

A Website for Mauritanian Women: An ICT Acquisition Model

Theme(s):

- Information, Education, and Communication

Type of Program:

- Capacity Building, Raising Awareness

Country/Region:

- Mauritania (National)

Submitting/Executing Organizations:

- ICT and Citizenship

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Project Cost [Amount and Source of Funds]:

Regentic-Enda (Senegal)

- 2002: \$700
- 2003: \$700
- 2004: \$10,300

Human Resources:

- Project Coordinator
- Volunteers

Partners:

In Mauritania:

- Alternative Citizenship Forum
- Women, Solidarity and Development
- Cyberforum of Civil Society
- UNDP
- GTZ
- European Commission

Regional:

- Regentic-Enda (Senegal)
- RENAFA-NTIC (Burkina Faso)

International:

- Rinoceros (France)
- Femnet (International)
- Apc-Women (Networking for Change and Empowerment)
- International Platform of Gender (Europe)
- International Platform of Gender and Water (France)
- AFAL (France)

Initiative overview: The initiative emerged from the realization that 55% of Mauritanian women did not have access to any type of media or communication (telephone, radio, Internet, etc). The idea was to create an interactive space that would enable them to access information technologies and express their views irrespective of ethnic, cultural, religious or political backgrounds.

Social discriminatory practices targeted: The last twenty years have witnessed positive legal and political transformations, but conservative social attitudes have limited women's capacity for improving their conditions in various fields, including education and political life.

Socio-cultural context: Statistics show that Mauritanian women represent 53% of the whole population (2,897,000), 53% of the urban population and 60% of the illiterate. 27.7% of Mauritanian women contribute to the economy. 29% of families are headed by women. The rate of maternal mortality is 747 per 100,000. 32% of women go to university whereas only 6% of them reach decision-making positions. It is noteworthy that the divorce rate has increased during the last few years to 47.6%.

In Mauritania, there are generally no strict positions or conservative religious attitudes against women's work. Although there is an appropriate legal framework for women's issues in important fields such as labour law and family planning, it still lacks effective monitoring by decision-makers. Socially, there is a tendency to make women responsible for their not benefiting from the opportunities offered to them. The gap between the legal framework and actual practice may be attributed to the lack of serious gender initiatives and the absence of qualified specialists in this area. The governmental institutions in charge of women's issues do not have enough power to impose multisectoral comprehensive approaches.

Objectives and Goals

The initiative aims at enabling Mauritanian women to access ICT so that they can express opinions irrespective of location and cultural, religious, ethnic and political backgrounds. The specific initiative objectives include establishing an information centre, developing capacity building projects to empower women through data collection, documentation, and the use of audio-visual aids; and designing training programmes to enable women to express their opinion in the media (radio, documentaries and public-oriented advertising).

The long-term objectives are:

- Facilitating women's access to a fixed information source;
- Capacity building to keep abreast of technological innovations; and
- Contributing to the national, regional and international efforts to reduce the ICT gender gap.

Good Practices

Innovative Approach

- The initiative was based on respecting the women beneficiaries' practical life. The centre's working hours have been adjusted to accommodate women's daily tasks and child rearing responsibilities.
- The principle of ownership and contribution was adopted through:
 - Creating transparency, which attracted members from various areas to participate in the information centre's activities.
 - Resisting the pressure to affiliate with political, ethnic and religious groups, thus creating trust among members.
- Using ICTs to facilitate information access, distance learning, and discussion forums in which women can exchange views and voice opinions, and men can express their thoughts on women's issues. The aim is to develop discussions on women's positions and support their participation.
- Using the radio to:
 - Raise awareness about women's rights and roles in all fields;
 - Support women's access to a widespread means of expression; and
 - Create and update a website.
- Urging women to contribute to the activities of the civil society through a variety of activities, including:
 - Creating and updating a website;
 - Organising workshops to raise awareness about the importance of using ICTs and communication between women and the civil society;
 - Organising ICT training sessions for women, girls and the disabled to make their participation and roles effective in the civil society;
 - Establishing electronic forums to discuss women's issues in development;
 - Supporting women activists in the civil society by developing web pages on their NGO activities and websites; and
 - Supporting women in their participation in regional and international workshops.

Overcoming Challenges

Challenges were basically political. It was difficult to obtain official recognition and national support. Governmental funding was limited. The adopted strategy for overcoming political obstacles was based on the determination of the initiative members and their refusal to adopt political/religious/ethnic agendas. The initiative largely relied on the members' efforts in building a strong and united team.

Such dynamics enabled the dissemination of the initiative's activities, the enhancement of influence and the creation of strategic alliances with regional organisations.

Immediate successes

Given the nature of the initiative, the quantitative success indicators may be measured as follows:

- 178 visitors visit the website daily. Six messages are received every day on seeking information or finding out about how to support the website.
- There are 84 constant participants in the forum. 587 messages were exchanged in 2007.
- 401 women have been trained on how to use the internet and email.
- Eight training sessions and eleven awareness building seminars and meetings were held.
- The website participated in more than 90 consultancies and activities at the national, regional and international levels.

The qualitative success indicators are:

- The overcoming of social and ethnic differences by addressing common interest issues, and
- Men's commitment to exchanging views on women's conditions and rights.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- The lack of resources prevented a thorough website evaluation. The adopted monitoring and evaluation indicators enabled improving the provided service.
 - There was a periodic review of website visitors, number of electronic forum participants and number of electronic mails.
 - Constant monitoring of reactions to common priority issues was achieved by focussing on the number and nature of discussed issues and the new materials incorporated into the website.
 - Ensuring sustainable capacity building was achieved through monitoring the number of training programmes and participants.
 - Increasing the number of women acquiring Internet skills and participating in the initiative forum and activities was a monitored activity.

Ensuring Sustainability

- Flexibility in dealing with challenges in order to overcome them and take advantage of opportunities was an important characteristic of the initiative.

Contribution to Social Transformation

- The initiative enabled Mauritanian women to access ITCs.
- The website created a women's space for mobilisation and awareness building in various fields such health, education, economic independence, and legal rights.
- The website represented an important source of information on the dangers of some social practices and on women's role in development.

Lessons for Replication

- The initiative can and should be replicated in different fields and contexts given the importance of creating networks and providing women with a space to voice views and undertake activities in complex social contexts. It is also important in bridging the digital divide and eliminating discriminatory forms of access to information. Transparency and creating a sense of belonging are two important conditions to ensure the trust of target groups and the success of communication initiatives.

