

Which Girls Are We Talking About? The Schooling Struggles of Rural Girls and the Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in South Africa

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Abstract

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is believed to have the potential to transform human development. That potential of ICT is reflected in democratic political participation, health, farming, education, transport and alleviation of poverty. There have been monumental ICT interventions in both urban and rural communities in South Africa but their impact has not been uniform. While the above are ICT benefits accrue to humanity, their material and particular benefit for girls, especially rural girls are often assumed to be consequential. In this paper, the researcher argues that ICT and the digital world have widened the gap between urban and rural communities. The educational promise of ICT has not been fully exploited in rural communities in South Africa. Narrative data is generated from an interview with Nomvulo, a rural 45 year old woman who recently qualified as a primary school teacher. Her story epitomises the daily struggles of rural girls as they aspire to participate productively and equally in the digitized and globalised world. Practical suggestions are proffered to help rural girls.

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Introduction

I preface this paper with the story of Nomvulo, a 45 years old rural woman who I met in 2013. I incidentally met Nomvulo during my visit to one of the rural provinces in South Africa where I had gone to conduct research on the state of rural schooling in that province. Nomvulo was one of my research participants.

My meeting with Nomvulo took place in the computer laboratory. Of all the building structures in this school, the computer lab was tightly secured with security gates and burglar windows. Actually the computer lab was not a place where learners and even staff members could easily access. The school general cleaners had much easy access to the computer lab. They could go into the lab daily to wipe the dust off the screens of the sacred machines. The lab was securely protected, thus, defeating the whole purpose of its presences in the school. The computers had been donated by one of the business people and the school always prided itself for having the latest technology.

At that time Nomvulo was chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) a position she had held for the past two consecutive terms. In the ensuing interview Nomvulo was fluent and articulate in English. More articulate than some of the qualified teachers I had interviewed at the same school. She was very confident and knowledgeable about her role as chairperson of the SGB. She had a passion for education and being SGB member was a role she felt could help

advance the education in her rural community. Her fluency in English struck me as someone who could be doing something better in life than being SGB chairperson a position which was voluntary with no financial/monetary rewards.

I was curious to know more about Nomvulo. After the formal research interview, I told Nomvulo how she had impressed me by her command of the English language. I asked her what her highest educational level of achievement was. In very clear narrative, she explained to me that she had completed grade 12, 23 years back. She had passed her matriculation examination in one sitting with distinction in most of the subjects and thus qualified for university admission. Nevertheless, she had not applied for university admission. She cited lack of money for fees as the reason for not applying for admission to university. When I asked her about available bursaries, she claimed that she knew nothing about available financial support. I pondered to myself how many other rural girls and even boys could be in a similar predicament as Nomvulo. Definitely they could be many.

Nomvulo's case reminded me of Mr Mahlangu who I had met the previous year (in 2012). He was in his final year of the Bachelor of Education Degree. He was a mature man in his early 50s. His story was also sensational as Nomvulo's. After completing his matric, Mr Mahlangu worked as a security guard while his colleague who was better connected proceeded to study law. It was his friend who advised him of available financial support for further studies many years later.

After failing to proceed to higher education, Nomvulo decided to get married because she had nothing to do. At the time of the interview, Nomvulo had 3 children and happily was married. I asked if she would want to study further and she gladly said yes. I later sat with Nomvulo and helped her through the online application process and also applied for funding. The following month Nomvulo got an acceptance letter at the University where I teach to study for a Bachelor of Education Degree. She had all the funding for her tuition fees, accommodation, food, and a little extra to support her children. She would go visit her family once every month.

Nomvulo completed the four years of her Bachelor's Degree and passed all the requisite courses. She never failed a single assignment or examination. In 2018, she got employed as a primary school teacher at the school where she was once chairperson of the SGB. She works from her home. When, I visited her in 2018, I was emotionally taken aback by her little girl doing grade 5 who came to me and kneeling on her feet, thanking me for having transformed their life. Now I feel a sense of guilt, as to why I did not help her apply to do medicine or engineering, because I know she could even have done very well there.

While Nomvulo's story may appear to be an isolated case, it actually represents the live experiences of other rural girls and to a lesser extent other rural boys who struggle to access further studies because of lack of information which we think is now readily accessible through ICT. Literature claims that the digital age has broken up geographical boundaries (Yu, 2006). Such claims are part of the dominant discursive trope that seek to conceal the inherent power, knowledge and representation of space (Warf, 2000). Rural contexts and women in these contexts continue to experience digital technological exclusion.

There are salient points in Nomvulo's story which I find significant in understanding rural women and girls and how ICT has impacted on their lives. Firstly, while ICT gadgets are available in rural areas, their utilization and consequent positive impact on girls' schooling is not known or rather limited. Secondly, some women who should benefit from ICT have not yet benefited as much as is popularly claimed. Thirdly, rural women are presented with completely different set

of challenges in accessing ICT. Lastly, interventions should be tailor-made specifically for rural girls to benefit from ICT in their personal advancement. I will explain these as I proceed and will explain what I have done to help Nomvulo advance her life.

The Information Technology Divide: International Perspectives

The advent of the telecommunications technologies was accepted with a huge optimism that there would be equal access to data and knowledge regardless of social standing or geographical location (Bell, 1980). However, Childers (1975) was already alluding to societal information inequality and information poverty. This is an acknowledgment of how some social groups are disadvantaged than others in terms of access to information (Moolman, Primo and Shackleton, 2007). This occurs because telecommunication companies are market and profit driven providing services to those customers from whom they generate high returns and effectively abandoning others such as rural regions and inner cities, which traditionally acquired services through government-mandated policies forced upon state-supervised monopolies (Graham & Marvin, 1996). Information poverty contradicts the public and dominant technological fantasy that everyone has or theoretically could have equal access to the cyberspace and that the internet eliminates geographical boundaries (Warf, 2000).

In the United States severe digital inequalities exist putting those without computers and computer skills at a competitive disadvantage at work and school (Warf; 2000, 9). The divide is accentuated by race, income, ethnicity and gender, excluding those who have no access and skills.

Gender gap in terms of access and use of ICT has been noted internationally (Huyer, 2005). A number of variables contribute to the gender digital divide; among them, low education levels among girls; rural locations; sociocultural and religious customs, poverty, domestic workloads and the packaging of ICT does not reflect the interests, concerns and information needs of women in the developing world (Huyer, 2005; Palita, 2011). Given the above gender ICT divide concerns, initiatives have clustered around empowering women to access and develop their ICT skills. For example, Palita (2011) notes, that;

in Sub-Saharan Africa a number of organizations throughout the continent work towards facilitating access to ICTs so that women and girls can improve their own and their families' social and economic future. (p.36)

While acknowledging the need for these gender-based ICT initiatives, this paper highlights the metro-centric nature of these initiatives, thus raising the question of which girls/women are we talking about when we claim that, “when women use ICTs, they increase their productivity, gain confidence, and status in the community, and use information to improve their lives and wellbeing” (Huyer, 2005). The rural girl is further marginalized and excluded in the ICT age by her social, gender and geographical positioning in relation to access to ICTs and more so the requisite skills in the case where access to the technical tools is granted. As noted by Moolman, Primo and Shackleton (2007) ICT infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas while the bulk of the women live in rural areas.

Rural-Gender-ICT Gap in South Africa

Little is known about gender and ICT access and use in rural areas in South Africa. Research has concentrated on urban girls and ICT use and access. What we know about rural ICT access and

use does not distinguish between men and women. For example in South Africa significant investments has been made in rural ICT infrastructure through the government Communication and Information System and the Universal Service Agency. This is laudable. But the rural ICT infrastructure investment policy does not deliberately focus on reducing gender inequality (Joseph and Andrew, 2009) thus exacerbating gender inequality through ICT access and use. At the same time infrastructure provision and access does not guarantee ICT adoption by women; issues of affordability and knowledge are essential aspects of the access picture (Sithole, Davids, Parker, Rumbelow, Molotja, and Labadarios 2013). In South Africa huge investment in infrastructure in urban settings than in rural areas leads to a widening gap in infrastructure and development in the latter (Langa, Conradie and Roberts, 2006). The lack of adequate infrastructure in rural areas limit the potential developmental impact of ICTs and thus further accentuate the rural-urban digital divide which adversely affect the already marginalised girls. Few studies available on ICT gender and rurality cast a disturbing picture. For example Dlodlo (2009) in her study of rural ICT provision in rural areas noted:

- Many schools have no computers and access to the internet
- Promises by donor agencies to connect all rural municipalities to a network have not been fulfilled.
- Women are not aware of organizations which may support and protect them.
- Girls drop out of school because of funding problems and teenage pregnancies.
- Women and girls are not aware of government loans and bursaries which they can access in order to pursue further education.
- There is a shortage of qualified ICT teachers in rural areas.
- Out of six primary and six secondary schools in Dlodlo's study only one had computers.
- No technical support for the available computers.
- In Dlodlo's study most women could not communicate in English.
- The computers are prone to theft and vandalism.

There are significant parallels between South Africa and other parts of the world with respect to understanding gender, space and ICT; a severed optimism about the potential developmental impact of ICT to reduce the gender rural-urban ICT divide. But can ICT override the gender and rural-urban inequalities that have persistently evaded previous policy interventions? Despite ICT women and particularly rural women continue to bear the burden of inequality. How should we explain this persistent blind spot?

What is Rurality in South Africa?

In South Africa the rural is associated with conditions and circumstances of 'oppression', 'deprivation', 'disadvantage' and 'deficit' (Department of Education; 2005, 8). There is a powerful discourse which pits the urban-rural binary. Rural education is also associated with lack of resources and poverty. Government policy to address rural challenges has also not been effective. The specific needs of rural schools have been consistently given low priority in terms of both policy and the level of governance that prevail in rural areas. What is evident is the steady widening rather than the narrowing of the gap of educational opportunities between

most rural and urban schools in South Africa. In all these rural girls carry the heaviest burden in terms of accessing education and ICT.

Analytic Framework: Problematizing Which Girls?

When we begin to talk about ICT and girls, I will argue here that, we need to develop a more sophisticated analytic framework which distinguishes between different kinds of girls in order to deepen our analysis about which girls we are talking about. Because research seems to acknowledge the urban-rural ICT/digital divide it may not be productive to essentialize all girls as beneficiaries of the Information Communication Technological revolution. Some rural girls have not derived notable benefits from the promises of ICT. The researcher draws on Watson, Kehler and Martino (2010) notion of which boys are we talking about in their analysis of boys' underachievement in literacy in Ontario, Canada. They raise concerns about the ways in which boys' literacy underachievement has been defined and taken up in a context that continue to represent all boys as victims or the new disadvantaged. Watson *et al*, suggest for the need to engage with literature and analytic perspectives that are capable of addressing the complex interplay between various social, cultural and institutional factors-such as gender, social class, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Using this analytic strategy, they were able to understand that not all boys are at risk and that their poor performance is not inevitable. Some boys were doing better in literacy achievement than others. In their review of literature, they observed that a combination of gender, racial and economic factors combine to accentuate the achievement gap for poor black and Hispanic boys (p. 357).

Allow me to make some critical provisions in case my whole argument might be misunderstood as if I am claiming that some girls are much better-off than boys. Gender inequality is a reality of our times. Girls/women suffer undue disadvantage in many spheres of life including education, employment, and at home. But still some girls are much better off than other girls.

The researcher associates Watson *et al*'s proposition with earlier distinctions made by post-colonial feminist scholars such as Bulbeck (1998) wherein she articulates the conceptual limitation and dangers of constructions of postcolonial non-western women in stereotypical style. Such constructions have tended to define postcolonial women in unitary terms, thus concealing their varied distinctiveness and contextual diversity and richness. In her articulation Bulbeck alerts us to the diversity of women in postcolonial contexts- an articulation that debunks earlier depictions of postcolonial women as homogeneous entities as portrayed in western public media, news agencies, movies and popular culture. Thus an adequate analysis of women/girls' issues need to move beyond the gender binary postulation; girls versus boys that in many ways does not take us far in understanding and addressing gender inequality.

In a similar approach, I have taken the same style of argument of Watson *et al* (2010) and Bulbeck (1998) to talk about girls' participation in ICT and the resultant implications on their social and educational success or lack thereof. Asserting which girls are we talking about allow us to identify the ICT needs of different girls in different contexts. Once the different girls and their particular needs are identified we can then allocate appropriate interventions and resources to address their needs. The challenge with many development interventions geared towards girls and women has been to adopt of broad-brush intervention approach. Such universally designed approaches tend to earmark resources to one group of girls at the expense of other girls. However, distinguishing "which girls" allows us to design appropriate interventions for identified

categories of girls. In my case study being a rural girl is quite different from being an urban girl. Rurality and gender are compounding factors which militate against girls' access to and utilization of ICTs thus undermining their participation and achievement in the digital and global community.

Discussion and Recommendations

It is widely accepted that ICTs are key in transforming human development and also positively impact on the empowerment of girls and women (Akpan-Obong, 2007). Despite the optimistic rhetoric, access to the ICTs is not evenly distributed both socially and spatially (Warf, 2000). ICTs are highly gendered (Joseph & Andrew, 2009) with relevant policy initiatives and programs in South Africa lacking significant or direct attention to rural women's development. (p. 1) Distinguishing between which girls are benefiting from ICT initiative and which girls are excluded might assist us to develop and channel appropriate measures to empower rural girls to access ICTs and further education. Without this level of analysis which problematizes "which girls" we might find many ICT interventions focusing on urban girls. As noted by Bulbeck (1998) women/girls are a diverse group whose experiences and challenges are also distinct. Rural girls may not be thought of in similar terms as urban girls. Their ICT needs might be different requiring specific and tailor-made ICT interventions.

Through a narrative inquiry approach using a single participant research design methodology, I have tried to illustrate schooling challenges of rural girls in South Africa using Nomvulo's experience. In the global age heightened digital technology how have rural girls fared? Nomvulo's story invites us to make a stop-check on what is actually going on with rural girls. Are rural girls taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by ICT? What is preventing rural girls from taking up these opportunities and what can be done to assist them?

There are many points of convergence between Nomvulo's story and what the limited available research has established. For example, lack of knowledge about available bursaries for further studies. In the digital world this knowledge should be readily available online and rural women should easily access it. This lack of knowledge is compounded by already existing gender inequalities such as lack education, poverty, cultural and religious norms. For example, early marriages and pregnancies also hinder rural girls' advancement with their studies. ICTs alone, cannot undo these engraved gender inequalities. As noted by Moolman, Primo and Shackleton, (2007), it is essential that the provision of ICT facilities is part of an integrated development approach that will also build men's and women's capacities to act on their newfound information and knowledge an integrated approach to ICT gender and rural development.

The fact that computers are liable to theft and vandalism is also common to both Nomvulo and literature. However, the possible theft of computers creates a barrier to their accessibility and utilization. Nomvulo's narrative has illustrated how security measures at her school made it practically impossible for both rural girls and boys to utilise the computers.

There are also marked differences between Nomvulo's story and what prevails in current research. For example, rural women are presented as illiterate and not able to converse in English which is completely different to Nomvulo who was articulate and had completed her matric qualification. Nomvulo in this study is a special rural girl who has passed some of the toughest hurdle that girls face, that is acquiring an education that could open higher education and employment opportunities. But ICT have not provided the desired keys to open the doors.

In fact, lack of access and knowledge of how to use computers have blocked Nomvulo's opportunities.

ICT are tools that are designed to simplify communication and yet for rural girls these technologies do not help as is expected. I have deliberately taken the initiative to practically assist Nomvulo by filling her application and access available bursaries in order for her to pursue her studies. With the assistance of Nomvulo, we recruited about 18 students from her rural area to attend different universities in South Africa. We assisted them to complete the application forms, apply for bursaries and have developed support networks to help them adjust to urban university environments.

ICT on their own may not transform girls' lives. In essence ICT may actually exclude some social groups such as rural girls. ICT are tools that require to be manipulated in order for them to have a positive impact in rural girls' lives. This paper has demonstrated how little steps such as assisting a single girl might be consolidated into action groups that help disenfranchised rural boys and girls to access further studies in urban areas. Government and non-government policy initiatives require people on the ground to implement them in order for ICT to make an impact on the lives of rural girls.

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