

Technology and Its Potential Impact on the Welfare of Women in Benin

Presented by

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Introduction

Presented at the Globalization, Liberalization, and the Role of Women in Development in Africa in the 21st Century Conference, this paper discusses technology and its potential impact on the welfare of women in Benin. First the nature of the problem is discussed, next the historical and contemporary roles of woman in Benin, then the potential impact of Information Technology (IT) on the welfare of Beninese women, and lastly the conclusion

The Nature of the Problem

What is the nature of the relationship between tradition, technology and the economic and political advancement of Beninese women? The author suggests that tradition is a key factor in the lack of economic and political development of Beninese women, and that IT could greatly enhance their welfare and the potential of their enhancing the political and economic development of Benin. Traditionally women in Benin have been discriminated against and physically abused. Today, this is changing. Women are attempting to acquire equal and human rights through governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and through traditional and non traditional organizations. Although their advancement is slow, technology could increase the probability of them reaching their goal(s) and be an impetus for cultural and social changes in Benin.

Historical Roles of Women in Benin

Formally known as Dahomey, Benin is located between Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Togo. The Republic of Benin is a small country (43, 483 square miles). Many languages are spoken but French has remained the national language even since full independence from France was achieved in 1960. The only democratic country in the region with a multiparty system, Benin has a population of 5.9 million—and the third-highest illiteracy rate (63%) in the world. The United Nations has said that the republic's most pressing need is to provide educational opportunities for its entire people (34). Yet this stipulation may not be a foreseeable reality for many Beninese women until they acquire human and civil rights equal to those of men.

A recent report published in Benin documents the historical impact of discrimination of women and shows that women are poorer than men because of their traditional role of being responsible for the household and children. According to the report 46% of urban households headed by women were poor. The reason is that few women participate in market activities, a large number are illiterate, excluded from land ownership and lack credit. Traditionally, girls do not have the same access to education as boys.

In rural areas some 82% of women are illiterate (35). The alphabetization rate for males is 48.7% and for females 25.8% (37). In urban areas women's illiteracy is 54% and much higher than that of men. In Benin the cost of education is high and girls work is considered to be needed in the household. Also, there are all kinds of cultural and traditional taboos that stand in the way of girls' education. Beninese women have the highest birth rates of Sub-Saharan Africa, an average of 6.32 children per woman, (2002) (35 & 37). Such a high birth rate also hinders them from participating in the workforce at large. Additionally, the differences between women and men in political life are considerable (35).

In Benin, women hold only 11.1% of higher political offices while men hold 88.1%. The number of women in parliament is six compared to 82 men. In modern businesses only

11.7% of personnel are women. According to Beninese women, all communications between women and men are characterized by underestimation of the abilities of women: they are excluded from all decision making. Moreover, discrimination against women is strongly supported by the culture and traditions of the people, especially in the legal arena. Traditionally, women are considered to be minors. In turn, women are concerned about “social injustice” and “human rights” (35).

Traditional, “vidomegon” is practiced among the poor, often rural, female children. Poor parents primarily place a female child in the home of a more wealthy family. Recently the Ministry of Justice launched a nationwide publicity campaign to alert parents regarding the risks of this practice. Other traditional practices include the killing of deformed babies and breeched babies, and one of two newborn twins; all of whom are thought to be sorcerers in some rural areas. A groom abducts and rapes his prospective child (under 14 years) bride. Crimes such as these never reach the courts (37). Some hold that, in order to support the development of the country, women must play an equal role as men (35). Slave trafficking of children is also practiced in Benin (41).

Despite constitutional prohibition, violence and abuse of women are still considered a family matter. The tradition of female “genital mutilation” (FGM) is still practiced in the northern province of Benin. It is practiced on females ranging from infancy through 30 years of age. FGM is legal in Benin (37 & 42). Stella Omorogie states that “A woman who is not circumcised is a dog and in the olden days was a slave.” This practice can result in lasting psychological trauma, extreme pain, chronic infections, bleeding, abscesses, tumors, urinary tract infections and infertility. The most extreme form of FGM is infibulation, a process in which all or part of the external genitalia is removed by the stitching and narrowing of the vaginal opening. In some communities it is believed that if a baby’s head touches the clitoris during childbirth either the mother or the baby will die. Female genital mutilation and infibulation are traditions and health problems (42). Because of the lack of medical services, many infants and women die from this procedure. Only 42% of the people in Benin have access to medical services (37).

Religion is also a factor in the injustice of Beninese women. There are three religious groups in Benin, Islam (13.75%), traditional African religions such as Voodoo (62.56%) and Christianity (23.69%). Islamic laws such as the stoning of adulterous woman are bias toward women. Men are not punished for partaking in the same crime. Certain traditional religious rites require the inhuman treatment of women, such as the age old practice of “widows’ rites” (44 & 45). A Benin Chief, Obaloza of Benin Kingdom, Chief Jackson Amure, condemned the passage of the bill on maltreatment of widows by the State House of Assembly, sating that it will lead to crisis, if eventually signed in to law by the executive (44). Widows are made to drink the water used to wash their dead husband’s corpse and eat a particular soup from a special plate consisting of the dead husband’s left hand. Widows are also required to swear at the forehead of their dead husband. His spirit is conjured up and she has to swear that she had no part in his death. After partaking in a series of widows rites, the widow is severely traumatized and depressed. Sometimes these practices lead to the death of the widow. Amure argues that abolishing such practices would destroy cultural values that have been adhered to since ancient times (44).

Under the above conditions, it will be an arduous struggle for women in Benin to acquire just treatment and human and civil rights equal to those of men.

Contemporary Roles of Women in Benin

Today, the role of women in Benin is changing. The government and other interest groups are actively pursuing change for Beninese women. The Association of Beninese Women for Development (AFBD) is merely one example. The AFBD has created a programme for integrating women into the country’s economy. The AFBD was founded in January 1990. Officially recognized and with approximately 500 fully registered and active members, it is a federation of many women’s groups and covers the entire national territory. Its ranks include a wide variety of professions: physicians, pharmacists, lawyers, civil servants, engineers, economists, technicians, teachers, midwives and

nurses, pensioners, businesswomen, housewives and unemployed women. The AFBD has a General Assembly and an 11-member Executive Board charged with carrying out all decisions emerging from the General Assembly. It also has several technical commissions designed to promote new ideas and programmes in the various fields of activity. Women organize and work in “cells”, approximately 200 microprojects which promote economic development and democratization in Benin.

Cells are perhaps the most important features of AFBD. They are decentralized and self-supporting organizations of women living in town suburbs and villages. “Cell groups” are extensions of cells and operate as cooperatives for women engaged in the marketing and processing of farm produce.

The principal objective of AFBD was to encourage more women to participate more intensively in the process of democratization. Next, it was sought to bring all the women together to promote Benin’s economic development through income-generating activities that would not only help them to raise their families’ standard of living but also enable them to accrue saving to cope better with any health problems that might arise. So that Beninese women can derive greater benefits from their economic activities and thus promote development, some of the women received training to train others in the running of microprojects. These projects will help women to involve themselves actively in the productive sector and make a savings that will ensure the financing of their families’ health through the creation of mutual funds for social welfare (38).

There are active women’s rights groups that have been effective in drafting a family code that would improve the status of women and children under the law. Although it has not been adopted by the National Assembly, it has been on the legislature’s agenda for more than a year and has been considered by parliamentary committees. Notwithstanding, to threaten the male prerogative is a highly volatile political issue in Benin (37).

Family planning programmes have played a role in providing modern contraceptive methods to women wanting to stop or delay childbearing but are not practicing

contraception. Yet, many Beninese women prefer using traditional contraception method rather than modern ones (36).

At sub-urban Cotonou (Rep. of Benin), more than 2,000 lower-income women are members of a set of 15 savings & credit groups, called "Banques des Femmes". In March 1996, the savings were 10,200,000 FCFA (US\$20,400). 1,200 loans amounting to 23,000,000 FCFA (Franc of the African Financial Community (Franc de la Communauté Financière de l'Afrique) (US\$46,000) have been given to the members, with a rate of reimbursement of about 99%. The system started in January 1992 with only 15 women. It is a member-run system, now supervised by a sectorial development programme called PAASF (Programme d'Appui à l'Association des Femmes, a programme created from PADEB (Programme d'Appui au Développement à la Base). PAASF collaborates with the women at every level of the bank's institutional organization. Originally, the main objective of the women was economic. However, the social returns are probably bigger than the economic ones. (39). The following are some of the economic and social results of the programme.

Economic Results

- a. After 4 years of life, by March 1996, *1,200 small businesses* of low-income women have been financed, with a total of 23,000,000 FCFA (US\$46,000). The credit decision is made by the Board of Trustees.
- b. Poor women have *easier access to reasonable credit* for their activities. Furthermore, getting such a credit instead of purchasing products at credit is advantageous since the purchase for credit could cost the double of a cash purchase. Before the banks were developed, and besides the "Sou" (a traditional financial scheme), poor people could get credit from the usury system at a rate varying between 20% and 50% a month. Even the access to this expensive system was difficult because of the numerous requirements of the practitioners. In the banks, the monthly interest rate varies between 2% and 2.5%. The short cycle of their businesses makes that rate applicable.

c. The system permitted them to *overcome some of the insufficiencies of the traditional financial system (Sou)*, such as the access to one's savings. In contrast to the traditional system, they can withdraw money from their savings when they need it, during the working days of the bank. The deposit also is more liberalized than within the Sou, although the liberalization of deposit (amount and frequencies) could have both advantages and disadvantages.

d. Owing to the procedure of credit allocation, members *analyze more the economic impacts of their activities*. Consequently, they become more careful when choosing an economic activity. Unfortunately, they seem to pay less attention to that economic analysis, now.

e. *Each bank employs a member as cashier and accountant*. After, a voluntary period, in general about 10 months, this person begins getting a certain amount of money deducted from the bank's profit.

f. By the middle of the year 1992, 5 to 6 months after starting the first bank, the women began a programme of adult literacy, being in charge of that programme, it was developed so that the courses are taught by 12 members previously trained. *Those 12 members of the banks are presently earning an important part of their livelihood from the teaching.*

Direct Social Results

a. Adult Literacy: Apart from the returns the literacy programme is having on the living standards of more than 350 participants, -such as easier access to diverse informations, and easier management of activities-, the key subgroup of alphabetizers is also increasing its potential to access further sources of revenue.

b. Gain of Freedom: There are certainly a lot of indicators. Here will be explain how, owing to those financial grassroots organizations; women are increasingly becoming able to *manage their time and their own human resources*.

At the beginning of the system, almost all the members had to run home after merely 2 hours of discussion/work. Initially they were saying things such as "Our husband will be angry. We must cook for them. We must go now, or we will not be able to come here again. They will refuse to let us come again, and if we insist we may be obliged to join our parents.". Nonetheless, the participation progressively and consistently increased in terms of duration and quality.

In March'1994 it has become possible that they stay working for their banks during a full day, and then many such days consecutively. It was the start of that ongoing change. By mid-1994, 12 women chosen by the existing 10 banks (at that time) moved outside of Cotonou for their training in the context of adult literacy programme. Then, they stayed twice for a full week, with the agreement of their husbands, whereas in 1992 that could not be even foreseen. Although in mid-1994 the alphabetizers were unable to follow their training at once (during 2 weeks), in October 1995 they were able to update their skills during a 2-week section outside of Cotonou, without interruption. The alphabetizers also go from one neighborhood to another teaching adult women. In November 1994, some of these women and other peasants women went for more than one week to Dakar (Senegal) where they and other organizers gave a series of lectures on "Donner la parole aux populations de la base" within the framework of the fifth African Regional Conference on Women. They sent a delegation to Beijing'1995 as well.

Other Changes in Gender-relationship.

In contrast to what used to happen, the following situations have been observed concerning the women participating either in the banks, or in the adult literacy programme, or both:

- a. The most active women in the group can go out without their husbands' authorization.
- b. They decide for themselves and for groups of women.
- c. The literacy programme initiated a change in the status of illiterate woman within the household.

d. Some men began helping their wives with housework, even if they did not use to do so. The increasing amount of time spent by their wives in community activities is playing a significant role in such shift.

e. It was difficult to understand that food be bought when there are all ingredients: woman should cook. However, the present occupations of some women holding key-roles in the associations (e.g. alphabetizers, accounts, administrators) are causing the contrary.

f. Some women said that owing to a decrease in the time they spend at home, disputes between them and their husbands have significantly decreased.

g. There are new subjects of discussion between spouses. Moreover, woman introduces the topics, and has more knowledge on the subjects than the man. Therefore, it creates a context of a more egalitarian debate led by the wife.

h. The women participate more effectively and more proudly in other social events and activities of their community. They have been consulted about community planning (39).

The following are mechanisms to promote the advancement of women. For an extended list of organizations, see reference 45.

a. National Machinery.

The National Commission on the Integration of Women in Development (CN/IFD) was established in 1993 in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Reconstruction (MPRE), with the mandate to develop and implement a national policy for the promotion of women in development, and to coordinate all initiatives by national and international structures for the advancement of women.

b. WID Units or Focal Points in Technical Ministries.

There are focal points in each of the technical ministries who are responsible for ensuring that the gender dimension is taken into consideration in the implementation of programmes within their respective Ministries. In addition, within the Ministry of Rural Development, the Office for the Promotion of Rural Women's Activities (SPAFR) works primarily in the area of data collection.

c. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).

There has been an increase in both the number of women's associations and NGOs concerned with the promotion of women, particularly in the areas of income-generation, savings and credit, literacy, mother and child health, - and environmental protection. Other NGOs focus on women's legal rights and carry out activities in the area of legal reform and legal literacy. Although these

organizations are relatively new and lack adequate financial resources to attain their objectives, these structures constitute potential agents for implementing a programme for the advancement of women in development (40).

Today, there are many such organizations throughout Benin. Although women in Benin do not have rights equal to those of men, the Constitution of 1990 recognizes equal rights of men and women. However, discriminatory legislative measures persist in the social, economic and political domains. Social and civil legislation is strongly influenced by tradition and customs, particularly in regard to the family, women and children. Women have very limited land rights and require their husbands' authorization for certain decisions, including access to family planning services (20). As stated earlier, a new family code has been drawn up and its adoption should introduce a more equitable relationship between men and women. The above changes may appear to be insignificant, but they are necessary if permanent social and cultural changes and equal rights for women are to become a reality in Benin. Technology is another medium through which Beninese woman can raise their standard of living, improve their social, economic and political status and achieve equal rights with men.

Technology in Africa and Its Potential Impact on the Welfare of Beninese Women

New information and communication technologies like the Internet are transforming the way people live, learn and work.

Humanity has definitely crossed into a new era of economic and social experience bound up in digitally-based technological changes that are producing new ways of working, new means and manners of communication, new goods and services, and new forms of community.... For the first time, it can be reasonably claimed that the extraordinary dynamism of the IT [Information Technology] sector and the new, proliferating forms of e-business and e-commerce are part of an enduring and broad economic pattern.... (3, p. xiii)

E-Commerce, e-business and like institutions were born out of the "Information Technological Age" and have been defined as electronic commerce or electronic business conducted through services such as the World Wide Web, the Internet, American Online, CompuServe, or through an intra-, extra- or Internet solution as noted in Digital Economy 2000. Such businesses would be an asset to the contemporary movements of Beninese

women in all aspects of life, particularly education, economics, politics and health services.

In the African Development Forum '99: Post ADF Summit report, Electronic Commerce in Africa, e-commerce is defined as follows: "Electronic commerce entails the production, advertising, sale, and distribution of products and services through electronic means." (26). In E-business Transformation in the Manufacturing Industry, e-business is defined as exploiting the combined power of the Internet and information technology to fundamentally transform key business strategies and processes. For manufacturing companies to transform successfully means they will become "digital enterprises" -- using e-business technologies and applications to connect critical business systems directly to key constituencies (customers, employees, suppliers and distributors) via Intranets, extranets and the Web (27, p1).

An Internet or e-commerce joint venture is an Internet-based business that has established a strategic partnership with another Internet-based business to enhance their marketing strategy, generate revenue, share customers, capture the world market, and enhance their global leadership in e-business. The goal is to align one's business with various Internet-based business models worldwide and leveraging intellectual capital, industry knowledge, network of contacts, credibility, and brand and customer base (18). All this became possible with the invention of the Internet.

Early on, the World Wide Web and the Internet were thought to be the "Great Equalizer". Recent research has shown that this is not always the case, particularly in places such as Africa and other developing nations. Don E. Descy states that the Internet

... will widen the gap separating the haves and the havenots from a crevice to an abyss. The Internet runs by its own rules. It is not governed by the rules of laws in the usual way. The Internet may be billed as a panacea. In some ways it is, but in other ways it isn't" (15, pg. 40).

According to Peter Yin, Regional Vice-President of Federal Express, in the Business Times-Singapore:

The Internet is changing the way business is conducted, but it is thanks to traditional brick and mortar companies and not the dot-com'And quite frankly, the opportunities on the Internet are not as apparent as many people have thought' Rather it is the business-to-business (B2B) traditional brick and mortar companies that are having the greatest impact, enabled by the Internet's pervasive flow of information which has led to new models of supply chain management.... As more and more traditional brick and mortar companies jump in and participate in B2C [business-to-customer] e-commerce, I think the dot-coms will begin to realise [realize] the traditional ones have an edge over them and can kill them.... What they need he says, 'is to have an e-commerce strategy that complements their traditional distribution network allowing them to leverage off of their existing inventory and outlets'.

For Beninese women this could be an asset. IT can be used to help organize new self-help businesses (cells) and enhance communication and commerce locally as well as regionally through various regional integrations movements. It could be used to help build and maintain Benin's infrastructure. Additionally, IT could be used to educate children and laborers through methods such as distance learning.

Many believe the Internet is still a medium through which start-ups can access the global market, but as it evolves and well-established e-businesses gain more skill in utilizing it, its potential equity will become increasingly less visible globally. In Africa in the Global Infosupermarket: Perspectives and Prospects, Emmanuel K. Ngwainmbi states that

Because electronics IT is a new phenomenon to the continent [Africa], its supply and use are limited when compared with other world regions. Only about 40% of businesses, less than 5% of government workers, and less than 1% of regular citizens use the cybertechnology in contrast to 70% Internet users, 99% television viewers, and 95% telephone subscribers in America alone (29, p 537).

He asserts that only through a neoassimilation lens can one realistically see Africa's participation in or contribution to, the global infosupermarket. According to Ngwainmbi, the uneven distribution of goods, services, and technology in world regions has made

economic competitiveness and political equality unattainable. Further, any society with established norms that adopt a new foreign order has a limited ability to initially master that order. Therefore, technological acculturation or electronic colonization of the African mind is a slow and meticulous process. This is why outsiders, particularly African Americans, must play a greater role in the development of Africa's infrastructure, the introduction of IT to the continent, and in the development of laws that govern IT (29). Notwithstanding, there are other organizations presently sharing the responsibility such projects (46).

According to the Benin Technology Facts, Internet users are 10 per 1000 people in Benin, 1.5 per 1000 people have personal computers (1999). Benin's infrastructure is as follows: Motor vehicles, 8 per 1000 people; passenger cars, 7 per 1000 people (1998); passengers carried (in thousands) .84; paved roads, 20%; total road network, 6,787km (1999). Media are as follows: Daily Newspapers, 2 per 1000 people (1996); radios, 110 per 1000 people; TV sets, 11 per 1000 people (1999). Research and development (R&D) are as follows: Expenditure for R&D, 0.00% of GNP (1997); high technology exports, \$0mn (Moldavian); high technology exports, 0% of manufactured exports (1999); science and engineering students, 18% of total tertiary students (1997); science and technology journal articles, 19 (1997); science and engineers in R&D; 176 per million people (1997); technicians in R&D; 54 per million people (1997). Royalties are as follows: Royalty and license fees (Receipts), \$0mn (1998); royalty and license fees (payments), 2 per mn (1999). Telecommunications are as follows: Fax machines, 0.2 per 1000 people (1998); telephone lines (cost of local call), \$0.11 per 3 minutes (1999); telephone lines; 7 per 1000 people (1998). The digital divide is a reality in Benin and can hinder its overall development, particularly that of women.

What is the Digital Divide? It is the gap that exists between the haves and the have-nots in Internet, World Wide Web and ICTs use worldwide. The following is the conclusion from Falling Through the Net, a report published by the Commerce Department in July 1999.

In just about every country, a certain percentage of people has [have] the best information technology that society has to offer. These people have the most powerful computers, the best telephone service and fastest Internet service, as well as a wealth of content and training relevant to their lives. There is another group of people. They are the people who for one reason or another don't have access to the newest or best computers, the most reliable telephone service or the fastest or most convenient Internet services. The difference between these two groups of people is what we call the Digital Divide. To be on the less fortunate side of the divide means that there is less opportunity to take part in our new information-based economy, in which many more jobs will be related to computers. It also means that there is less opportunity to take part in the education, training, shopping, entertainment and communications opportunities that are available online. In general, those who are poor and live in rural areas are about 20 times more in danger of being left behind than wealthier residents of suburban areas (33).

The digital divide is a pivotal factor in determining the future participation of Beninese people in both the regional and global market economies. The extent to which they successfully resolve the "Digital Divide Problem" will determine future world economies. The Internet was conceived in the United States and spread globally. While Internet use was spreading in Europe, North America, and Asia in the early 1990s, the Africans were debating whether the continent would participate in Internet use (29, p 539). During his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention, Vice President Al Gore stated that if Americans do not close the digital divide between the haves and the have-nots worldwide, we run the risk of making the poor perpetually poor and "on the bottom". A report published by the U.S. government, From Digital Divide to Digital Opportunity: A Global Call to Action, records that "...if we fail to ensure that all nations have the opportunity to participate fully in the network economy and society, we run the risk that the divide between nations will grow (4).

According to the Computer Industry Almanac report from last November, there were 57.5 Internet users per 1,000 people on a worldwide average. That ranged from a high of 492 Internet users per 1,000 people in North America, to 7.88 users per 1,000 people in

the Middle East and Africa. This is the global Digital Divide (2). According to Rohde, the Digital Divide and “Digital Inclusion” is a policy that ought to be applied everywhere (1). Of the estimated 332 million people online as of March 2000, less than 1 percent (2.77 million) lives in Africa (Nua Internet Surveys, March 2000). Less than 5 percent of the computers that are connected to the Internet are in developing countries. The developed world has 49.5 phone lines per 100 people, compared to 1.4 phones in low-income countries. (International Telecommunications Union, 1999). The state of IT on the African continent will greatly influence the potential for economic, social, cultural and political growth of Benin and Beninese women.

IT penetration in Chad, Guinea, and Kenya has been relatively limited. By 1997, there were about 8,000 telephone lines with one line per 125 people in Chad. An attempt was made in Guinea to complete telephone installation in most parts of the country, including the establishment of a coastal earth station in, by the year 2000. Among the three, Kenya has the most efficient post and telephone communication system. The increase in telephone subscriptions foreshadows the potential for establishing an efficient global computer network in Africa. South Africa has more Internet users than any country in Africa (29, p 542).

The only country that has any continental interconnections is South Africa, which shares links with Namibia and Swaziland. While nearly all-African nations have Internet connectivity, in every other case the connection is via an industrialized nation (usually its former colonial power). There are no interconnection points for pan-African traffic. Save for the two South African cases, traffic from any nation to another must first pass through a third country. For example, Benin and Burkina Faso border each other in West Africa yet traffic between the two nations travel via France (for the former) and Canada (for the latter).... In Africa, recent telecom initiatives are aimed at improving teledensity by installing new local lines; plans in 1995 for a sub-sea fiber cable around Africa to link countries to each other have been scuppered; and a regional satellite consortium is a decade behind schedule (25).

In 1998, the United Nation Development Programme established a plan for the enhancement of Sub-Saharan African's access to the global market (29).

Today, intercontinental connectivity in Africa has not been so promising.... In 1999, the African Network Information Center (AfriNIC), an African Internet registry, was created to administer the system across the continent and represent the latter's interest [Europe] in the global information supermarket. More than 100 World Wide Web sites now provide information on Africa ranging from business contacts to tourist attractions to government functions. Among these, 22 sights are direct resources on South Africa. As of 1999, Egypt, South Africa, Tunisia, Ghana, Morocco, and Uganda were connected to the international Internet backbone at a rate of 64 kilo bits per second (kbps), whereas Namibia, Mozambique, Madagascar, Zambia, and Zimbabwe had a 9.6 kbps link. In the same year, all African countries had Internet services. Thirty-two West, East, South, and North African countries connect to the international backbone at a more than 65 kbps rate.... Through the Internet, business relations between countries with higher connectivity rates have increased (29).

The proliferation, existence and maintenance of the Internet in Africa is plagued with problems such as: a lack technical support and services; the suppression of local cultures; the absence of copyright laws; vulnerability to information hijacking and misrepresentation, general distrust and fear, and IT colonization and exploitation; new and old divisions resurfacing; isolation and exclusion within the continent; economic adjustments; information gate keeping, alien penetration; a lack of capital and foreign currency; a lack of adequate computer trainers and repair technicians; poor electrical supply and inadequate infrastructure, national security, political problems and political instability, warfare and social stability, weather conditions, AIDS and other health related issues and illnesses, a "brain drain" of educated Africans etc. According to Electronic Commerce in Africa, the situation and the potential in Africa today are:

- a. E-commerce represents a very real significant opportunity for Africa.
- b. Africa has unique competitive advantages in some key areas of e-commerce, namely in the area of Business to Business export teleservices, an area which happens to be one of the fastest growing markets.

- c. The potential economic and social impact of e-commerce is, on balance, very positive.
- d. Time is of the essence as the window of opportunity for Africa to achieve a significant level of e-commerce development, and avoid becoming dependent on outside economic actors is very short (26).

Today, e-commerce in Africa is characterized by the following:

- a. There are a small number of African e-commerce ventures currently in operation. Their existence proves that well informed African entrepreneurs can be successful and that Africa does indeed have competitive advantages, especially in export oriented Business to Business teleservices.
- b. There are several programmes aimed at bringing the Internet to the rural areas and to disenfranchised groups.
- c. There are several programmes aimed at providing access to the Internet and e-commerce via voluntary and community based associations.
- d. There are a few, mainly donor-sponsored, programmes aimed at providing training and/or assistance to e-commerce pilot project (26).

The main barriers to e-commerce in Africa are:

The African infrastructure is not sufficiently e-commerce friendly, mainly because:

1. The physical infrastructure is insufficient.
2. The electronic transaction infrastructure is deficient.
3. The legal and regulatory framework is still inadequate.
4. The African e-commerce environment is not a nurturing one, mainly because:
 - a. The level of awareness of e-commerce is not high enough.
 - b. African entrepreneurs need training in using Internet for business
 - c. African Internet support professionals need training to be able to support E-Business orientated ventures (26).

In Electronic Commerce in Africa it is stated that the business-to-business explosion is imminent. E-commerce trends will direct priorities to business-to-business opportunities in a short term while inviting African countries to follow carefully the development of business-to-customer e-commerce which could enable small and micro enterprises to capture international market niches through ICTs. To do so, African countries need to implement an enabling environment at the legal, regulatory, financial, logistical and economical levels (26). Based on the above research, it is apparent that the potential impact of IT on Benin and the welfare of Beninese women is phenomenal. Nevertheless, there must be a synthesis of cultural, political, economical, and social reforms before it becomes a significant reality. It is also apparent that Benin and Beninese women will need help, outside assistance, in these endeavors. The author poses the question “What is the African American’s role in the cultural, political, economical and social development of Benin and Beninese women?” She suggests that African Americans have the right and the responsibility of participating in Benin and Beninese women’s plight for equal social, political and economic rights (justice) and a place in the global market economy.

The African American’s Role

The author proposes that Africanans (Africans in the Diaspora), as well as African Americans, have a moral responsibility for the welfare of Benin and other African nations. Thus she proposes a potential role for Africanans, African Americans in particular, in the plight of Beninese women to change their traditional, social, economical and political status in Benin: If the digital divide is not closed between the haves and the have-nots, the world will be separate but not equal. If the digital divide problem persists, poorer nations such as Benin that are already heavily in debt will remain perpetually poor, and dependent upon more advanced nations. This will negatively affect the plight of women in Benin. If African Americans are to be an asset to their plight, they must first take responsibility for solving the digital divide problem and closing the digital abyss. The following are concrete steps that Africanans and African Americans can take to facilitate the plight of Beninese women and help to ensure Benin a place in the global economy. They must

In the area of education:

- be academician
- be lifelong learners
- be innovative
- be contemporary
- be self-starters

In the area of community:

- love our families, each other and ourselves.
- Communicate our wisdom and history to our children.
- force political leaders to reach across continents, share common experiences, and begin figuring out together how to resolve Africanans' political, economic, and social problems in the modern age, wherever they may be.
- encourage Africanan scientist and academics across the Diaspora to begin to learn about and to understand Africanans' illnesses, diseases, and their cures; to exchange ideas and information because we must be in the forefront of this type of research. The utilization of computers in such an interactive and interdependent way will help.
- to heighten and highlight Africanan-led research work which might, for example, hasten finding cures for diseases that affect the Africanan community most.
- We must continue to pass among ourselves the story of how we overcame.

In the area of business:

- become economically independent, and interdependent
- adapt to change and change when necessary
- devise methods of getting a computer in every Africanans' home.
- be entrepreneurs in establishing electronic communication, "e-business and e-commerce. We must "Begin the discussion" among ourselves.
- make it possible for Black youths and students to establish electronic communication to foster future business developments once they become adults and leaders.

In the area of faith:

- Make the Almighty God first and preeminent in all things.

Based on the above discussions, tradition is not a strong enough deterrent to hinder the potentially positive impact of IT on the welfare of Beninese women.

Conclusion

The present age, as in past ages, will present challenges to women in Benin. Traditionally, they have been discriminated against and abused, but today, this is changing. There are governmental and nongovernmental agencies working to assist them in acquiring equal social, human, economical and political rights, and equal opportunities to participate in the political institutions of Benin. Change is occurring for Beninese women but it is slow. Initially, these changes may appear to be insignificant, but they are necessary if permanent change and equal rights are to become a reality for them. These acts are the impetus for permanent change. Information Technology has the potential to significantly impact the welfare of women in Benin, but before this occurs, there must be a synthesis of cultural, political, economical, and social reforms. Also, there is a potential role for African Americans in the plight of Beninese women. Finally, tradition alone is not a strong enough deterrent to hinder the potentially positive impact of IT on their welfare.

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