

WOMEN AND ICT: CELEBRATING THE GAINS; CONFRONTING THE OBSTACLES

International Women's Day presents an opportunity to reflect on the journey towards a more equitable world for women. It is a day to recognize the progress that has been made in that direction and to commit to tackling the obstacles that continue to stand in the way.

Today, we recognize the role Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has played in helping women to navigate some of the challenges they face day-to-day, and the potential of ICTs to empower women to enjoy the full benefits of a digital economy.

In recent years, ICTs have played a crucial role in enhancing women's lives in various aspects of life, including agriculture, safe motherhood, small and medium enterprises, rural livelihood, the informal sector, and social economic participation.

Women in Agriculture

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), out of the 72% of the population employed in Uganda's agriculture sector, 77% are women. This underlines the importance of women in the agricultural value chain, especially subsistence food production.

ICTs have helped to address some of the challenges that women face in this sector, including limited access to information, financial services, and markets. Today, mobile phones and internet services have enabled women farmers to access information on weather patterns, market prices, and improved agricultural practices, leading to better yields and higher incomes.

Additionally, ICTs have facilitated mobile banking services that enable women farmers to access financial services, which they can leverage to boost their farming ventures.

To enhance the adoption of ICTs, improve the content and digital skills for smallholder farmers, Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) has partnered with Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE) and developed

the ICT4Farmer App, the Farmer Extension Services Call Centre, the Agricultural e-Academy, and digital skilling for farmers. All this is geared towards improving agricultural productivity.

Safe Motherhood

Women face significant challenges regarding maternal health, especially in developing countries. However, ICTs have provided new opportunities to address these challenges and improve the quality of healthcare. Thanks to mobile phones and telemedicine services, women can now receive antenatal care, postnatal care, and family planning services through mobile health services. Additionally, mobile phones have facilitated the collection of health data, which has enabled health authorities to monitor maternal health and make informed decisions. Consequently, the maternal mortality rate has dropped from 438 deaths per 100,000 births in 2011 to 368 deaths per 100,000 in 2021, according to Uganda Bureau of Statistics.

Small and Medium Enterprises

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) account for more than 90% of the private sector and more than 70% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, women-owned SMEs often face significant challenges, including limited access to markets and finance.

However, ICTs have enabled women entrepreneurs to access new markets and business networks through e-commerce and other online business opportunities. Additionally, digital financial services have made it easier for women entrepreneurs to access finance, which they can use to grow their businesses.

To enhance ICT adoption by MSMEs, UCC has partnered with the Federation of Small and Medium Enterprises (FSMEs) to train more than 3,000 women in the informal sector to boost productivity and expand business opportunities.



Rural Women

Rural women face unique challenges, including limited access to basic services, such as healthcare, education, and clean water. ICTs have helped to improve the lives of rural women through tools such as the mobile phone, which enables them to access information on healthcare services, including antenatal care, family planning, and HIV/AIDS prevention. ICTs also support the delivery of education services in rural areas, enabling girls to gain knowledge and skills.

To further stimulate ICT access and usage among rural communities, including women, UCC has distributed 4,000 low-cost internet enabled devices to poor households in selected villages across the country as part of a proof-of-concept project on the necessity and role of access and usage of ICTs in eradicating household poverty.

Women in the Informal Sector

Women in the informal sector often work in low-paying jobs and face significant challenges, including limited access to financial services and social protection. ICTs have enabled women in the informal sector to access financial services, including mobile banking and microfinance. Additionally, digital platforms have enabled women to find new work opportunities, such as online freelancing and e-commerce.

To empower women to take advantage of such opportunities, UCC has partnered with Women in Technology (WITU) through a digital literacy programme that targets 3,000 women across 15 districts. Through digital skilling, women are empowered to not only use ICTs but use them safely, hence being in position to harness their full potential.

Social Economic Participation

Women's social economic participation is essential for economic growth and development. However, women often face significant challenges when it comes to participating in economic activities. ICTs have provided new opportunities for women inclusion



in the economy through digital platforms such as ride-sharing and home-sharing. For many young mothers, career women and women in the informal sector, ICTs as basic as a mobile phone provide the much-needed support that helps them balance domestic, economic and work demands.

Skills and Safety

However, to fully participate in the digital economy and to realize their full potential through ICTs, women require adequate digital skills. By boosting women's digital skills, we can create a more inclusive and equitable digital economy.

It is also worth remembering that women face a range of online safety challenges that can compromise their privacy, security, and well-being. A safer and more inclusive online environment is critical for women to participate fully in the digital economy and reap the benefits to the fullest.

Conclusion

As we commemorate International Women's Day, let us remember that access to safe and affordable ICTs can empower women in a variety of ways - from boosting agricultural productivity to the informal sector - and provide access to new opportunities and resources. However, more work remains to be done to ensure that bottlenecks such as access, safety and skills that stand in the way of women fully benefiting from ICTs are overcome.

Uganda Communications Commission renews its commitment to empowering women through access to safe and affordable ICTs, advocating for policies and programmes that promote digital inclusion and equal opportunities through the ICT sector, and working towards creating a world where all women have access to the tools and resources that they need to achieve their full potential.

Together, we can close the digital divide and build a brighter future for women in the digital age.

