

23 Communications and Commerce: The Role of ICT in Linking Women Entrepreneurs with Global Markets⁵⁶

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Background

In an increasingly globalised and networked world, businesswomen need access to a range of information to enable them to make informed choices concerning their livelihoods, management of resources and income, and to understand and influence the policy decisions that have an impact on their business activities. The role of ICT in enabling women to access and analyse this kind of information cannot be underestimated. Despite much rhetoric around the diffusion of ICT in developing countries, the reality is that a widespread assumption still persists that women in general have no real use for or interest in ICT. This is often reflected in the ways in which business support services are designed and delivered.

This case study – based on a needs survey conducted with people in the clothing sector in Douala, the economic capital of Cameroon, from July 2005 to March 2006⁵⁷ – seeks to examine this issue. It looks at the personal initiatives taken by a small group of women entrepreneurs involved in ready-to-wear clothing design, manufacture and export to learn about and use the internet as a support tool for their entrepreneurial, creative and export initiatives. It then looks at the donor-driven experience of a Chamber of Commerce initiative to increase and improve women's use of internet services through a new high-tech multimedia centre.

Women and the textile and clothing sector in Cameroon

Anyone who visits Cameroon and its neighbouring countries cannot fail to notice the rich, colourful and diverse textile and clothing sector that is dominated by enterprising women who manage everything from cotton growing to design, stitching, transport and retail. Much of the cross-border import/export trade in fabric and clothing is also conducted by women. The sector can be roughly divided into industrial uniform production, ready-to-wear clothing and traditional made-to-measure tailored garments. According to an estimate by the African Development Bank (2005), women entre-

preneurs own approximately 38 per cent of the 7,100 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) registered in Cameroon. Typically, these SMEs in the region of Douala have between 10 and 15 employees.

The 1995 WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing established a quota system governing international trade in textiles and clothing. When this agreement ended in 2005, many developing countries, including Cameroon, faced more and more challenges entering or remaining in international trade in this segment of the market. With the renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act,⁵⁸ however, some textile production in member countries continued to be exempted from customs duties. According to the *Washington Post*, AGOA brought about an increase in the value of textile exports to the USA from US\$600 million in 1999 to \$1.5 billion in 2003 (cited by Afrik.com, 2004). Also in 2003, imports from 37 countries, including Cameroon, grew by 55 per cent compared to the previous year (ibid.).

Several programmes are being developed to further strengthen and support the capacity of clothing sector entrepreneurs to better organise themselves to penetrate the US market. Within these programmes, companies owned or managed by women are being specially targeted. The trade potential is quite substantial. African designs are attractive and certain American retailers specifically seek to obtain supplies from the continent. Market studies have shown that African Americans are interested in products that express or reflect their ethnic heritage. This market, estimated by the World Bank in 2003 as potentially worth between US\$200 and 270 billion, is a promising niche for African exporters in the clothing sector (Biggs *et al.* 2003).

Potential benefits of the internet for entrepreneurs

A series of publications from the International Trade Centre (Knappe, 2005; Hirsch, 2005) has highlighted the advantages of the internet for entrepreneurs in the clothing sector of developing countries, which include:

- Monitoring goods that could improve the competitiveness of producers;
- Speeding up delivery, reducing costs and improving services;
- Integrating design and development of products through access to virtual prototypes of clothing and ‘tests’ in real time that can simulate the appearance and adjustment of a new model in two or three dimensions, considerably reducing costs of research and development;
- Developing solutions in collaboration with buyers or simply using their system;
- ‘Internal security’ and other customs protection;

- Receipt by manufacturers of data on outlets in an almost instantaneous way – they may start production and ship replacement stock without waiting for orders from the retailer; and
- Short delivery times and reduced inventory costs.

Use of the internet by women entrepreneurs

In a survey of members of organisations supporting women entrepreneurs, fashion designers and the women entrepreneurs themselves in Douala, most of the women interviewed stated that they knew about the internet. Jeanine, for example, said:

I know the internet very well, for at least five years my uncle [a senior staff member in a private company] had internet in his office. When I went there, very often, I found him busy reading or sending mails. I profited from consulting my mailbox.

Of the 34 women entrepreneurs interviewed, 32 used the internet for social reasons and 17 used it for professional reasons. The social users wrote, edited and sent messages, chatted, and scanned and sent photos of family events to friends and parents abroad. All of them said that they used it to communicate with their relatives. For example, Yveline noted that:

I only use the internet to receive and send mails. I have family abroad, and as they have internet at their home, they have obliged me to get used to the Net. At times when they have things to tell me, they call and the telephone does not go through. It is in the cyber café that I consult or send my mails.

Source of information and training

Those who use the internet for professional reasons were self-trained. They generally agreed that it could be of great use to them in their search for customers and access to sites communicating useful information for their market studies. Two of them said that it enabled them to become informed on current fashion trends and to improve their own creativity and competitiveness. Nicole, a fashion designer who exports to the USA, said:

The world of fashion changes often. Trends, colours, and styles change from one season to the next, from one country to the other. In my case, I have a varied clientele, in Cameroon, but also outside the country. So, in order to be up to date, I dip into the internet, I find out what's changed, and even about emerging trends. This allows me to be in phase with my clients.

Women respondents also used the internet to search for information (on prices and brands of dressmaking equipment, fashion sites, fashion trends), to share information with foreign partners and colleagues, and to watch fashion shows. Esmerelda declared:

Through the internet, I have learnt to search for information on suppliers of sewing equipment and on the trends of fashion. I needed an over-sewing machine. As I could not find the brand on the market, I launched a search on the internet that enabled me to locate some suppliers abroad that were selling them. I contacted them at the same time that my sister stayed in that location. She put me in contact with the one in her location, and I negotiated and was able to acquire my machine. It is providing me with so much fame in my trade!

Three women said that they had used the internet for training. Françoise holds a baccalaureate. She is married and has three children. Her passion for the internet was born during the course of her training:

I got to know the internet when I was still a student. When I started training as a fashion designer, I was pleasantly surprised to find on the internet some sites of foreign dressmakers and their designs ... I got inspired by them during my training, and I have designs that are very much appreciated by my customers, that I created with inspiration from these sites. I do not frequently visit them, but when I do visit I am prepared to give up some hours of my time. I get a lot of ideas. All that I regret is not being able to have internet in the house.

Diane, who holds a First School Leaving Certificate, is married and a mother of five, and is a member of an association affiliated to the Chamber of Commerce. She took several training courses in entrepreneurship, and then took part in computer training provided by the Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui à la Femme Entrepreneur (ASAFE) based in Douala. It is thanks to her son, who always accompanies her to the cyber café, that she learnt to use the internet:

In the beginning, the internet was a real curiosity to me. But so long as I go there, I learn a lot from it. The speed with which I work with the internet is increasing. I know how to open my mailbox. I can download documents. I would not have believed it two years ago.

Providing visibility for enterprises

Three women used the internet to create greater visibility for their activities by means of 'virtual boutiques'; four used it to communicate with their clients.

Rose, a fashion designer and married mother of two, was recruited after university to be a senior staff member in a local private enterprise. A number of years later this enterprise went bankrupt and she found herself jobless. With her severance benefits she decided to learn dressmaking. She originally learned how to sew from her seamstress mother and sewed dresses for her colleagues, who appreciated her talent. She went to Paris and a year later, on return to Cameroon, opened a dressmaking workshop. Since then she has been participating in fashion fairs at national as well as international levels, and has won several prizes. Rose said:

I am the proprietor of a website. It was created for me by one of my Canadian partners. During a sojourn in Canada, I participated in a fashion parade and fair. Thanks to this site, you can imagine, I was found by one of my best American clients that had for a long time had difficulties contacting me. The internet enables me to communicate with my customers. I have a lot of other customers outside Douala, and even outside the country.

Ingrid holds a Higher National Diploma in Dressmaking obtained years ago. Based in Douala, she has opened shops at the airports of some European countries. She has participated in numerous fairs and fashion shows in Cameroon and abroad. Every two years she organises a fashion parade in which renowned fashion designers participate. Her reputation rests on the high quality of her products and on their originality. Ingrid said:

The internet has brought so much to me. It is a source of inspiration. When I visit fashion sites I get myself always versed with news in the domain of fashion, and that gives me a lot of ideas. Our sector is one of those that witness a lot of mutations. These trends change frequently, new designs appear while others eclipse. I make European fashion design in ready-to-wear. One must always be up to date in order to retain or win other customers. Often I have found patterns that I adapted to come out with original designs that have earned me awards. Today I have customers in all the provinces of Cameroon and in Europe. I have the good fortune of belonging to a dynamic association. We have a partner abroad that placed at our disposal a website where we exhibit our designs. I was recently contacted by an American trader dealing in ready-to-wear. Negotiations are under way and on course. I have hope.

Two women said that they used the internet to communicate with their suppliers. Rachel, who has an export and import business, uses it in this way:

I don't always have the possibility of travelling. So, if I have an order to send, I send an email to my supplier and I specify what I want. Since I've

been working with him for quite a while and we know each other, everything usually goes well. I'm glad that the internet is here.

On the other hand, Florence, another entrepreneur, specified:

I prefer to deal right on the spot because you are not always sure if what you buy through the internet will be good quality merchandise.

Constraints on women's use of the internet

While the women knew of the internet as a communication and information search tool, other services – such as discussion forums and the capacity to undertake collaborative work – were not known to them.

Moreover, despite the promising examples noted above, the internet still seems to be unknown or inaccessible to the large majority of women entrepreneurs in Cameroon. Like many other parts of Africa, the country has limited access to and use of the internet (Chéneau-Loquay, 2002; Tankeu, 2005). A 2006 report by the International Telecommunication Union underlined the lack of ICT infrastructure in Cameroon and the relatively high cost of bandwidth, as well as the lack of adequate local content, making women's participation difficult. Government action to encourage the use of the internet is embryonic and barely visible. Objectives in telecommunications and ICT have either not been achieved or are experiencing considerable delays. These objectives included making available to the public an offer of access to 2 megabytes in all cities with a digital centre before the end of 2007 and increasing fixed-line teledensity from 0.7 per cent in 2005 to 30 per cent in 2015. Currently, however, the internet is used by only 0.16 per cent of the population.

Improving women's access to the internet

In an effort to help local enterprises to compete in the liberalised international textile trade, the Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Crafts (CCIMA) started a multimedia centre with funding from several partners. Apart from providing entrepreneurs with services, including training, counselling and useful information on the socio-economic environment, as well as facilitating access to foreign markets, this centre places at their disposal an internet access space with a capacity of 30 machines and a bandwidth of 128 MB. A support programme for women entrepreneurs in the textile sector and clothing arena is being developed in the centre with a view to preparing them to supply to the North American market within the framework of AGOA.

Of the 34 women interviewed, 17 were members of the CCIMA. However, only six knew of the existence of the multimedia centre, and only two had used the internet there. When asked why they did not use this resource centre, they gave the following reasons:

- Lack of information, even from the CCIMA to its members, of the existence of this resource centre (which was put in place in 2001). According to Edith, 'I did not even know of the existence of this centre, and we hold regular meetings in the meeting hall of this institution. I would have at least visited it once to see. As I know of it now, if I have time, I will go there'.
- The fact that the centre is not centrally located within the institution, but is situated in a residential quarter with difficult access.
- The opening hours (8.00 am to 4.00 pm from Monday to Friday) are not convenient even for those who wish to frequent it. These hours correspond to traditional work and school hours. Claudia, a fashion designer, says, 'It is by luck that I learnt of the existence of the multimedia centre. I have been there twice. I found mostly students there. There was nobody there to help me carry out my research. Moreover, the opening and closing times of the centre are not to my convenience.'
- The fact that it has never organised sensitisation activities for women on the uses of the internet.

Moreover, the Chamber of Commerce did not offer any dedicated training on how to use the internet among its other training programmes.

Lessons learned and future directions

Using ICT is turning out to be a powerful business tool for these women. Learning through the internet has helped enhance the competence of quite a few of the respondents, enabling them to acquire knowledge for themselves and for their enterprises. E-learning and self-training can reinforce communication and computer competencies, media attitudes and self-motivation. It is therefore suitable for women in general, and particularly for women entrepreneurs who are creating their own businesses.

While the CCIMA multimedia centre dispenses important resources, these are unfortunately not used by all the members. The location of the project renders access very difficult, and its opening hours do not provide women with optimal access. The centre appears to have been conceived and put in place according to the recommendations of donors. The beneficiaries of the project were not consulted either during formulation or implementation. In

other words, its objectives, strategies and basic principles did not take into account the specific situation of the local women entrepreneurs or their particular needs.

For programmes to be useful to women entrepreneurs in Douala, it is recommended that the programme designers learn from what the women have put in place already, taking note of their emerging internet knowledge and practices. Only when women are consulted about their needs and realities can internet support programmes be developed that will enable women entrepreneurs to enhance their lives and their contributions to the Cameroon economy.

Over the next decades, the world will continue to shift its focus from connecting people to connecting nodes of information that people can universally access, share and build upon. Developing efficient and effective ways to value and sustain information networks goes hand in hand with social and economic development. In other words, working in isolation is no longer viable. Developing spheres of trust, influence, goodwill, buy-in, collaboration and partnership and, above all, the sharing of knowledge are the fundamental foundations for women's economic and social empowerment.

In the long term, the potential of this new form of global production is that research and development costs can become localised, and producers and consumers can become more involved in the design and development of products and services. In other words, manual workers can upgrade their skills and do more creative, higher value-added work.

Increasingly then, women are developing their own professional and business networks, which play an important role in both the commercial and policy arenas. One example is Les Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales (FCEM) (World Association of Women Entrepreneurs), which was established in 1945 and now hosts a website that links together members from 33 countries and boasts a marketing list of around 45,000 members. More recently established groups include the National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia, which was formed in 1993 and now has 170 members; the Alliance of Micro-Enterprise Development Practitioners, a subsection of the Women and Enterprise group of WomensNet – a South African initiative; and the Organization of Women in International Trade, a special interest group that brings together women exporters from both developing and industrialised countries.

These networks range from marketing co-operatives and professional associations to international virtual networks of small businesses. As ICT opens up channels for communication and commerce, more of them take on a cross-border and international character, even if from initially small beginnings.

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