

Common Agenda, Different Methods: Women's Use of ICTS in Conflict Situations

By Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng

This paper was presented at the side panel on globalised media and ICT systems and structures and their interrelationship with fundamentalism and militarism organised by Isis International-Manila during the WSIS in Geneva, Switzerland in December 2003.

“If the American demonstrations are sometimes ignored by their own mainstream media, who are we, scattered all over villages in Africa, to expect our issues to attract their screens and cameras?”

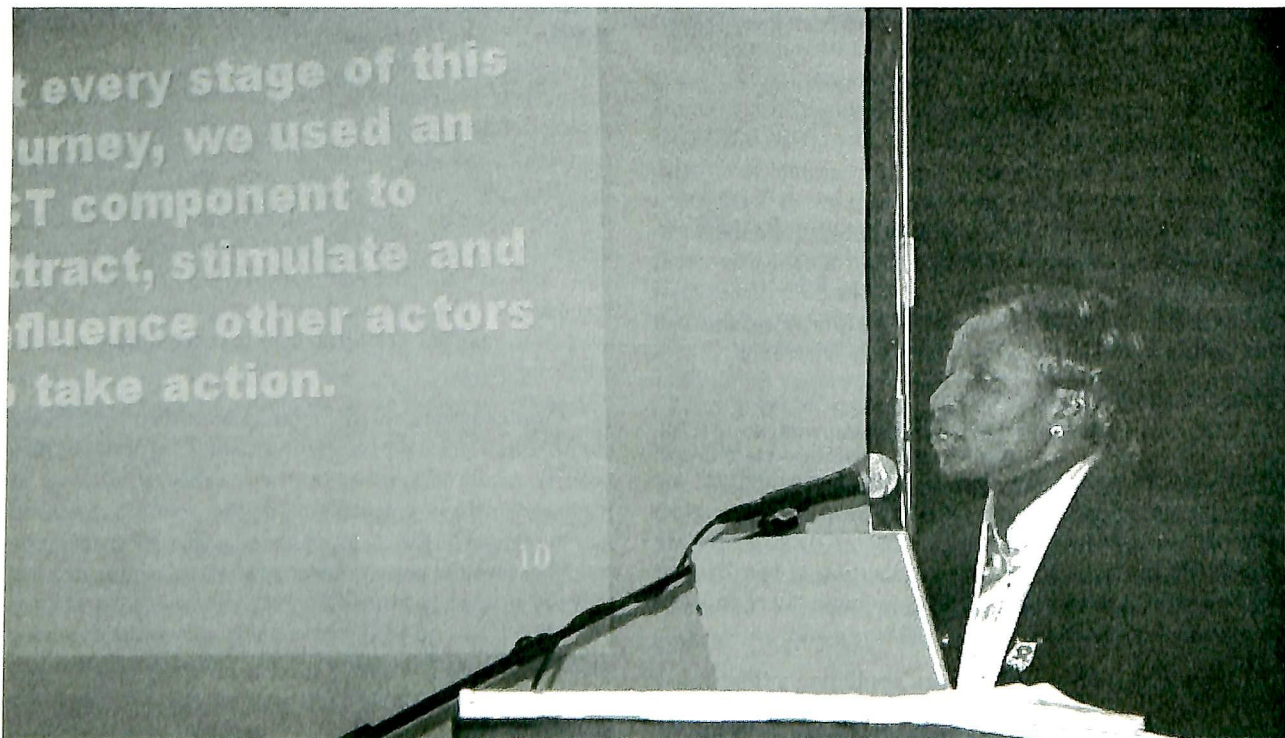
This question was what inspired Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), to resort to the convergence of media and communication to advance its agenda.

Advocacy Stage

The urgent task was to develop mechanisms that would communicate women's ideas and allow them to

forge solidarity action plans, to exchange information and strategies despite the challenges before them of poor communication infrastructure, high level of illiteracy among majority of women and the conflict situation amidst them. For this to take off, there was a need for Isis-WICCE to build the capacity of women in using different ICTs to address their principal problems and to effect change.

This brought about an effective link between Isis-WICCE, the war survivors and the policy makers to apply the appropriate communication methods that would generate disaggregated data, relay their stories, and move



Isis-WICCE Executive Director Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng during her presentation at the side panel on globalised media and ICTs during the World Summit on the Information Society held in Geneva, Switzerland last December 2003.

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each one to take action. The ICTs were therefore vehicles that stimulated and influenced the actions of the different stakeholders.

The organisation prepared women to tell their stories in their own languages and methods, within their contexts. The tape recorder was the most appropriate tool because of its simplicity. Many were able to tell their stories.

In the course, the Isis-WICCE staff realised that key aspects of story telling were being missed out. The expressions on the survivors' face, the tears rolling down their cheeks, the mutilated parts of their bodies—none of these could be part of their stories. It was important to expose these visual magnitude of pain, to which mainstream media was mostly indifferent. The video camera became handy at this point. It became a powerful tool to project women's suffering—physical, mental, psychological and economic. Their expressions on video brought the organisation to the next step, the formulation of an action and sustainability strategy.

Action and Sustainability Strategy

As the saying goes, seeing is believing. The audio and visuals drove different actors to take action. The story of a young woman who leaked urine and faeces for 14 years made activists and policy makers react differently. For the gynaecologists, the agenda was to rectify the problem. Indeed they did! A woman who could not step out of her homestead for 14 years was able to say, "At least I can now interact with others... I can walk around, go to church without smelling."

Inviting the "powers that be", to be part of the strategy of launching of these findings was a useful strategy for long-term interventions. During such workshops, survivors were invited to tell their stories (using the person-to-person medium of communication).

The women's own telling of the stories named and shamed the very systems expected to provide them security and better their lives. This prompted some of them, mostly government workers, to take action. Few women who never dreamt of safe shelter received materials and today have a roof above their heads. ICT tools are indeed powerful and could clarify the real value of women.

We also involved mission representatives and members of the diplomatic community who showed sympathy and volunteered their assistance. For example, we invited the Ambassador of the Republic of Germany to launch one of the reports, who then released about US\$40,000 to provide basic needs of internally displaced persons.

Telling their stories in front of a camera was in itself empowering for the survivors of armed conflict. The support from UNIFEM to the documentary "A Lingering Pain" brought these survivors, their war-torn places of origin, and their refugee camps to TV and radio. Their pains were no longer hidden but became topics of discussion by ordinary Ugandans, human rights activists, as well as the UN Security Council.

The unknown conflict became known worldwide. Many actors influenced policy makers at different levels for legal reforms to improve the women's conditions. It became known that apart from rape, women suffered numerous gender-specific and non-specific violations. The organisation's link to more than 2,000 networks

worldwide made the sharing of this information (through the Internet) timely. For example, the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) was able to request the UN Security Council to discuss the conflict in Uganda on the way to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Our other partners such as the Association for Progressive Communicators, FEMNET, Isis International-Manila used the same information to articulate the issues of women and conflict at different levels of governance.

Knowing the power of drama to most communities in the Africa, Isis-WICCE continued to build the capacity of women to use drama to sensitise, educate and raise awareness of the ills of war. It has remained a tool in these women's search for peace.

Recommendations

But there are still systems at play to challenge, including globalisation, militarisation and the different fundamentalisms that my colleagues (in this forum) have explained. We need to assess and reassess women's methods of using ICTs, instead of letting the global few dictate their ideas on how we should proceed. We need to address the question of access to technology, especially for women in remote areas. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has to realise that Africa will benefit from information-society initiatives only if the process addresses the needs of the majority. This is the only way the global village will become truly global. Otherwise, it becomes the information society of the minority.

It is imperative to involve the women in determining how they want to communicate, what they want to communicate, and where they want to communicate. The focus should not always be on globalised media, which does not always make sense to majority who are out of reach. Globalised media may be the way for some of us, but not for all of us.

It is important that approaches to communication are sensitive to all the different ways people communicate. It is also important that the training provided is what the beneficiaries require, and not the training we think they require. Therefore, all proponents of gender mainstreaming policy should not only include the word "gender" in policy documents but enforce a gender perspective, if the marginalised,

particularly women, are to benefit from the process.

Considering the numerous gender issues that affect women's access and use the ICTs for development, there must be a choice of what technology to use, especially for the poor, isolated and illiterate, for obvious reasons.

There must be consultations with these vulnerable groups on how, to whom, and what they want to communicate. Only through this approach will they be able to develop their own content relevant to their needs.

Although governments such as Uganda propose to focus on human capacity building, it is evident that such initiative are still urban-based and mainly in rich, established schools. The costs of improving one's skills in accessing communication services are way beyond the capacity of the majority poor in the rural communities. It is important, therefore, to address the issues of learning and organisational development to help each sector develop human capacity.

Although there has been response by some public, regulatory and license regimes to extend ICT services to rural areas, the delivery of such must tally with the people's needs and ability to pay. What seems to be the advocacy now is the distribution of the new technologies, without taking into account usage by the majority. There is more of a macro level approach to infrastructure development and less consideration of micro utilisation and needs. This perpetuates the digital divide and isolation of the poor communities.

On the other hand, the resources for the development of the information society seem to concentrate on access to new technologies, without addressing the gender issues that continue to hinder marginalised women from accessing the technology for their empowerment. It is important that this be addressed.

Information and communication policies must be people-centred for these to have meaning. Government and the private sector in our respective countries must learn to appreciate individual and societal ways of communicating. ☺

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