

## **African women and the Internet**

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*As the future of the Internet in Africa seems promising from an infrastructure point of view, the issue of the women of Africa should not be forgotten, in particular women who are already in academia and who continue to struggle for equality despite their relative achievements. Women all over the world face similar hurdles and conflicts related to their gender, such as tenure vs “biological clock”. However, the glass ceiling in the West is made of iron in Africa and one cannot yet aspire to reach the top. Luckily thanks to the Internet, women communicate with each other and African women as well are being heard. The Internet is serving them as a sounding board and a support in their struggles.*

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## The Internet in Africa

### *The situation now*

As the Internet continues to gain momentum throughout Africa, people in many countries are becoming more knowledgeable about connectivity, content development, training, and public policy issues.

Yet the numbers of users are still relatively small. For example, as of September 2006, there were 425 000 Internet users in Benin, which is 5.7% of the population, and less than a million in all of Africa, which represents 3.6% of the total population according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). (More world statistics can be seen at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.)

The Internet Society (ISOC) continued its long-standing effort to promote the development of the Internet in Africa through its INET Africa Conference, held on 4 May 2007 in Abuja, Nigeria. INET Africa is held in conjunction with the AfriNIC 6 and AfNOG 8 meetings.

### *The near future*

Efforts spent on the connectivity level are aimed at getting 50 African countries online with various speeds, ranging from 64k or lower up to hundreds of Mb/sec. in some cases. The next phase includes the local training and human resource development of support staff in many communities in Africa. This represents much progress achieved in the direction of access.

Africa is now facing new challenges, such as a shift from the development of infrastructure *only* to the development of infostructure *as well*. Several “hot” issues are being explored, such as local languages, content update, intellectual property, and security. Regarding Internet governance and policy issues, Africa is shaping its efforts as well. The establishment of an African Network Information Centre for managing IP addresses is under development.

Two other major topics of concern to Africa addressed in the 2007 ISOC conference are Internet security, and detecting and deterring unwanted Internet traffic. Much work is to be done in this domain, just as it is all over the world. Security may just be an elusive goal.

## The women of Africa

As the future seems promising from an infrastructure point of view, we should not forget the issue of the women of Africa, and in particular those already in academia and who continue to struggle for equality despite their achievements. Women all over the world face similar hurdles and conflicts related to their gender, such as tenure vs “biological clock”. The glass ceiling in the West, however, is made of iron in Africa. One often cannot even aspire to reach the top.

The number of women in computing, and in academia in general, is higher in the West than in Africa, although it is steadily declining. In the West, the problem is recognised and efforts are made to remedy it. In Africa, however, the issue is not yet dealt with openly. The culture is such that a woman’s place is with her family and her work should be within the family. In the West, many women have broken this stereotype some time ago and are working outside the house to develop themselves and not just to provide for their families.

Luckily, thanks to the Internet, many women are communicating with each other and African women are also being heard. The Internet is serving them as a sounding board and a support in their struggles. This social tool may prove to be more revolutionary in Africa than in the West. It serves as an information highway straight from someone’s home, even if there is only a dirt road outside of the physical house. An African woman may have to take a leap to use this highway, which is a more difficult task than for her sister in the West, but by doing so she can reach much farther than her neighbours who do not try.

From my experience living a year in Benin, West Africa, in 2003–2004, I know women there are proud and self-confident. They have achieved relative equality when it comes to economic and financial independence. In many rural areas of the South, they are partners with the men, yet they still have a long way to go from a social standpoint. In academia, also, their numbers are few and need to increase so that they can serve as role models for future generations.

Poverty in many African countries, bound with old beliefs, keep women at home and at work, far from school benches and lacking books and other educational resources.

Let me expand on the current situation of university women in particular, and how informatics can help stabilise their role in the African society.

## **The joy of sharing knowledge**

### ***The title***

The title of the 2007 African Conference on Information Ethics reminds me of a recurring theme between my husband and I which, I may argue, could be generalised to a theme between men and women. Women, who may value socialisation more readily than men, generally like to share information more willingly as well. Men, whose motive in life is most likely to climb up the ladder of success, may tend to retain information so that their rivals will not use it to advance themselves. Sound familiar? This, of course, may be a Western way of life. However, gender inequality in Africa should be an issue of concern.

The Western world, instead of sharing of its knowledge (which it does to some degree), inadvertently steals brain power from Africa. The rich and powerful in Africa send their children to study abroad. The talented get stipends and leave their native countries, sometimes to never return. Of course, many do return and bring a wealth of knowledge to help their countries out of poverty, but many do not. Therefore, it is a comforting idea to have participated in a conference that has as its title the sharing of knowledge to advance the good of all.

Sharing of knowledge implies trust; trust that the receiving party will acknowledge and appreciate the source and will in turn reciprocate so that all parties involved will benefit in the long run; hence comes the joy. Many of us believe that this is the only way to advance science and culture throughout the world. A rich country confident in its resources can begin by sharing and giving to the less fortunate. When Africa recognises its full potential, its brain resource, among other things, it can start by keeping it there and using it with proper compensation to benefit all involved. For example, industries can be developed producing microchips and the like (using their hardworking potential), data centres including programming, and system-developing centres. India, for example, has achieved such a status. Why not Africa with its French-speaking potential, for example?

## ***The global community and the case of women and girls***

We live in a global community. Neglecting one part of the community will hurt us all in the long run. In Africa, universities remain male-dominated and male-structured. That can be particularly true in sub-Saharan Africa where 20 million girls are denied any education due to discrimination, poverty and conflict, according to a 2005 Save the Children report.

In Benin, West Africa, I witnessed gender discrimination. In the graduate institute where I taught (IMSP), very few women (less than 10%) came from rich families or foreign countries. They themselves were not aware of any direct discrimination, except sometimes from their own families who wanted them to marry instead of study. However, I realised later on by teaching a Women-in-Computing course in the US (where women in computer science represent 20-30% of the general student population) that no one was aware of discrimination until their eyes were opened to it. In a survey I conducted this past semester in my class, none of my students felt there was any such discrimination in our department or anywhere. Only in mid-term, or at the end of the semester, after much reading and discussions on the topic did the students start seeing the truth.

It seems the same will happen in Africa. Right now many women deny there is discrimination, but their eyes are just not open to see it yet. It will not take long, I believe, as the proliferation of the Internet and Western influence will bring with them greater awareness and a desire for more.

## ***South Africa, in particular***

Post-apartheid South Africa is widely agreed to be a mecca, but even there, senior women faculty are scarce. At Johannesburg's University of the Witwatersrand, for instance, women account for only 19% of associate professors and 17% of full professors in recent years, according to Dr Hilary Geber, a professor there.

In South Africa, female faculty of colour are particularly rare. At the University of Cape Town, women account for 35% of the overall academic staff of 779. However, only 59 (or 8%) are women of colour, according to Nazeema Mohammed,

who oversees the institution's transformation from the apartheid system. Representation at universities is just part of the problem, as "the insufficient support for the production, dissemination and use of African feminist knowledge and theory, in all fields, is surprising". Groups such as the African Gender Institute (AGI) are using technology as a major tool for overcoming those hurdles.

Online connections to other female thinkers and advocates help make up for the camaraderie that is often lacking for women at African universities; it is a loneliness that may lead many to leave the continent to pursue graduate-level studies. "The Internet and technology play a big role in breaking the isolation," says Dr Elaine Salo, senior lecturer at the AGI. "We are doing work here that will result in a generation of scholars who will say: 'We can do work here that is relevant to our society.'" The institute was founded in 1996, two years after South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, to expose African researchers and intellectuals to the importance of gender equity and to support those engaged in that process.

Housed in offices at the University of Cape Town, AGI offers undergraduate and graduate academic programmes in gender and women's studies. Three core teaching faculty also raise up to US\$1 million a year from international foundations to offer programmes for African scholars committed to gender equity. Female academics in Africa also exchange ideas and information through a number of bodies, such as:

- African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) in Kenya (<http://www.feministafrica.org/index.php/femnet>)
- Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre Network (<http://www.zwrcn.org.zw/>)
- Cameroon's association for support to women entrepreneurs, Les Femmes Chefs d'Enterprises Mondiales (FCEM)
- Uganda's African Women's Economic Policy Network
- To ensure as many readers as possible, Feminist Africa is published both as a traditional 150-page academic journal and on a free website (<http://www.feministafrica.org/>).
- GWS Africa is a project of AGI, sponsored by the Ford Foundation (<http://www.gwsafrica.org/>).

Professor Sylvia Tamale has become the first female dean of Makerere University's Faculty of Law in 2004. She has launched a research project on gender, law and sexuality, which she hopes will become a fully fledged research centre.

In addition, the origin of the newly established Institute for Women's and Gender Studies of the University of Pretoria (the fourth of its kind in South Africa), is not dissimilar to the origin of women's and gender studies elsewhere in Africa.

Whereas the women's movement had played a fundamental role in establishing women's and gender studies in the West, women's movements in Africa have not played a similar role in institutionalising women's and gender studies in Africa. On the contrary, the main forces behind the institutionalising of women's and gender studies in Africa have been Western financial support, conceptual apparatuses and theoretical models. Even Oprah Winfrey has opened a school for girls in the small town of Henley-on-Klip, south of Johannesburg, South Africa. This is another example of a Western concept that may impact the local culture.

## Ethical overview

We need to realise that cyber ethics are different from the ethics we have had since the earliest of times. What makes "ethics online" a unique moral issue, according to Deborah Johnson (1997), can be summarised in these three points:

- The scope of the Internet is global and interactive.
- The Internet enables users to interact with anonymity.
- Internet technology makes the reproducibility of information possible in ways not possible before.

These features make behaviour online morally different than offline. In a country where not too many people use the Internet, or one gender uses it substantially more, these differences create a wider digital gap that should be avoided.

## In conclusion

In the industrialised world, the use of computers is changing everything: from education to health, from voting to making friends or making war.

Many countries fully participate in cyberspace and make use of opportunities offered by global networks. We are indeed experiencing a technological and informational revolution.

It is important for policy makers, leaders, teachers, computer professionals and all social thinkers to become involved in the social and ethical impacts of communication technology. Women, in particular, can be invaluable in this regard, as they are more naturally communicative.

Not involving women in this new technological world is immoral (Johnson & Miller, 2002). A society that does not use its entire citizenry is losing on attaining its full potential. It is only through diversity that a society can reach the full rainbow of its colours.

## Appendix A: Telecentres

There has been a proliferation of telecentres that provide access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), initiated by governments, the private sector, international donors and community organisations. Telecentres address the lack of ICTs throughout Africa and assist in providing universal access, to both telephony and other forms of communication.

Senegal is the African country with the largest number of telecentres: more than 9 000.

## Appendix B: Statistics

	Population (2006 est.)	Population (% in world)	Internet users (latest data)	Penetration (% population)	Users in the world (%)	Use growth (2000–2006)
Total for Africa	915 210 928	14.1%	32 765 700	3.6%	3.0%	625.8%
Rest of world	5 584 486 132	85.9%	1 053 485 203	18.9%	97.0%	195.5%
World total	6 499 697 060	100.0%	1 086 250 903	16.7%	100.0%	200.9%

Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

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Other major centres were established in Mali, Mozambique, South Africa and Uganda by foreign organisations but had a hard time once they had to operate on their own. Nakaseke Multipurpose Community Telecentre (MCT) in Uganda is a more realistic and successful centre of this kind.

Purely market-driven initiatives are likely to increase the digital divide in Africa. There does not yet exist a model for sustaining community access centres that can provide access for the majority. Rarely should foreign funding be 100% (all the economic lessons of entrepreneurship should be used).

The greatest potential for bringing access to ICTs throughout Africa is to support the smaller businesses and community organisations that develop new services themselves. Through telephony, they can offer fax, secretarial, computer or even Internet services. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Secretary-General Pekka Tarjanne stated:

*The individual who sublets his or her phone line or sets up a phone shop or telecenter does more to close the development gap than the great corporations and businesses of the world.*

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*See also:*

- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2989567.stm>
- [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Home\\_Page/mcgee.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Home_Page/mcgee.html)
- <http://www.afrinic.net/>
- <http://www.brad.ac.uk/research/ijas/links.htm>
- <http://www.computers4africa.org/>
- <http://www.isoc.org/isoc/conferences/inet/06/mauritiu.shtml>