

Empowering Women and Girls Through ICT at Libraries

Introduction

Within the digital divide of access to information and communication technologies (ICT) in developing countries exists another gap: between boys and girls, men and women. Particularly in developing countries and rural areas, girls and women are often restricted to traditional roles, and do not have equal access to technologies and technology training.



As numerous studies have shown, when women do have access to educational resources, their families and communities benefit.¹ As more and more information is moving online, it is critical that women and girls have equal, safe, and reliable access to computers and the internet. Without access to computers, the internet, and technology training, girls and women will continue to be excluded from many opportunities for social and economic leadership.

Many international organizations have established initiatives intended to help girls and women access technology and technology training. These initiatives, coupled with the 3rd Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to promote gender equality and empower women, have opened the dialogue regarding the importance of gender equality in ICT access and training.

A sampling of programs that seek to increase ICT usage among women and girls:

- The annual International Girls in ICT Day, launched in April 2011 by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), aims to encourage more girls and women to access technology and consider careers in the technology field.²
- The ITU has initiated other programs including the Digital Literacy for Women & Girls joint program with Telecentre.org, Community ICT Centres for Women's Empowerment, and Girls in ICT, in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).³
- UNESCO has an entire strategy on gender equality that includes ensuring ICT access for girls and women, and training to help girls and women enter technology professions.⁴
- The United States State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) also have initiatives, such as TechWomen, geared towards inspiring women to pursue careers and leadership positions in technology.^{5,6}



Public Libraries as a Solution to the Gender Divide

These programs are critical pieces of the campaign to foster girls' ICT skills, but they often overlook and underuse a potentially valuable asset that could help scale and institutionalize girls' access: public libraries. Public libraries are trusted, safe institutions that already exist in many developing countries where large inequities in education and opportunities for girls and women abound. The Global Impact Study, a recent research project on the impact of public access computing venues in developing countries, indicates that public libraries in developing countries serve more females than telecenters and cybercafés do.⁷ Other research suggests that girls and women choose public libraries over other public access venues because libraries are perceived as safe, reliable, and affordable, often with trained female staff that can help in places where it is not always appropriate for females to interact with males.⁸ As trusted community figures, librarians are well-positioned to support women through the process of applying ICT and other information tools.

Some development initiatives, particularly in ICT, create stand-alone programs or seek new technologies to overcome technology disparities and include underserved populations, like girls and women. As much of the literature in the ICT4D field suggests, these programs and technologies often fail and are not sustainable.⁹ Public libraries, however, are typically part of a larger network and already included in local, regional, and national government budgets.

Some view mobile phones and mobile internet as the key to bridging the digital divide. However, mobiles alone are not enough, particularly when trying to reduce the social barriers girls and women face with ICT access and training. Just as girls and women suffer from inequity of access to computers, internet, and technology training, females are far less likely than males to own or have access to a mobile phone, let alone mobile internet, in developing countries.

Girls and women need places where they feel comfortable going to access computers, the internet, and technology training. Library stakeholders have emerged as strong advocates for comprehensive library and information services for women,¹⁰ and public library systems around the world have already demonstrated their commitment to bridging gender gaps in ICT usage through targeted programs:

The Northern Regional Library in Tamale, Ghana established a program that provides technology training on internet, web 2.0 use, and search techniques, along with leadership development. **The 3-month program trained 125 young women.** The library instituted training hours to make it easier for girls to attend the training while still working during the day. In addition to this training program, the Northern Regional Library also provides general computer and internet access for the community and hosts regular events about technology, **creating a space where female patrons can participate.**

A library in Bogota, Colombia offers young girls aged 5-18 access to not only books and literacy programs, but also to computers, the internet, and technology training. The technology resources available to these girls helps them **excel in their schooling, communicate with friends and family, and develop digital skills** that will help them through the rest of their lives.

Librarians in the southern Ukraine city of Zaporizhia saw an opportunity to help their community when they noticed that many girls were falling prey to drug abuse and other unhealthy choices. They launched a program to provide girls with ICT training, career advice, and an overall support network. The program offers basic computer training, as well as more specialized technology training in professions of interest to the girls. As a result of this program, **girls are spending more and more time at the library using computers and the internet, focusing on their schoolwork, and preparing for their futures** instead of getting into trouble on the streets.



A library in Copán, Honduras offers technology training and digital literacy programs to the girls and women in their community. Many girls who have been trained at the library later became library volunteers themselves, **training other people in the community—particularly girls and women—in ICT and digital literacy.** The training has improved school performance and enhanced the education of many, **leading more girls to stay in school and actively seek out more educational opportunities.**

The National Library of Uganda has introduced an ICT training program designed for female farmers. After conducting background research in local communities, the library found that female farmers have many unmet information needs, and would benefit from access to weather forecasts, crop prices, and planting information, particularly in local languages. **This program empowers women farmers and increases their economic well-being through technology skills, even helping them set up online markets for their crops.** In addition to in-person training, the program also provides agriculture information to participating women through mobile phones and text messages.

Recommendations

Public libraries in many countries are providing girls and women the opportunity to access computers and the internet and gain valuable digital skills that help them improve their lives. Girls and women should be equally included and encouraged to participate in the information society in order to propel their own development, as well as the development of their families and communities. For those institutions, organizations, and governments who have gender ICT inclusion goals and objectives, we suggest the following:

1. **Development agencies should consider partnering with public libraries for all gender and ICT initiatives, particularly access and training programs.** Many public libraries in developing countries are already offering computer and internet access and training. Many libraries already have the infrastructure and community participation needed for ICT access and training programs to work.
2. **Development agencies, policy makers, and governments should support and build upon infrastructure already in place in libraries rather than designing new programs from scratch.** Public libraries already exist in many communities as a safe, trusted place for girls and women to access ICT and receive technology training. Rather than building new institutional structures, development stakeholders should consider leveraging ICT access and training programs in public libraries to meet gender access objectives.
3. **Governments at all levels should ensure public libraries are equipped with quality technology, internet connections, and trained staff to help girls and women gain the benefits associated with ICT usage.** Where public libraries lack ICT resources, development priorities should include ensuring public information access exists where it can best be supported permanently. Governments should support technology, internet, and training in public libraries.

For more examples of how public libraries around the world are introducing girls and women to technology and ICT skills, please visit www.beyondaccess.net.



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