



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 12
Issue 1 (January/February)

Article 23

Jan-2011

Book Review: African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment

Karen Keifer-Boyd

Recommended Citation

Keifer-Boyd, Karen (2011). Book Review: African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(1), 212-217.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss1/23>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment.

2009. Edited by Ineke Buskens & Anne Webb.

Zed Books. London | New York. 222 pp.

Epilogue, Notes on contributors, and Index included.

\$28.95USD (Paperback). \$124.95USD (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Karen Keifer-Boyd¹

GRACE (Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment) is a research network of 14 research teams in 12 countries² of about 30 women and men that formed in 2004 from a call to African academics and activists by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Association for Progressive Communications (APC). The GRACE Network is committed to equality and social justice. At their first meeting in Johannesburg in 2004, they prepared a collective agenda of research about African women's sense of agency and empowerment with Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). Their in-depth research reports are at the GRACE website³ and synthesized in the 17 chapters of the book, *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (Buskens & Webb, 2009).⁴

The qualitative critical emancipatory research of GRACE was conceptualized and developed by Buskens (2002), and Buskens and Earl (2008). This research practice "produces practical, functional knowledge that can lead to change" (Buskens & Webb, 2009, p. 3). The purpose of the GRACE Network is to learn how women understand their current situation, and to help women imagine empowerment and what is needed to enact their vision of agency in their lives.

There are three significant reasons to read this book: (a) to use it in conjunction with the GRACE website to teach feminist qualitative research methodology; (b) to inform ICTs policies that support women's empowerment, access, entrepreneurship, and advocacy; and (c) to develop awareness of ICTs gender inequity with sensitivity to cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental contexts. The book is comprised of four sections, each with three to five chapters, by researchers working in their home country (i.e., in Mozambique, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Zambia, Senegal, Kenya, Cameroon, and Uganda⁵) who examine the external, structural

¹ Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D., is Professor of Art Education in the School of Visual Arts and Affiliate Professor of Women's Studies at the Pennsylvania State University.

² A list of the teams is at http://www.grace-network.net/research_teams.php.

³ The GRACE network continues to grow and includes Africa and Arab countries with the mission stated on the home page: "Transforming Our Gendered World Through Research-Informed Action." See <http://www.grace-network.net/>

⁴ The book can be read online, downloaded from the Internet, or purchased in Paperback. See http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-135944-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html#begining

⁵ A map of Africa with the location of the different research teams is at <http://www.grace-network.net/>. Most of the teams are linked on the map to a page about their research and each page in the GRACE website can be changed to French or English. The GRACE homepage states: "Grace is an initiative envisioned and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), developed by Research For the Future (RFF) and managed by The GRACE Project Voluntary Association"

barriers and internal, conceptual factors that hinder African women's agency and empowerment.

"The researchers conducted their studies in their own geographical regions, in some cases in their communities, or at their workplaces, in local languages and, sometimes, with themselves included among the respondents" (Buskens & Webb, 2009, p. 2). I met one of the researchers, Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo (2009), Professor of Women and Gender Studies at Makerere University, who described that at first some, who gathered in July 2005 for the GRACE Methodology two-week workshop in Khaya Lembali Conference Centre near the city of Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, questioned the purpose of activities such as to "create ostrich eggs around themselves,"⁶ a visualization exercise to develop self-reflection practices. Yet, the workshop inspired critical emancipatory research. Researchers learned how to facilitate change through critical self-reflection.

For example in a blog about the workshop, Kiss Brian Abrahams from Zambia, states: "For me personally this [getting into one's ostrich egg] was such a useful exercise" (APC WNSP blog, September 27, 2005). In the Ostrich Egg exercise, researchers become aware of their values and histories conceptualized within and shielded by an eggshell that serves as protection but can also break from the forces within their immediate external environment. The workshops also included teaching how to use ICTs for research (i.e., NVivo, a computer aided qualitative data analysis software program) and for networking (e.g., e-mailing lists, chats, blogs, wikis, Intranet conferences, and presentation software).

Many authors, in their chapters of this book, mention the use of the qualitative research strategies they learned at the 2005 workshop including Ineke Buskens' Transformational Attitude Interview Technique, the Depth Interview Technique, Outcome Mapping, and the Free Attitude Interview. These strategies helped them to listen to the concepts women used to make meaning of their realities and to explain their experiences with ICTs and their interpretation of empowerment. Reflected in their writing is their attention to women's diversity based on social and economic class, ethnicity, age, and marital status.

The GRACE researchers continued to meet annually to learn from each other and share their research. They also used ICTs to share resources, ask questions, give feedback, and communicate between and among teams. The writing for this book comes from the contexts, methodologies, stories, and actions shared and critiqued by teams of The GRACE Network and from Ineke Buskens' facilitation of the workshops on research techniques, gender awareness, and collaboration.

I began by reading the chapters on Uganda on my flight to Uganda in February 2010, and was puzzled about the focus on radio and mobile phones as prominent ICTs in relation to empowerment and agency. I reread them, along with the rest of the book, after five-weeks at the Human Rights and Peace Center working with the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University in Uganda's capital city, Kampala. The university's broadband was too weak with a connection speed of 48.6 Kbps, which is below the dial-up phone connection of 53.3 Kbps, to access most

⁶ This is how APC WNSP (Women's Networking Support Programme) describes the process in a blog at <http://www.apcwomen.org/node/256>. The book begins with a centering visualization by Ineke Buskens in which she asks the researchers to "be aware you are sitting here, in your egg" (Buskens & Webb, 2009, p. 1).

multimedia (e.g., *YouTube*, *Second Life*), as well as databases, social networks, and open-source ICTs. Moreover, at the university, and other sections of the capital city, the electricity went out for several hours throughout each week in March 2010. This lack of electricity and broadband infrastructure in most areas of Africa is why radios, typically wind-up radios, are the most common ICTs available. “An estimated 90 per cent of the rural population in Africa, in which most are women, remain without electricity ... Hence, energy poverty and ICT poverty are genderized” (Muller, 2009, p. 34). Other places that I visited in southern Uganda there was no electricity or running water, but typically the mobile phone could be used, although women in Mozambique reported to GRACE researchers, that they had to climb a tree for mobile phone connection. In sub-Saharan Africa, “the number of female headed households varies between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of rural households as men migrate to urban centres seeking employment” (Muller, 2009, p. 33). I gained a better understanding of the challenges and obstacles women face in their daily life from meeting many women who shared their perspectives with me during my short time in Uganda, and from re-reading the book in the order that the chapters are organized in the four sections of empowerment thresholds.

The book’s overarching purpose is to derail ICTs from reinforcing, unintentionally or otherwise, women’s discrimination and disempowerment. There are four groupings of the qualitative studies, considered by the editors as stages of women’s empowerment with ICTs. The research from The GRACE Network research presented in this book “indicates that there are certain ‘empowerment thresholds’ at every level, comprising supportive internal and external factors in various combinations” (Buskens & Webb, 2009, p. 7). Below, I briefly summarize these empowerment thresholds at the four levels to better understand and further encourage women’s agency through ICTs.

In the four studies presented in the first section of the book, “ONE | ICT tools: access and use,” the stories are of how women’s lives are changed by ICTs but with limited access and use of ICT tools (pp. 21-63). The lack of infrastructure of electricity, hardware, and broadband contributes to the sense of powerlessness to produce by illiterate women in survival modes. There are some exceptions in which women are producers in local radio broadcasts, and in entrepreneur mobile phone enterprises (i.e., sending and receiving calls, and sharing news in-person from the mobile phone connectivity). However, many husbands prohibit women to own a mobile phone not only due to cost but also because the men want to have control over the women’s communication. Some women regard the mobile phone as instrumental in the demise of family gatherings since their grown children call rather than visit.

In section “TWO | Female-only ICT spaces: perceptions and practices,” the benefits of woman-made spaces they create for themselves through and with ICTs—for refuge, expression, education, network, and trade—has been a type of empowerment that circles outside of the center of patriarchal economic, political, and social power (pp. 65-104). Similar to many other countries in Africa, the major obstacles for women in Morocco are “illiteracy, poverty, ‘unawareness’ and their husband’s authority over them” (Tafnout & Timjerdine, 2009, p. 95). Yet, the mobile phone, which uses wireless technology and, therefore, a minimal infrastructure compared to landline telephones, is used, for example, by women in Zambia to inform about court hearings to mobilize women to meet at the courthouse to advocate for the rights of women (Abraham, 2009).

In section “THREE | Using ICTs: making life better?” women use ICTs for independence and socio-economic gains, even though this jeopardizes their acceptance within the patriarchal communities in which they live (pp. 105-165). According to Munyua (2009), and echoed in other chapters, “those who build successful businesses or careers are perceived to be venturing into masculine roles” (p. 122). Or, for those less economically successful in their careers, this parallels ICT use that “contributes to the traditional gendered division of labour and thus to the general gender imbalance” (Buskens, 2009, p. 6). Some women have transformed their realities with more control of their space and time, although women earn less than men in their micro-enterprises, which conform to socially accepted gender roles for women such as food processing, garment making, and service work (Munyua, 2009).

Section “FOUR | Creating new realities,” present women who use ICTs to create new spaces that affect patriarchal public spaces at the household, local, national, and international levels (pp. 167-205). This section focused analysis on women’s capacity to take action to challenge inequities, “especially those internalized so strongly [such as being regarded as property by their husbands] to have crept into women’s dreams and desires” (Munyua, 2009, p. 128). The women and their work are sources of inspiration in their self-actualization, which involved interrogating life choices. Empowerment at this fourth level is the ability to choose, which implies having and seeing choices.

In summary, the four themes suggest that concepts of agency and empowerment are complex and varied. Further complications to notions of agency involves being able to recognize “adaptive preferences,” which is when women attach to identities and practices of gender inequality, and they process their experiences through this perspective as “agents of their own disempowerment” (Buskens, 2009, p. 13). Adaptive preferences are often enforced through female sexism or women’s aggression towards other women, which can be seen in the use of ICTs to warn other women to not overstep their role. Buskens (2009) cites cross-cultural studies that indicate high rates of sexism in Africa, and that “given the fact that a country’s general sexism rate correlates with its rate of female sexism, the possibility that a similar study would find similar results in Africa” (p. 16). Therefore, the GRACE research teams employed “techniques that stimulate women’s creativity and free expression ... combined with in-depth interviews and participant observations (Buskens, 2009, p. 13). Researchers listened to themselves while listening to the women interviewed to become aware of female sexism and gender bias they hold that would shape what they asked, what they heard, and how they practiced emancipatory research. Female sexism can be overcome through self-respect, self-confidence, and self-love but such empowerment is difficult to develop and maintain in a patriarchal society.

Empowerment is defined by the Mozambique GRACE Network research team as a sense of self-worth, ability to resolve their own problems, in control of their lives, expand physical and financial assets, to “make decisions, be heard, set agendas, negotiate and face difficulties on one’s own,” and as a group or individually to make choices, and “then to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes” (Macueve et al, 2009, p. 22). Ugandan researchers conceptualized empowerment “as a process through which women’s enterprises and their personal lives progressed to better levels of performance” (Bakesha, Nakafeero, & Okello, 2009, p. 145).

Although access to and control of resources is necessary for strategic life choices, even when people have access to the same resources, this does not guarantee social justice and empowerment. An economic autonomy may for some increase respect, but for women whose husbands leave them and they experience a loss of social status they do not feel empowered. When widowhood and other life events place one outside expected norms of behavior, this can be liberating and empowering. A sense of empowerment is unique to different contexts. While there is no singular definition, empowerment is a sense of self-valuing and self-appreciation.

References

- Abraham, K. B. (2009). The names in your address book: Are mobile phone networks effective in advocating women's rights in Zambia? In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 97-106). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Bakesha, S., Nakafeero, A., & Okello, D. (2009). ICTs as agents of change: A case of grassroots women entrepreneurs in Uganda. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 143-153). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Buskens, I. (2002). Fine line or strong cords? Who do we think we are and how can we become what we want to be in the quest for qualitative research? *Education as Change*, 6(1), 1-31.
- Buskens, I., & Earl, S. (2008). Research for change — Outcome mapping's contribution to emancipatory research in Africa. *Action Research*, 6(2), 173-194.
- Buskens, I. (2009). Doing research with women for the purpose of transformation. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 9-17). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Buskens, I., & Webb, A. (2009). *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment*. London & New York: Zed Books.
- Kyomuhendo, G. B. (2009). The mobile payphone business: A vehicle for rural women's empowerment in Uganda. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 154-168). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Macueve, G., Mandlate, J., Ginger, L., Gaster, P., & Macome, E. (2009). Women's use of information and communication technologies in Mozambique: A tool for empowerment? In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 21-32). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Muller, J. (2009). Considering ICT use when energy access is not secured: A case study from rural South Africa. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 33-43). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Munyua, A. W. (2009). Women entrepreneurs in Nairobi: Examining and contextualizing women's choices. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 119-132). London & New York: Zed Books.
- Tafnout, A., & Timjerdine, A. (2009). Using ICTs to act on hope and commitment: The fight against gender violence in Morocco. In I. Buskens & A Webb (Eds.), *African Women & ICTs: Investigating Technology, Gender and Empowerment* (pp. 88-96). London & New York: Zed Books.