

Women and Girls Working With ICT

Much has been written about the “the digital divide”—the gap between those who have Internet and computer access and those who do not. This divide is biggest in the nonindustrialized nations where Peace Corps Volunteers live and work. Unfortunately, in developing countries women tend to suffer the consequences of the divide more acutely than men and are less likely or able to participate in today’s “information age.”

In an era when fax machines have gone from new technology, to common use, to virtual obsolescence in only about 10 years’ time—and Internet cafes have become commonplace in capital cities and in smaller towns in nearly every country where Peace Corps Volunteers work—“women are still only 22 percent of all Internet users in Asia, 30 percent of those in Latin America and six percent of Middle Eastern users. No regional figures by sex are available for Africa.”¹



A Tongan girl learns how to type using computer-based typing software.



Why Are Women Less “Connected” Than Men?

In many countries women tend to participate in the low-tech end of adaptation (as data processors, for example) rather than contributing to higher end applications such as Internet content development, programming, or web page design. However, women and women’s groups do frequently use e-mail, an important tool for empowerment, to share resources and to network.

Some of the reasons women tend to participate less frequently than men in a technological society include:

Low Literacy Skills. “Basic literacy and numeracy are needed to read and compose simple messages, navigate the Internet, and execute commands in software applications. As women make up nearly two-thirds of the world’s illiterate, and one out of every two women in developing countries is illiterate, women are more likely than men to lack the basic literacy and computer skills that would enable them to take advantage of new global communication opportunities.”²

Cultural Biases. In some countries, it is not culturally appropriate for women and girls to “hang out” in public places like cybercafes, where Internet and computer access are available for those who cannot afford a personal computer.

Traditional Gender Roles. Women and girls may lack the confidence to try something unfamiliar or new.

More Women Than Men Live in Rural Areas. In rural areas, women constitute 60 percent of the population. The gender gap in Internet access runs parallel to the rural/urban divide. Cybercafes and cheap Internet access are more likely to be located in urban centers.



How Can You Encourage Women and Girls to Participate in a Technological Society?

- Provide cooperative, hands-on learning experiences. When classes are cross-disciplinary (e.g., relating computer science to real-world applications like health, politics, and art), more girls are likely to sign up and stay with it.
- Hold a girls-only class. Girls are more likely to participate when boys are not present.
- Introduce female role models in the technology field.

What follows are some initiatives encouraging girls to use technology. Visit the following websites for additional ideas on how you can encourage women and girls in your own community to make use of technology:

- Techbridge: Encouraging Girls in Technology
www.chabotspace.org/visit/programs/techbridge.asp
- The IGNITE (Inspiring Girls Now in Technology Evolution) Program
www.ignite-us.org/
- Center for Women and Information Technology
www.umbc.edu/cwit/index.html
- Peace Corps Resource Focusing on Women, Girls, and Technology
Gender and the Information Revolution in Africa (ICE No. WD143).





Women, Girls, and Radio

Approach your community radio station, or even the Ministry of Information, regarding producing a dramatic serial radio program about the trials and tribulations of an enterprising female farmer, small business owner, teacher, etc.

In Niger, Volunteers used radio to publicize and expand the reach of events such as a Women's Day, a Men's Day, and a campaign to raise awareness of the need for girls' education. Volunteers also used rural radio to promote women's agribusiness and women's career days, to discuss women's issues, and to train young women to use computers.

The following URL contains the article "Improving Access to Rural Radio by 'Hard-to-Reach' Women Audiences":

www.fao.org/docrep/003/x6721e/x6721e15.htm#P5_1

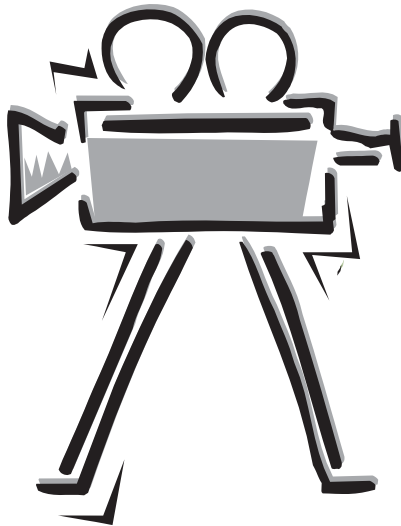


Radio: Take Our Daughters to Work Day in Cameroon

Women, Girls, and Television

Local TV and radio stations are often starved for locally produced programming. In conjunction with your counterpart, community, or local Women in Development/Gender and Development (WID/GAD) group, propose the production of a weekly radio or TV talk show that focuses on a different woman-owned small business each week. If it is a television program, ask local female business owners to donate items to furnish the set or to provide a wardrobe for the show “talent,” in exchange for on-air credit at the end of the show.

Hold mock interview sessions to help increase women’s opportunities for landing a new job. Videotape and then replay the interview so that the interviewee can evaluate her performance. Seeing or hearing oneself can be a very enlightening experience. Training women how to operate the video and audio equipment to record the interview sessions also provides the women the opportunity to gain a valuable new skill. If your organization does not own a video or tape recorder, you may be able to access one through a local university, NGO, or community radio station.



Women, Girls, and Computers

The following are examples of activities that can be used to help facilitate the use of computers by women and girls:

- At your next WID/GAD meeting, distribute a list of Internet resources for women and girls. Make arrangements with a local Internet cafe or telecommunications center (often located at teacher-training colleges) for a group discount and hold a “Web surfing” day for a local women’s group. Make arrangements for child care so that women can fully participate.

- Help women set up and run sustainable community or school telecommunications centers. For ideas on how to go about this, see the UNESCO publication, *The Community Telecentre Cookbook for Africa: Recipes for Self-Sustainability* (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001230/123004e.pdf>).

- Encourage women to make use of free online typing tutors (typing courses and tests) to increase their typing speeds and increase job marketability. (Just type “free typing tutor” in your favorite search engine.)

- Design an “e-commerce” website featuring goods produced by women and girls. Use a free Web-hosting service (there are still a few available).

- Add an IT component to your Camp GLOW (Girls Leading Our World) activities. Collaborate with a local Internet cafe to provide access to the Internet. (Additional information on Camp GLOW is available in the *Camp Glow Handbook for Volunteers*, ICE No. M0056, and the idea book *Beyond the Classroom: Empowering Girls*, ICE No. M0080.)

The following workshop is an example of how a Volunteer facilitated access to computers for women and girls.

Ghanaians Gain Confidence Through Computers

(Originally published in the Peace Corps' WID/GAD *Exchange* newsletter, September 2001, Volume 34)

Recently, a handful of Ghanaian girls participated in a weekend workshop designed to introduce them to basic computer skills, to build their confidence in using computers, and to promote their interest in information technology. The conference took place at Wenchi Secondary School, and was facilitated by its computer lab's director and his two computer technicians.

The director started the workshop by introducing the girls to the lab and explaining its rules and etiquette. The girls had a wide range of computer experience, from never having seen a computer before to being familiar with some software.

The participants learned about the parts of a computer, and its basic operations. They learned how to use menus, and were each assigned a user name and a password for the local network. They were taught how to log in and look at the files in their directories. The girls also practiced the correct way to position their hands on the keyboards, which they abandoned for the hunt-and-peck method. The girls also played simple computer games, which provided a great way to break up the sessions and practice using the keyboard.

Another interesting session allowed the girls to send e-mail messages to someone in America. With the phone lines down, however, they were not sent in time to receive replies before the end of the workshop. The girls also took time to view the Wenchi Secondary School website, after which they learned about html (hypertext – markup language) code and designed their own Web pages. The lab director took a photo of each girl to be added later to their personal pages.

One of the most enjoyable activities was a competitive game of Scrabble over the network. The students seemed to really enjoy the weekend and all expressed interest in learning more about computers.

Specific examples of how Peace Corps Volunteers have used computers to empower women include the following:

- Guaraní women artisans in Bolivia are using computers to open new markets for their crafts.
- An English Resource Center has been established in Jordan where user-friendly, English language software is available to female teachers.
- A Volunteer in Estonia helped establish the Lääne-Virumaa (West Viru County) Contemporary Information and Technology Center. The center provides IT resources and training for students, teachers, and community members. It is located in the Technical School and managed by the school's information technology teacher. The lack of a formal computer center earlier had hindered students' and residents' efforts to secure work, to create new opportunities for employment, and to access information available through computer technology. Following its official opening in 2001, the center has become a popular resource for the entire community. Thirty IT students (postsecondary school) currently study at the facility. In addition, the center offers adult evening courses Monday through Saturday, and is open for Lääne Virumaa students, teachers, and residents on a daily basis.



A Volunteer and counterpart work on their ICT integration plan during a workshop.



Women, Girls, and the Internet



The Internet offers an incredibly powerful medium for the sharing of information and communicating. The following describes an effort by Peace Corps headquarters staff to expose girls from around the world to one of many ways they can use the Internet.

Virtual Chat Forum for Girls

Peace Corps headquarters' Girls Education Working Group hosted a series of live, online text chat sessions in 2002 and 2003. The forums were organized by language (e.g., an English chat and Spanish chat), and the participants included girls in 15 Peace Corps countries. The goals of this activity were:

- ▶ to expose girls to ICT and promote the use of technology;
- ▶ to encourage geographically dispersed girls, Volunteers, and Peace Corps staff to discuss girls' roles in the ICT field; and
- ▶ to initiate discussion among participants on the ways that ICT can affect girls' education.

Each post nominated one or two Volunteers to participate, and in turn, those Volunteers selected up to two girls to participate in the event.

The private, low-graphics, password-protected chat room was provided by the Academy for Educational Development.

Selection Criteria

Volunteers were asked to consider girls who:

- were motivated and interested in this activity
- were aware of and interested in information and communication technologies.

- had written and conversational language skills in the selected chat languages.
- possessed basic typing skills.
- were willing to participate in follow-up activities.
- were 12 to 18 years old.

Activity Overview

- Each live, one-hour chat was moderated by Peace Corps headquarters staff.
- Peace Corps headquarters invited female ICT professionals (from outside the U.S.) to participate as guest “speakers.”
- Volunteers and girls were provided with funding to cover an additional hour of connectivity for guided follow-up activities.
- Prior to the event, Volunteers participated in a dry run to correct any technical problems that might arise.
- Prior to the event, Volunteers also assisted the girls in setting up e-mail accounts and helped the girls prepare and post brief biographical profiles in the chat room so that the girls could learn a bit about each other.
- Volunteers acted as mentors to the participants during the event, but the girls did all the “chatting.”
- For the first 20 minutes of the chat, the girls had the opportunity to chat among themselves, sharing information about their schools, families, culture, communities, sports, free-time activities, etc.
- For the second 30 minutes of the chat, the girls asked questions of women who use ICTs in their professional work and in their personal lives. The girls mostly inquired about the women’s education and career development, women’s access to computers, and the role or impact of computers in society.

- Volunteers assisted in identifying resources and carrying out follow-up learning opportunities.
- Volunteers and girls participated in an evaluation of the activity to better inform future online chats.

Online Chat Sample Agenda

TIME*	ACTIVITY
10:00 a.m. EST	Girls and Peace Corps/Washington are logged in to the chat room
10:00–10:05 a.m. (5 mins)	Peace Corps/Washington welcomes the participants
10:05–10:25 a.m. (20 mins)	Girls' Free Chat—during this time girls may ask each other questions about life in their respective countries. They may also use this time to look at other profiles and explore the icons and text color features.
10:25–10:27 a.m. (2 mins)	Technology experts log in to the chat room
10:27–10:30 a.m. (3 mins)	Peace Corps/Washington welcomes the technology experts
10:30–10:35 a.m. (5 mins)	Girl(s) in Belize post their questions to the technology experts and receive their response
10:35–10:40 a.m. (5 mins)	Girl(s) in Bulgaria post their question to the technology experts and receive their response
10:40–10:45 a.m. (5 mins)	Girl(s) in Ghana post their question to the technology experts and receive their response
10:45–10:50 a.m. (5 mins)	Girl(s) in Romania post their question to the technology experts and receive their response
10:50–10:55 a.m. (5 mins.)	Girl(s) in The Gambia post their question to the technology experts and receive their response
10:55–11:00 a.m. (5 mins)	Girl(s) in Ukraine post their question to the technology experts and receive their response
11:00–11:05 a.m. (5 mins)	Closing remarks from Peace Corps/Washington
11:05–11:10 a.m. (5 mins)	Goodbye and log out of chat room. Begin follow-up online activities.

Outcomes

For many of the girls, this was their first experience using the Internet, participating in a live chat discussion, and communicating with individuals outside of their own communities and countries. They came away from the experience with the understanding that “technology isn’t just for boys!” They felt empowered by the opportunity to use the latest technology to “talk” with female professionals. Several of the girls exchanged e-mail addresses following the chat so that they could stay in touch with the new friends they made online. Many of the girls made formal presentations to their schools and communities about their Virtual Chat Forum experience.



Video: Interviewing a young student during
Take Our Daughters to Work Day