

BRIDGING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

**Africa Launch of the Digital Diaspora Initiative and
Global Advisory Committee meeting
Kampala, Uganda
(May 5-6, 2003)**

Panel presentation by Dr. Gillian M Marcelle (WSIS Gender Caucus)

Excellencies, members of the diplomatic community, members of the panel, and fellow gender justice advocates, it is with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation of UNIFEM to participate in this timely and important meeting.

We have been asked to reflect on how ICTs can assist with bringing African women out of the poverty trap. To do this, I will rely only on the oldest communication technology, and one that is familiar on the African continent – storytelling. My story will give information about heroines who have undertaken adventures in foreign lands, bringing rewards, hope and inspiration to their communities. This story also has many lessons to help us solve the challenges that we will be discussing in Kampala over the next three days.

Many, many moons ago, in the year 1995, a fearless woman called Wanjiru Kihoro, having crossed land and sea to returned from China, where she had been called to participate in a gathering of forty thousand woman warriors, convened a meeting of African women in the city where the two oceans meet (Cape Town), South Africa. More than one hundred African women responded to the call. When we met we discussed ways of strengthen our organisations and finding ways to respond to new challenges and opportunities. In that meeting, perhaps for the first time, a wide range of organisations came to learn about new tools for collecting and sharing information. Those gathered listened and gazed in wonder at the accounts of *e-mail, mailing lists, search engines and the Internet*.

When the meeting was over, we returned to our countries and sent scouts to learn more about these tools. Soon the community was abuzz with the news about ICTs. But alas the excitement did not last very long; many scouts were disappointed, and were crest fallen as they recounted all the barriers that African women’s organisations face in accessing and using these technologies. Their reports, made us sad and despondent:

*“its too costly, - we cannot afford these technologies;
women need clean water and adequate food first;
there are too many rules, that restrict our access to and use of ICTs,
there are not enough people who understand how to make these tools work and
finally,
there are very important people who do not think that women need to collect and share
information or to communicate with each other –what would they speak about?”*

Back in the land of Big Ben, Wanjiru gathered a group of leaders together and decided to raise funds to get around some of the many problems that the scouts had identified¹.

Two years later in 1997, in the land of the Masai, another group of African women met, called together by Eva Rathgeber. After much discussion, they decided to write a book in which they would collect the wisdom and insights that could be used to convince important people, those with money and power, that women should have access to these technologies. There was much excitement and lots of hard workⁱⁱ. In 1998, at a huge feast of words, actions and celebrations the advice of these women was presented to leaders gathered in the land of Ethiopiaⁱⁱⁱ. The leaders listened attentively, acclaiming the wisdom of the advice; we had great expectations that they would act with determination and urgency.

Fast forward five years to 2002^{iv}. The world is even more in awe of the might and power of these technologies, and those in power are increasingly convinced that without access to ICTs, one's chances for quality of life are dim. There are many plans for spreading these tools far and wide. But alas, not much has changed as far as African women's access to ICTs. If we sent scouts out to speak to our communities and to the important people, the answers we receive would be much the same *"its too expensive, African women have other priorities; why do we have to do anything special for women- this is a technical issue"*

Realizing that something had to be done, a group of twenty-two organisations, sent emissaries to the land of Timbuktu where we hoped that the ancients would help us to solve this intractable problem. How would we get the *important people* in ICTs, gathered in Bamako to realise that continuing to make African women invisible was not wise? Could we convince them that the potential value of ICTs lies in wide accessibility to all people? Out of that experience, with leadership from African women, the WSIS Gender Caucus was born^v.

As we traveled and mulled over the problem, we met many Africans who live in distant places and those who were forced to leave four centuries ago. These Diaspora Africans have been on the inside track of the new Information Society. They have observed first hand how ICTs have come to dominate the economic and technological landscape. Africa's daughters and sons have been part of the adventure of creating the new Information Society. Located in the best universities, research labs and in private companies; these Africans have been moving and shaking with the important people in ICTs. The African technologists, thinkers and entrepreneurs in distant lands^{vi} speak with an exciting voice, they say:

*"we understand these technologies and can adapt them to serve African problems
" no challenge is to great, we thrive on problems and enjoy finding solutions"
"solving problems in Africa can teach the world how to use ICTs for development"*

This meeting brings the family together again, this time we are focusing not on questions but on formulating answers and designing actions. I hope that the important people are listening and our work over the next three days will influence how ICT budgets are spent, which technologies are developed and the rules that determine who has access. Let us hope that this gathering marks the beginning of a new chapter in our story; one in which the needs and legitimate rights of African women are placed at the centre of the Information Society.

In years to come, we will again come together to tell stories; those tales, which are yet to be written, will recount how Africa made great strides in using ICTs and succeeded in bringing its people out of the poverty trap. The bitter struggles of the last decade, characterised by our fight to legitimise women's right to access and control of ICTs, and the ignoring of sound advice on how these technologies can be used to assist with empowerment, protection of human rights and promotion of dignity, will be relegated to a distant memory.

A luta continua.

ⁱ Some years later ABANTU for Development became the first organisation to be successfully awarded an INFODEV grant for a project focusing on gender and ICTs. See www.abantu.org for further details.

ⁱⁱ Dr Eva Rathgeber, then Regional Director for East Africa with IDRC, coordinated the production of a volume on gender issues in African ICT sector. The volume Gender and the Information Revolution in Africa edited by Eva M. Rathgeber and Edith Ofwona Adera is available at www.idrc.ca/acb/showdetl.cfm?&DID=6&Product_ID=471&CATID=15

ⁱⁱⁱ The 1998 40th anniversary conference on African Women's Economic Empowerment organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, had a visible focus on the role of ICTs in promoting economic development.

Full conference report is available at www.uneca.org/eca_resources/major_eca_websites/eca40th/finalrep.exe
Background papers on women and ICTs are found at www.un.org/depts/eca/eca40th/doc.htm

^{iv} In those five years, many more gatherings have taken place including the successful hosting of the Know How Conference in Kampala in July 2002. There has also been a great deal of research, analysis, training and advocacy, by African organisations such as ABANTU for Development, Association of African Media Women, AISGWG, APC Africa Women, ASAFE, FEMNET, FAWE, ISIS-WICCE, SchoolNetAfrica, TAMWA, WomensNet, WOUNET and ZWRNC. There is a strong basis for partnership across the continent and with organisations in other regions, including those led by Diaspora Africans.

^v The WSIS Gender Caucus is a global multistakeholder organisation which aims to ensure that gender equality is integrated in to the World Summit on the Information Society and its outcomes. With financial and organisational support from UNIFEM, the WSIS Gender Caucus was formed during the first Regional Preparatory conference for WSIS, held in May 2002. The founding organisations and individuals in the WSIS Gender Caucus included most of the pioneers of gender and ICT advocacy. In June 2002, only one month after its launch, the Caucus expanded membership to other regions, by meeting in Geneva and issuing a call during the first meeting of the ITU Working Group on Gender Issues. The WSIS Gender Caucus, used the Bamako conference to produce a comprehensive statement on gender equality advocacy issues in the African ICT sector. This statement available at www.wougnet.org/WSIS/genderstatement.html has been widely used as a foundation for lobbying and advocacy, including as preparation for the Global Prep-Coms and the March 2003, Commission on the Status of Women.

^{vi} A small selection of African Diaspora women technologists and entrepreneurs, based outside the continent, who combine their leadership in the Information Society with concern for African development.
Dorothy Okello – www.wougnet.org
Jacqueline Morris – www.jacquelinemorris.com
Atieno Aluoch - <http://stage.itp.tsoa.nyu.edu/~sa403/portfolio/>