‘Telling our own stories’: African women blogging for social change
Oreoluwa Somolu

This article explores how African women have embraced the blogging phenomenon, and how blogs can be used to promote women’s equality and empowerment. One of the reasons frequently cited for a lack of interest by African women in information and communications technologies (ICTs) is the lack of content available that is relevant to their needs. Blogging provides a way for women to become active creators and disseminators of knowledge, writing about what is important to them. As we explore how African women are using blogs, we will also examine the obstacles to blogging, and why some women are not attracted to the technology.

The Internet, and other information and communication technologies, (ICTs), have the potential to support the economic, political, and social empowerment of women, and the promotion of gender equality. Examples include e-commerce initiatives, that link women artisans to global markets through the Internet; e-governance programmes, initiated by some governments, which use ICTs to make government services more accessible to citizens by providing them electronically; and health programmes, where educators have used radio to communicate information related to women’s sexual and reproductive health (Gurumurthy 2004). However, in the African context, this potential of ICTs is limited by poverty, illiteracy, lack of computer literacy, and language barriers – obstacles that are felt more keenly by women (Radloff, Primo, and Munyua 2004). For instance, in Africa only 3.6 per cent of people have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats 2007), and it is very difficult to know how many of these are women (Hafkin and Taggart 2001).

Despite these obstacles, there are many organisations implementing projects that use ICTs as a tool to improve African women’s social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. Nigeria’s Fantsuam Foundation, for instance, supported the Bayanloco Community Learning Centre, which set up community-based, community-sustained computer centres targeted at rural women in northern Nigeria1. The Women of Uganda Network supports and promotes the use of ICTs among its member organisations: activities have included ICT and entrepreneurship training2. Nigeria’s KnowledgeHouseAfrica’s Gender Team has organised several free and open source
software training events. Fahamu, a pan-African human-rights and social justice organisation, set up the UmNyango Project, where SMS technology is used to access information and report incidences of violence against women and children in rural areas of South Africa. As part of the project, women produced their own radio programmes, which were made available to local radio stations, as well as being distributed over the Internet as ‘podcasts’.

One new ICT tool that African women are gradually embracing is the ‘weblog’ or ‘blog’, as it is commonly known. A blog is a website where entries are made in journal style, and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs are made up of written entries, or ‘posts’. Blog entries can contain text, hypertext (i.e. links to other websites), pictures, video, and audio material. Each post has its own web address or URL, which is also known as a ‘permalink’. Many blogs feature a ‘blogroll’, or list of other blogs, which come recommended by the author. Many blogs also offer a ‘trackback’ feature, which notifies the blog author, or ‘blogger’ about any blogs or sites that link to that specific post (Economist 2006). Blogs range from subject-specific blogs, and news and current affairs blogs, to personal diary-style blogs. Although blogging has now ceased being considered a ‘geeky’, unconventional activity, and has moved to being part of mainstream media activity, the majority of blogs today are still maintained by amateur writers, who have stories or opinions to share.

Blogs are widely heralded as an alternative to mainstream media, as they provide a forum for ‘ordinary’ people to share their own perspective and experiences with other Internet users. Blogs and other Internet social networking facilities afford individuals, networks, and organisations the opportunity to communicate with each other quickly, share information and other resources, and collaborate to pool their collective knowledge. In particular, blogs provide arenas for discussion, dissent, and debate, which can translate into knowledge, and a feeling of empowerment that is critical for social transformation and development (Radloff, Primo, and Munyu 2004).

That said, while ICTs can contribute to socioeconomic and political development, they are not a panacea to social ills and they can and do easily reinforce social inequity (Radloff, Primo, and Munyu 2004, 5). Gender inequality may be reinforced due to the fact that women have less access to, and hence lack skills in using, ICTs. So, as with any technology, when assessing the value of blogs, it is critical to examine their impact and use by both women and men. With these considerations in mind, this article looks at African women’s access to and use of blogging, and how blogs can be used as a tool to contribute towards gender equality and women’s empowerment.

This article will focus predominantly on African women bloggers who live within the African continent. While it is acknowledged that there are many blogs by African women living outside Africa, as well as blogs by non-Africans writing on issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment, these groups of bloggers might not share the unique challenges which women on the continent face. These include poor and slow Internet access, lack of access to information, lack of access to and control over
ICTs, stereotyped portrayals of men as the typical ICT user, and patriarchal culture that discourages women from using ICTs. My analysis of African women bloggers will be based on a review of blogs by African women living in Africa, as well as a survey, which was completed by women whose blogs dealt with gender equality and/or women’s empowerment issues.

The blog review

On a worldwide scale, Technorati, the most notable blog Internet search engine, tracks 70 million blogs, and records the creation of 120,000 new blogs internationally every day (Technorati 2007). As such, it is probably the foremost source of information on blogging patterns. However, the figures that it provides are not broken down by geographic location or sex, so it is almost impossible to deduce how many African women bloggers there are, and how many live within the African continent and in the diaspora.

To start to build up a picture of the female African blogosphere (as the worldwide community of blogs is known), I carried out a review of blogs by African women, which gave me an overview of what African women are writing about. Next, I conducted an informal survey, which was targeted at a select group of women whose blogs dealt with women’s empowerment issues. This helped to identify women’s motivations for blogging, and their views on the role they perceived blogging to play in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women.

To identify blogs for my review, I visited the major African blog aggregators. ‘Afrigator’ tracks 180 African blogs; ‘Amatomu’ tracks 320 South African blogs; ‘BlogAfrica’ lists 221 blogs; ‘Kenyan Unlimited’ tracks 384 blogs; ‘Nigerian Blog Aggregator’ tracks 344 blogs; and ‘reBlog’ tracks 154 blogs by women (figures accurate for my last visit in April 2007). I was hoping to obtain figures disaggregated by bloggers’ country and sex, but this information was difficult to find.

In the end, I used the ‘reBlog’ aggregator as my primary source of blogs by African women. ‘reBlog: African Women’s Blogs’, an aggregator developed by three African women bloggers, is currently the most comprehensive collection of blogs by African women both within the continent and in the diaspora. These were supplemented by blogs identified from the major aggregators, as well as from the blogrolls of various African blogs.

To select the blogs for my analysis, I applied the following set of criteria:

• The blogs were authored by African women (or if the blog was authored by a team of bloggers, then the team had to be at least 50 per cent women, and I would focus more on the posts written by the women).

• The bloggers were based in Africa.
The blogs were ‘active’, i.e. the blogger had blogged at least four times in the last two consecutive months.

The blogger had blogged for at least two months.

The blogs were written in English, as I did not have the capacity to translate text from other languages into English.

My initial decision was to look for blogs that focused on social change and women’s empowerment, such as those writing about issues affecting African women, discussing socio-economic problems, proposing solutions, providing a forum for discussion, and highlighting projects, blogs, resources, and people addressing these problems. However, in the end, I decided instead to look for blogs that cut across a wider spectrum of themes. In part, this was because I was able to identify only a small number of blogs focusing specifically on social change and women’s empowerment. In addition, it became obvious that many blogs, particularly those by women, tended to cover a wide range of different subjects.

Another challenge faced was identifying the sex of the blogger, which was not always apparent - that is, it was not stated in the blogger’s profile, or anywhere else on the blog. In such cases, I chose to err on the side of caution, and exclude such blogs from the review.

By the end of this exercise, I had identified a sample of 92 blogs by African women resident in Africa.

What are African women blogging about?

From this sample, blogs were grouped into one or more of the following categories.

- Arts blogs included posts about books, music, paintings and drawings, sculptures, television, and film.
- Career/education blogs talked about working life, starting and building a career, and education.
- Current affairs blogs focused predominantly on politics within a national or regional context.
- Blogs in the faith category featured posts on religion, spirituality, and issues related to nurturing a relationship with God or a higher being.
- Fashion blogs explored fashion trends, fabrics, designers, and sewing techniques.
- Food/health blogs focused on well-being, mental and physical fitness, food choices and preparation.
- Parenting blogs included topics on pregnancy, bringing up children, and family life.
- Personal journals focused predominantly on the writer’s day-to-day experiences. These were also characterised by a diary-style expression of thoughts, fears, and hopes.
Relationships/sex blogs focused on developing relationships – these included with friends, family and romantic partners. These blogs also included discussions on sex.

Sports blogs talked about sports, especially organised sports.

Technology blogs predominantly featured discussions on the development, usage, and effects of tools and crafts, which could include ICTs, health technologies, agricultural technologies, science, and engineering.

Women’s issues/feminist blogs focused mainly on issues affecting women, such as gender inequity and discrimination, within a theoretical and practical context. This category also included blogs that discussed feminism.

While some bloggers explicitly stated the subject of their blog, some did not have a specific focus, although reading through the blog revealed certain dominant topics. In cases where the blogs did not focus on specific topics, and where the majority of the posts featured the blogger’s personal experiences, they were classified as personal journals.

As I started to review and categorise the blogs, it became obvious that, due to the fluid nature of many women’s writing styles, most blogs tended not to focus exclusively on one topic. Rather they encompassed a set of major subjects around which the blogger wrote. Most (65 per cent) were personal journals, although some of these focused on other topics as well. The review showed bloggers drawing extensively from personal experiences, so that even when writing on a specific topic, like politics or feminism, they would link to related experiences or examples from their lives.

It became apparent that within the genre of ‘personal journals’, in describing everyday experiences, the bloggers were writing from their perspectives as women living in Africa. Some of the frustrations they experienced and wrote about were clearly shared by many other women (for example, cultural expectations of women’s roles in life, sexual harassment from men, pressure on women to look attractive, societal pressure on women to marry before the age of 30), as these posts tended to generate many responses and much discussion, particularly from other women. It was rare for a blog to focus solely on a single subject and not include references to personal experiences and reflections: only one blog focused predominantly on feminism; one on food/health; one on parenting; three on arts; and three on relationships/sex. It was rarer to find blogs that focused on subjects like technology or current affairs: ten blogs focused on current affairs, while just one focused mainly on technology.

The survey

The purpose of the survey was to learn about the motivations of African women who blog about and/or for gender equality and women’s empowerment; this could include talking about gender-based inequities and discrimination, proposing solutions, or
organising action to address these issues. I asked women to ‘self-select’, and decide whether they felt their blogs met these criteria for participation in the survey. I asked them to include their blog URLs (Uniform Resource Locator – that is, an Internet link), so that I was able to verify that their blogs focused predominantly on the highlighted themes.

While the survey was open to African women bloggers from all over the world, my intent when analysing the responses was to pay more attention to those responses from bloggers within the continent. However, due to the low response rate, I used all responses. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, I found the motivations to be very similar.

I developed an online 26-question survey, which was publicised on several blogs, websites, and electronic lists. Despite this publicity, the response rate was low. After later reviewing my blog sample from the review, I attributed this to the fact that there are few blogs which met the stated criteria of writing predominantly on gender equality and empowerment issues. In addition, although a lot of blogs raise issues of importance or interest to women, many young African women do not identify with feminist ideology, or regard themselves as ‘feminists’, and so may not think of their writing as related to ‘gender equality’ or ‘women’s empowerment’, even though much of the content of their blogs might raise pertinent questions relating to issues of gender-based discrimination that exist within their societies.

A total of 21 bloggers responded, ranging in age from 21 to 47 years. The bloggers were, on average, very highly educated. Altogether, 19 respondents had an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification, and of the remaining two, one had a high school certificate, and the other was still studying at university. Nine lived outside Africa, 11 were based in Africa, and one split her time between the UK and Nigeria. The bloggers’ career backgrounds tended to be professional and white-collar (e.g. journalist, consultant, financial analyst, lawyer, health researcher, NGO director). Their high level of education correlates with research findings relating to other developing countries, which indicate that most women Internet users in almost all developing countries are not representative of women in the country as a whole, but rather are part of a small, urban-educated elite (Hafkin and Taggart 2001; Thas, Ramilo, and Cinco 2007).

It would appear from the survey responses that many of the bloggers (nine) saw their blogs as a means to empower other women (although an almost equal number – eight – declared that they were indifferent in this regard). However, it is interesting to note that a high number (16) identified themselves as feminist and were using their blogs in ways that would speak meaningfully to women. Twelve were using their blogs to share perspectives on issues that affect women, four to reveal injustices perpetrated against women, four to foster discussion between themselves and their readers, and one to write positive stories about Africa and Africans. It was also
particularly important to one of the respondents that she used her blog to mobilise people for specific social action.

Why are African women blogging?

‘Empowerment implies enabling people towards self-determination and for women, this emphasises the importance of increasing their power and taking control over decisions and issues that shape their lives’ (Thas, Ramilo, and Cinco 2007, 14). It appears that the power of the blog as a tool for empowering women lies in its ability to provide an avenue for women to express themselves and connect with other women. The ability to write anonymously is regarded as an important factor in enabling women to share their experiences and opinions honestly and openly. Since, as one blogger puts it, women can be ‘very truthful and open about things we wouldn’t dare talk about in public’, women can be encouraged by and learn from each other. Many women capitalise on the ability of blogs to be ‘a powerful conversational tool with the potential to reach a wide audience’ and to ‘empower by giving a voice to the unheard’. Through ‘story sharing, encouragement, education, and words’, women ‘promote strong positive images’. This is especially important given the low numbers of women working in the mainstream media. A 2001 report by the International Federation of Journalists found that only 38 per cent of all journalists are women, with women accounting for only 0.6 per cent of editors, heads of departments, or media owners (Peters 2001). As a result, it is no surprise that ‘women’s lives are still the untold story in today’s media’ (Peters 2001, 14). It is possible that dissatisfaction with how they are represented in most mainstream media has led women to turn to blogging as a way of portraying the real stories of their lives.

About half the bloggers felt that it is important to shed light on how African women live. One blogger felt that this could be best done ‘through reporting and writing commentary on all aspects of women’s lives and providing a feminist and gender perspective on issues’. This could include subjects as diverse as ‘African women’s art, literature, and music, political involvement, and activism’. Since these are issues that many women can relate to, for the most part, they tend to participate actively in blogs that talk about these topics. However, while it is important to welcome and encourage participation from women, discussions must explore women’s lives through a gender-conscious lens and challenge traditional and patriarchal ways of thinking, if blogs are to be a truly empowering tool. Although it might appear that the responsibility for this would rest on the shoulders of feminist bloggers, all women – including those who do not identify themselves as feminists – have experiences to share with other women.

One wonders, though, how effective or popular a blog would be, if it were to present itself as largely focused on feminism or women’s empowerment. Many young African women do not appear to identify with feminist ideology, often seeing it as a western import, or a way of life that is totally incongruent with the reality of their lives.
as women in largely traditional African society. One blogger concurred that it would be a challenge getting readership for such blogs.

Perhaps their effectiveness would lie in how they conveyed their message. One blogger commented ‘aside from content that discusses issues of gender equality, I feel that bloggers whose language and general content fosters an environment that welcomes women and encourages other women to join the blogosphere are in essence using their blogs to promote women’s equality and empowerment’. Openness to diverse ways of thinking is also essential in nurturing honest discussions, as well as the recognition that African women are not a monolithic group with the same experiences or ideals. This sentiment was articulated by another blogger: ‘We need to first identify that as a group of African women, we are diverse and with this comes a whole set of diverse opinions and these may not necessarily reflect our own views but these are the views of a lot of other women.’

One challenge that women using or attempting to adopt technology face is that their input is often overlooked. To encourage more women to blog and use blogs constructively, it is important that ‘women’s knowledge, culture, and tacit and uncodified skills are respected and enhanced’ through the use of blogs – and ICTs in general – ‘enabling a better preservation and transference of traditional knowledge, wisdom and skills’ (Thas, Ramon, and Cimon 2007, 10). When women blog irrespective of the topic – they are sharing their life experiences and perspectives, documenting and passing on knowledge, reaching out to other women (and men), and giving women a voice. This ensures that the information needed by specific communities is generated and available (Thas, Ramon, and Cimon 2007).

These bloggers felt that blogs that actively sought to promote gender equality were in the minority in the African female blogosphere, with the more common topics being personal life, relationships, health, education, and music, with some commentary on current affairs and politics. While one blogger felt that ‘most blogs by African women do not discuss serious matters, or even the arts, but rather tend to talk about fashion, men, parties and stories about their lives’, another blogger saw these types of blogs as being ‘just as important because they are about African women being out there and contributing to the conversation in a stream of consciousness sort of way’. With the blogs that respondents felt addressed issues relevant to women and sought to promote gender equality, their appeal lay in the simple yet assertive language they used, communicating their message in a direct way. Respondents also liked the fact that these bloggers were honest about their lives, and freely shared their life experiences. Their style was considered welcoming and encouraging. Some of these bloggers were considered to have a good sense of what is happening in different parts of the continent. Some respondents liked the fact that some of these blogs spoke from a feminist perspective and covered a wide range of issues around women, gender issues, and social justice.
Ultimately, all respondents felt that there was a need for more blogs by African women that address issues of gender equality, feminism, and social development – especially as they pertain to women, although one blogger acknowledged that ‘the presence of women bloggers is in itself a positive step towards addressing issues of gender equality’. Despite this, another blogger felt that more women would be represented in the African blogosphere if they had the requisite ICT skills.

Obstacles to blogging and strategies to address them

Going through the survey responses, I was able to start identifying factors that contributed to the fairly small numbers of African women blogging. These can be grouped into three broad areas: technology factors, economic factors, and social factors.

**Technology factors**

In many African countries, the telecommunication infrastructure that is necessary for people to have access to the Internet is usually concentrated in the cities, leaving the vast majority of women who live in rural and remote areas underserved (Radloff, Primo, and Munyua 2004). Where connectivity exists, prevailing low bandwidths mean that downloading web pages is a slow process, and this can limit the types of information – for example, multimedia content – that women can access or create. While some initiatives have been set up to provide Internet connectivity to specific rural areas, these efforts need to be more widespread. Across the continent, mobile phone companies are looking at newer technologies – for example, ‘3G’ or third generation – which can deliver broadband Internet connection to a mobile phone (Heavens 2007). Since mobile phone use is rising rapidly throughout Africa, this opens up the opportunity for women to ‘mob-blog’; that is, to blog using their mobile phones.

A second challenge is that many blog tools are in English, and require the blogger to be able to read English at least, in order to set up their blog. After this, they have the choice to blog in their local language, provided the alphabet symbols are available for their keyboard. This puts the African woman who does not speak English at a disadvantage, and indicates the need to explore the development of blog tools in indigenous African languages, to open up the technology to women who do not understand English.

**Economic factors**

The cost of accessing the Internet in Africa remains high, due to a host of factors, including the limited supply of national and international connectivity, limited and expensive satellite links, and poor internal telecommunications infrastructure (Radloff,
Primo, and Munyua 2004). To compound the effect of these high costs, lower education levels and gender stereotyping in the employment market typically mean that women earn less than men, and so are less able to afford Internet access fees. The good news is that increasing competition between service providers is pushing costs downwards. Government policy is increasingly providing an enabling environment for this competition to grow, by putting in place favourable telecommunications regulations, as well as the necessary infrastructure.

Social factors
Social factors, such as gender stereotyping, can be more pervasive obstacles to blogging than technology and economic factors, because they strongly influence women’s desire to use blogs and other ICTs. One such stereotype is that technology is a male preserve. This, coupled with the technical jargon that surrounds ICTs, could discourage many women from blogging. Fear of censure is another factor. The freedom that encourages people to express themselves frankly and often anonymously in the blogosphere also allows for vigorous and sometimes hurtful dissent from readers, which could discourage some women from blogging about issues which might be considered contentious, or even discourage them from blogging altogether (Ekine 2006). Another challenge for many women is the time investment required to nurture their blog, and develop a community of readers. This is an investment which women are frequently unable to make, given their multiple roles as homemakers, mothers, wives, and career women. If a blogger is not able to build a community of readers, she may think that no one finds any value in what she has to say, and so may stop blogging. These feelings of inadequacy could be compounded by the patriarchal culture of many African countries, that makes many women feel that their contributions are less valued than those of their male counterparts. A fourth obstacle to women’s blogging is the overall lower education and literacy levels of African girls and women. This puts them at a disadvantage in adopting the technology, because, while blogging does not involve a steep technical learning curve, it does require good writing and reading skills.

Encouraging more women to blog requires a multi-pronged approach. On one level, it requires a long-term and persistent campaign against patriarchy, with greater appreciation for women’s contributions economically and socially. On a more practical level, it requires de-mystifying technology and being more aware of the language we use to talk about technology, so that it is more inviting to women. ICT skill-building programmes can help women develop the capacity and confidence to use technologies, while mentoring programmes can provide a safe space for women to start to express themselves openly and honestly with each other.
Conclusion

The blogging movement is still in its early stages in Africa, and as yet it is hard to see any concrete outcomes from women speaking out through blogs. However, blogs are providing an avenue for, and encouraging debate between, individual bloggers. For wide-reaching impact, individual efforts must ultimately become part of a bigger movement that involves networks of bloggers and organisations. Government support of blogging initiatives would lend credibility to the role that blogs can play in pushing for social change; however, bureaucracy and the inability to adapt quickly to changing situations and technology are real challenges for such initiatives.

The ability to implement blog-facilitated gender equality and women’s empowerment strategies is likely to be more successful in smaller organisations, or in organisations with a vested interest in the issue of empowering women. Already, online spaces like the African women’s blogs’ aggregator, ‘reBlog’, feature blog postings by African women only. And although many of the blogs featured are not overtly pushing for women’s empowerment and gender equality, the fact that women are able to write about issues of interest to them is an important first step in giving them a sense of psychological empowerment.

It is also important that individual bloggers help build a community of people pushing for social change. Some bloggers in Africa are already doing this, by linking into campaigns on women’s rights and gender equality issues. For instance, several African women bloggers participated in the Take Back the Tech initiative, a campaign against ICT-mediated violence against women organised by the Association for Progressive Communications, Women’s Networking Support Programme, by speaking out against violence against women in their blogs.

The power of blogs for empowering women does not lie in alerting a western audience to gender-based injustices happening in Africa, and telling our stories to the west. Its true potency lies in its ability to give a voice to the previously unheard, and provide them with the tools to connect with others who share the same concerns, while reaching out to people who might have been unaware of these issues, and providing them with a platform on which they can map a strategy for raising the quality of women’s lives in Africa. In real terms, this means African women connecting with each other as they tell their stories, support each other, and identify strategies for improving the quality of their lives.

Oreoluwa Somolu is founder of Blogs for African Women (BAWo), which works to encourage African women to become more active users of technology. Prior to this, she worked for several years in the United States at an educational non-for-profit organisation on a number of projects, which explored the interplay between gender and technology and sought to attract more girls and women to study and work in science and technology-related fields. She is co-author of Making the Most of On-line Learning: An Introduction to Learning on the Internet (http://www2.edc.org/gdi/
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Notes

2 www.wougnet.org.
3 www.knowledgehouseafrica.org.
4 SMS or Short Message Service enables people send text messages from one mobile phone to another. This service is supported by most digital mobile phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs).
5 www.fahamu.org.
6 A podcast is a digital media file – this could include audio or video – that is distributed over the Internet for playback on portable media players and personal computers.

References

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