

GRACE Project Rationale

By Ineke Buskens

Women: development and empowerment

Women are crucial to the transformation of Africa.

The link between a country's overall status of evolvement and that of its women has found general acceptance. Research done in the last 35 years has made women's contributions and gender induced disadvantages more visible and yet much (and we do not know how much) is still unknown. Especially Africa appears under-researched when it comes to women.

The conceptual understanding of women's transformation process has in the last 35 years shifted from a focus on development to a focus on empowerment. It is recognized that provision of resources and services will not be sufficient in itself to change women's situations because it does not address the root causes of gender inequality. "Women need to be able to assert their *own agency* to break out of gender discrimination (*emphasis added*)."
(Hannan, 2004).

The Millennium Goals fortunately acknowledge both the importance of the contributions women, as people and as women, are making to the well-being of humanity, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that women are facing very specific, human made challenges, because they are women.

Women are essential to the accomplishment of all the Millennium Goals as general agents. Regarding the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1), the achievement of universal primary education (MDG 2), the reduction of child mortality (MDG 4) and the combat of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6), women are more than essential: because of their contributions as care-givers in various ways and in various fora, they take centre stage. At the same time, the world is still not a safe and nurturing environment for women themselves: hence the emphasis on the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (MDG 3) and the promotion of maternal health (MDG 5). Developing global partnerships (MDG 8) and ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7), necessary if we want to leave coming generations a future on this planet, will most definitely benefit from empowered women's contributions as care for the young has always been of deep concern to women.

This dual perspective -- the focus on aspects and areas of women's strengths and at the same time on aspects and areas where women could benefit from support -- is found in the research topics and research questions of the GRACE researchers: what realities do women create through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and where would they benefit from interventions aimed at elimination or reduction of gender induced disadvantages?

Women, gender and ICTs

ICTs are more than tools for effective information and communication. We have transformed the way we think and interact with each other in all areas of our lives through the use of radio, telephone and internet. And with the rate that the technical developments are ongoing, so are the possibilities unfolding. And here too, a dual perspective is called for: a focus on the areas and aspects of women's ICT involvement as well as on the areas and aspects where they could benefit from support in overcoming gender induced barriers.

ICT policy is currently being made and implemented all over the continent. Unfortunately this is happening mostly in the absence of clear knowledge about the ways gender and ICTs are impacting on each other. Gender "neutral" policies tend to favour men because of their implicit and unexamined male-centric focus.

Earlier development efforts in Africa, especially in the agricultural sector, which did not entertain a gender perspective, have actively contributed to the deterioration of women's position and hence of the economic situation of households. Warnings to this regard, which were already flagged in the seventies and eighties, were not heeded and the general ramifications of this phenomenon were only acknowledged after they had become clearly visible on a grand scale. By that time, most of these developments had also unfortunately become irreversible.

Policymakers and researchers in the ICT field find themselves in a similar situation of having to enter an arena of development which has generated already complex unintended effects and may even generate more and different ones. Policymakers and development agencies may now, just as then, have similar blind spots. By being alert to a gender dimension in ICT developments at an early stage of the information revolution, we may be able to prevent greater scaled undesirable effects in the future.

Influencing policy makers is therefore an explicit objective within Grace and the design of the project has made provision for extensive focus on the dissemination of the research results through various media and on various fora. The specific contribution Grace aims to make to the policy debates will be grounded in the insights gained into women's agency in relation to ICT use: how women have accomplished their dreams, what they needed in order to do this, what obstacles they faced and how they managed their internal and external barriers. Without an insight into women's agency, development efforts will not be lasting and sustainable.

The choice of a qualitative approach

The connections between gender, ICTs and empowerment in Africa are complex and not well understood yet. This in itself would be reason enough to opt for a qualitative approach. The perspective on women's empowerment within Grace acknowledges however the crucial importance of women's agency. And qualitative research, especially qualitative research that allows for participatory and transformatory techniques is eminently suitable to study "women in change" in action.

Within this broader methodological framework, all sub-projects have complete freedom in choosing their research focus and designing their study. This research strategy will enable the network to yield insights into the various dimensions and aspects of women's empowerment, gender and ICTs in Africa. The focus and commitment to create bridges between the world of the African women research respondents and the world of policymakers and commercial interests, will at the same time, generate context – specific data that will allow for follow-up with concrete action projects for change. Coherent with this methodological approach, ICTs as a concept is approached from a user-perspective. Regardless of the fact that the various ICTs serve similar (communication and information) purposes, the actual use of them will entail a different reality for users in terms of access, maintenance, control and use. For most users, the categorical concept of ICT or ICTs may not make any sense at all.

The 14 sub-project investigations focus on a wide spread of ICTs and involve a wide variety of different women users who face very different challenges and opportunities. Explicating the specific nature of each ICT under investigation, the specific nature of the women engaging this ICT, and the way this relationship develops and evolves, will enable us to speak to the problem of the interaction between gender and ICTs in a concrete, specific and in-depth way.

The Imperative of a Researcher Network

Whilst qualitative research is the obvious research approach given the purpose of this project, the consequence of this methodological choice is that the researchers have to cope with a very challenging and potentially anxiety-provoking research reality and practice. The context specific focus needs researchers to think “out of the box”, away from structured designs and research methods. The open attitude towards respondents needs the researchers to be very present and highly aware as they have to structure their data whilst collecting it and construct knowledge in the moment that the information is coming in. Regardless of their measure of research experience and skill, qualitative researchers need a lot of courage. Researcher - support and mentorship thus play an important role in qualitative research. Placed within an overall strategy of striving towards research quality, researcher support and guidance can be framed as methodological imperatives within qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative research, regardless of its quality and usefulness, is often still seen as the “soft option.” Because the methodological foundations of qualitative research and its possibilities to attain rigor are often not generally understood, qualitative research projects may be criticized for the wrong methodological reasons. Qualitative researchers therefore not only need the knowledge and skill to do their research well, they would also benefit from having enough methodological insight to participate effectively in general research discussions.

A well functioning research network is a most effective vehicle to meet both the purpose of support and of capacity development. Such a network generates its own methodological discussions which are directly related to the researchers' specific research reality and the sharing and learning will create a supportive environment.

Reference

Hannan, Carolyn. 2004. "Women's Rights and Empowerment: Gender Equality in the New Millennium." Presentation to the United Nations Day Banquet, Dallas Chapter of the United Nations, October 24.