



THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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NAIROBI, Feb 14 (IPS) - Janet Malika owes her success to the little gadget that is her cell phone. Formerly a struggling food hawker in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, she has become a cafeteria owner since acquiring the device about five years ago, and using it to conduct business.

"Before, I would waste a lot of time trying to get ingredients from the market. By the time I got ready to start preparing food for sale, it would be so late -- and I ended up losing a lot of customers," she told IPS.

"With a cell phone all I have to do is call my suppliers, who will deliver the ingredients within no time. Because of the phone, I am always on time in preparing meals for customers. My business has expanded to the point that I have opened a cafeteria. All I know now is profit."

And, she's not the only one. A 2006 study conducted in Nairobi to explore the effect mobile phones had on small businesses owned by women indicates that most concerns benefited from use of the devices. The report was commissioned by the International Development Research Centre, which is funded by the Canadian government.

Most women interviewed said phone features such as calendars and clocks "enhanced better planning of time and meetings", allowing them "to handle business and family issues at the same time, maintain contact with customers, keep track of business while away, and make orders and ensure deliveries on time."

Technology has also come to the aid of Bernedette Mushilla. Since the Nairobi-based sex therapist started marketing her practice through a web site two years ago, her clients have increased from 500 to over 2,000.

"I get so many calls from people who are seeking advice on relationships and sex matters, as opposed to previously, when I popularised my services by word of mouth. The internet has truly made a difference in my business," Mushilla said in an interview with IPS.

The experiences of Malika and Mushilla typify how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can transform the lives of women in Kenya and elsewhere on the continent.

At present, however, the benefits of ICTs are largely restricted to towns and cities, as most rural areas lack the infrastructure, equipment and skills needed for communities to take full advantage of these technologies.

Government figures indicate that only 20 percent of Kenya's population of over 30 million has access to electricity; the majority of those who do without live in outlying regions.

In addition, a high illiteracy rate among women has prevented many from using ICTs to improve business efficiency and productivity. According to United Nations statistics, more than 40 percent of women in Africa have no access to basic education -- with most who lack schooling based in rural areas.

Given that official estimates put over 70 percent of the Kenyan population in far-flung regions, this rural-urban digital divide is a source of some concern.

"We will not achieve meaningful development for as long as we have women in the rural areas still unable to use ICTs, which can greatly improve their well being," says Constantine Abuya, executive director of the African Centre for Women, Information and Communications Technology, based in Nairobi.

Various initiatives to help Africa's rural women join the information age are emerging.

A case in point is the new Regional Information Communication Technology Support Programme (RICTSP), organised by the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which will allow women entrepreneurs in rural parts to get grants for boosting their businesses, and advise them on ICTs.

"We are giving them grants because we know that it is difficult for these women to get financing. We know they have

low skill levels in ICTs," Bessie Nyirenda, head of the RICTSP, told IPS. "Because radio is widely used in these areas, advice on how to do business will be given through this medium."

Last week (Feb. 7-8), a two-day workshop for business women's associations from Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan was convened by IGAD: a regional body comprising Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda. The event, held in Nairobi, mapped out ways of promoting ICT use by women in outlying regions.

Delegates from all four countries represented at the workshop noted that, in addition to radio, the mobile phone had become a popular tool of communication in rural areas because of the drastic shortage of fixed lines there.

The same problem occurs in Kenya, where only 14,285 of the country's 293,364 fixed lines are rural connections, according to the Communications Commission of Kenya's (CCK) annual report of 2005/2006.

This situation has seen impressive growth in subscriptions to the country's two mobile operators. Safaricom and Celtel now have about 6.5 million subscribers, says the CCK report. (FIN/2007)

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