’ experience conflicting messages on their gender

roles from different social structures such as home, school, community and the media, which give way to persistent gender stereotypes. The seed should be planted by both mothers and fathers in their boys and girls. Fathers should be role models for the boys as they see them giving their sisters the same privileges in terms of financial, education and respect for all at home. Girls will grow knowing, they are free to participate as citizens of worth – a trait desirable in the digital world.

Autonomy – some women in other communities grow up knowing that the man has the last word and all that they must do to demonstrate that they are good subordinates is complying. In some cases, the reason is that so we can win favors from men. Some women willingly or not, hand over their lives to human beings like them and are made to believe they do not have a mind with a capacity to operate at a certain level.

Reports on women uptake of digital technology are low in some communities and this is due to not having autonomy over finances. The consequence for this dependence in this age is exclusion from what one needs to empower themselves. Girls need to be taught ways of being productive and investing their income at an early age. They must be taught to buy themselves goods and not always rely on someone else to do it for them. It is such dependences that later make them run for older men at all costs so they can rely on them for their upkeep.

The dependence syndrome has a way of making women feel they are not worth getting good merchandise, as a result even if they have money; they would rather spend it on others or managing their homes. Some of this has to do with being responsible, which is good, but some of the funds should be put aside for her upkeep. At times women sacrifice so much while their partners spoil themselves instead of buying necessities for their families (Alumanah, 2005). At times it is women who promote this virtual cycle because they struggle to value themselves and deprive man access to all the luxuries. What about women? Do they not need the news? They do, but time is their major constraint.

Digital technologies have affordances that can help save time so they can open spaces to empower themselves in different aspects of their lives. What ICT do they need to help create time for them, or do they need it? Maybe they do not, but they want to be kept busy? What occupation do they want to engage in? What are their dreams for life? How can the society help them fulfill their dreams? Should it do it for them or should it empower them to do it for themselves as they understand better what affordances they need for what? Why are ICT not in their budgets? Even if they had money, there are other 'urgent' matters that need to be addressed. For instance, the following can be accessed and e-purchased online: clothes; patterns, material; gardening tips for subsistence farmers; weather broadcast to help make decisions; The purchase of a cell phone can cause conflict in families as there will be more urgent household needs (Alumanah, 2005). The reason for that could be that a cellphone is presented as a medium to receive content and communicate and yet there is much more they can be used for. For instance:

- If sick – call an ambulance
- If lonely – entertainment – but is that a need? Of course, it is
- If looking for information about anything in the home – Google.

Those who are techno savvy know that with these tools much is a click or swipe away. We need to empower others so they can create spaces for themselves where they can work smart.

There are so many tools available that need to be identified and for poor communities to access them for free.

Another excuse for women's failure to use digital technology is that they are unable to operate devices because they are illiterate and prefer verbal communication (Alumanah, 2005). If that is the reason as there are many social networks now that have the function of sending voices messages and images that can be used by non-users of the phone language. Since we are working together, let us come up with ways of loading data instead of entering those numerous numbers. Something operating like a Quick Response (QR) code could be used instead. What might even help, is educate the illiterate through the same phone so that they can be independent.

Mastery– Women, even those in rural areas have a skill. If they cannot cook well, they can clean well, if not, they can wash well, if not, they can iron well, if not, they can write well, if not, they can drive well. The question is, do women and girls value the gift they have, and if they do, what are they doing to allow themselves to advance with that skill. There are many that have degrees and PhDs on what we are already doing so well. We might not have the theory, but we got it through trial and error. All that is left now is to gain knowledge about it so we can share it with others or better still make its outputs sustainable.

Own affairs–the following synonyms of affairs from the Thesaurus.com make clearer what this refers to: business, matters, dealings, activities concern, undertakings, obligation, duty, pursuit, task and relationships. It is everything and anything that relates to the woman that she should have control over.

UNICEF proposes that women's empowerment should include provision of basic welfare services, access to resources, conscientisation, mobilization and participation. This paper argues that sustainable development of women focuses more on giving them tools such as knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them generate resources they need to provide themselves. There is infrastructure that government projects need to provide, but lower level resources can be their responsibility. This approach inculcates a sense of ownership, autonomy and promotes mastery in their affairs. In addition, girls and women need to live in social structures that will support (empower) them and not disempower them.

ICT for Empowerment

In their study, Hargittai and Walejko (2008) were able to expose discrepancies in the use of digital technologies by boys and girls. And as per the dominant discourses of the time, girls were less involved in creating digital content than boys. One needs to look at the specific social structure then and the availability of digital technologies. In cultures where female roles are confined to homecare (Western or African), girls will not have much time to spend on their phones as boys and this would have an impact on the extent to which they use them. Creating digital content needs time and people (regardless of their gender) who have more access points are more likely to engage in more online activities that can benefit their lives Hassani (2006).

Ignorance and negligence on the part of parents is bound to be detrimental to the lives of their girl-children. As they are carried away by the access and new technologies, the young share their lives with strangers by posting different types of texts like photos of themselves, links,

music and videos on social media. Gallo (2013) posits that teens in particular, use these spaces to express themselves and as they do, they are left as prey for vultures to consume. The challenge therefore is how these platforms can be manufactured in such a way that the young people are empowered to cope with real life challenges instead of isolating them from realities they are bound to come across. How do they communicate in a way that they become citizens that promote respect for the individual, others and the community at large, regardless of their gender? Who should facilitate these conversations, or should they be monitored and if so why?

With the above questions, it is clear that digital technology cannot be relied on for raising our children. The truth is, we cannot be with our children all the time. The question therefore is, what are we doing as a society at large to ensure our girls are able to identify predators so when they get to this unsafe space, they are more knowledgeable in terms of how to participate in a conversation intelligently and more cautiously? Manufacturers, what features on the phone can help detect or report unscrupulous characters. These smart phones we have, can they help our girls to be smarter? It is possible that such features are already there since the rate at which these devices are advancing is so great.

ICT in Education for the girl-child

The social networks play an important role in building generational identity and harmony among the young people and yet whatever intervention is used, it should be well-informed so as to avoid disrupting the good that might be produced through the virtual interactions. The influence of this type of socialisation is not breeding strong-willed future adults. Although the future citizens of the digital world appear to be both consumers and producers, researchers need to investigate the quality of the content consumed and produced by these digital citizens. Do they add value to the development of their cognitive skills, or they inculcate 'floating' behaviours that can be blown in any direction of the wind? Girls in particular need to engage in activities that will help them navigate the world or be the best negotiators and collaborators if they will meaningfully participate in this emerging society. It is unfortunate that these results do not specify the gender differences.

Much as there is a lot that has been said in literature about the girls' deficiency in digital technology skills, further studies need to be made to understand the deeper cultural constructs that may be responsible for the findings. Superficial studies help to perpetrate some of these stereotypes. There is literature that argues that females pursue and do well in education because they want to meet educated men. How about many educated women who are married to uneducated men? This is all to demonstrate that women are all about financial gain in relationships, a dogma that many assertive women, including nego-feminists would strongly object too. Such views endorse patriarchal agendas that the digital era is proving to be untrue.

The participatory culture in the digital world should not be dominated by activities that bring about immediate gratification as that (like drugs) will promote addiction that leads to tendencies that seclude them from the world that needs them to play meaningful roles. Our youth activities should be such that they enhance our society through supplementing people's skills necessary for use in the contemporary world and for diversifying creative and cultural production (Hargittai&Walejko, 2008).

Clark and Mayer (2011) argue that over the past 60 years instructional methods that bring about learning have not changed. Contrary to Prensky (2001) the fact that instructional methods have not changed is reason to believe learning has not changed regardless of the

medium used to teach. We teach for many reasons. It is not just about getting a 100% pass rate, but we do so that the knowledge, skills and attitudes our youth gains will help them successfully navigate life. In the case of our girls, will they be able to negotiate difficult home, work and societal pandemoniums? As they do, will they have adequate digital skills to dissolve social ills and create sustainable solutions to life? An exceptional case in Nigeria reported,

“... when informed that some state governments had refused to implement the federal government policy of giving a housing allowance to married female public servants, IfeyinwaNzeako, the National President of the Nigerian National Council of Women’s Societies (NCWS), rather than quarrel about the gender inequality in the allocation of fringe benefits, issued a statement pointing out that the discriminatory policy hurts women by depriving them of the benefits to provide for their children. Knowing how to negotiate cultural spaces, the NCWS leadership shifted the argument from gender equity to family well-being/ children’s welfare and accomplished its goals.” (Nnaemeka, 2004:381)

Some of our educators are guilty of throwing out the most effective traditional methods that have worked for years simply because they want to create a simulation of this ‘digital world’ in the exclusion of what in Zulu is called *ubuntu*, humanity, for lack of a better word. This takes us back to the Digital Citizenship principles which are respect, educate and protect (Digital Citizenship, 2016). If what Clark and Mayer (2011) is to be espoused and we keep our proven pedagogies in our integration of ICT, teaching and instilling all three of the principles should help develop a sound minded learner who will be able to participate in the digital world responsibly. The recognition of pitfalls in technology and its use that compromises the three can only prepare our young ones to be robots that are inhuman. If our girls develop heartless traits, what kind of women and mothers will they be? The utilization of digital technology in the classroom should therefore mean the utilization of these powerful tools to learn and as they do, be taught netiquette so they may learn how to express themselves as they communicate for instance. For girls, this is the time when they should learn how to apply those negotiating and collaborative abilities they learnt at home as they participate online in a discussion on a topic.

As we empower women and girls for sustainable development, ICT are a flexible tool that can be used as vehicles to reach women and girls in all parts of the world. They have proven to be efficient and effective when used with a clear purpose. The table uses the framework in Table 1. It uses the different aspects that determine the sustainability of interventions that the civil society and governments may initiate. Table 2 demonstrates how ICT can be used at each level to empower women and girls for sustainable development.

Table 2: Empowering women and girls for sustainable development (Perryman & de los Arcos, 2016, p. 166)

Inequalities and Respective Barriers	Micro-Level	Meso-Level	Macro-Level
Socio-cultural (e.g., oppressing gender roles for women in male-dominated societies; religious beliefs and practices) (Bourdieu, 1986; Hafkin and Huyer, 2008)	ICT used to empower women and girls with negotiation skills.	ICT used to acknowledge and appreciate women and girls' roles they play in their families and communities. The description of achievement needs to change.	Media needs to make loud the contribution women are already making.
Economic (e.g., inflation, lack of economic opportunities) (Annafari, Axelsson& Bohlin, 2013: Rice and Katz, 2003)	ICT used to advertise the goods they produce – whatever they are good at.	Women given leadership opportunities and tell their stories to girls so they can be their role models. This does not have to be done in a gathering, but from a channel girl can tune to for ideas they need to pursue futures that will give them opportunities to be self-reliant.	Financial resources should not only be for providing digital resources, but to train women to use them meaningfully to elevate their socio-economic status.
Demographic (e.g., lower caste, less education) (DiMaggio and Cohen, 2003: Zainudeen, Iqbal & Samarajiva (2010), Van Dijk, 2005)	ICT used to reach out to women in their mother tongue where they receive education on how to work smart in their productivity.	Community programmes that are aimed at educating women and girls with knowledge and skills they need to advance themselves through ICT.	The education system should be used as a mechanism to redress gender inequalities. ICT used as tools for accessing knowledge they need to participate meaningfully.
Psychological (e.g., beliefs creating an inferiority complex among women) (Madinou and Miller, 2011)	Social networks are used for formation of groups for mentoring purposes with old and young.	Programmes that give an opportunity for female and male to collaborate in safe environments can be shared in digital form online or offline to cater for all.	Interventions should therefore give women autonomy by placing value on their use of ICT as they create content that can be used for development.
Geographic (e.g., rural vs. urban location, poor transportation infrastructure) (European Commission, 2005)	Own and use affordable and customised ICT to	Create spaces where women can be supported as they operate from where they are and yet reach out to the world.	Create infrastructure that works even for those in remote areas so they can participate in their communities meaningfully.

Conclusion

There is a need to work together in raising the girl-child that will become the woman we want in the digital world. A girl, who will work towards elevating her life and that of others. It is in the nature of women to care, but the seed must be planted and nurtured by all. Digital literacy should include understanding how predators use these technologies to lure us into buying what we do not need, making hasty lifetime decisions, going to places we do not know and trusting people we do not know as they claim to be harmless and know us. This is the education our children need.

Recommendations

Level 1. Sustainable empowerment of women and the girl-child is not only a civil society's responsibility. It should be approached at all levels. Men in all ages should be educated on how to support and interact with females in their homes and at school. Without this education, they will continue doing what they know and have been exposed to. Digital technology is a tool that can be used to disseminate the information that all can interact with as they participate in the digital world.

Level 2. The use of ICT in the interventions should be well-structured and informed by the needs on the ground. These needs should not be generic but be customized for the target group if they are to be sustainable. Women and girls know their challenges better and for that reason, they should be given opportunities to create their own content that can help support each other. Manufacturers of digital tools should include features that can be useful to women at home and in specific geographic areas. They should consider how women can use these tools to generate income so they can be self-reliant.

Level 3. Homes and education institutions should take up the role of educating and supporting both the girl and boy-child to avoid animosity against each other. Both must grow up together knowing that, much as they may be different physiologically, they have the same opportunities to contribute to their advancement and their communities. They should be prepared to participate in a meaningful way where they both create a safe environment with and through ICT.

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