

**IICD Cross-Country Learning Event: ICTs & Gender  
Supporting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment using ICT**  
December 1<sup>st</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> 2009, The Hague, The Netherlands

A number of IICD's Country Programme partner organisations are generating experiences and lessons learned on implementation and practices of using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to address gender equality and women empowerment issues in development. The programmes differ from country to country, and much can be learned from sharing experiences across borders.

A Cross-Country Learning Event (CCLE) brings together the people who are designing, implementing and working with ICT to address gender equality and women empowerment issues in development in different countries forms a perfect opportunity for exchanging experiences, learning, and adding value to practices in this field.

Workshop participants were project partners from the IICD-supported programmes in Bolivia, Ecuador, Mali, Burkina Faso, Zambia and Ghana.

| <b>Country</b> | <b>First Name</b> | <b>Family Name</b>  | <b>Organisation</b>  |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------------|--|
| Bolivia        | Eliana            | Rioja de Casanova   | Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia – CIDOB                      |
| Bolivia        | Norma             | Vaca Galarza        | Casa de la Mujer   |
| Ecuador        | Luz               | Haro Guanga         | Asociación de Mujeres de Juntas Parroquiales Rurales del Ecuador – AMJUPRE |
| Ecuador        | Paulina           | Enriques Echeverria | Asociación de Mujeres de Juntas Parroquiales Rurales del Ecuador – AMJUPRE |
| Mali           | Masséni           | Sanogo              | Coordination des Femmes Transformatrices de Sikasso - CFTS                 |
| Mali           | Ousmane           | Fomba               | COPROKAZAN   |
| Mali           | Assetou           | Diarra              | Femmes et TIC  |
| Burkina Faso   | Aicha             | Boro                | Institut Africain de Bio Economie Rurale – IABER                           |
| Zambia         | Chimika           | Lungu               | Zambia Association for Research & Development (ZARD)                       |
| Ghana          | Patricia          | Formadi             | Women and Development Programme (WADEP)                                    |
| Zambia         | Caroline          | Nyimbili            | GenARDIS Finalist (Ndola Resource Centre)                                  |
| Ghana          | Hamadu            | Hassan              | GenARDIS Finalist (Navrongo Community Information Centre)                  |

The participants came from French, Spanish and English speaking countries, therefore the whole workshop was supported by a team of 4 translators that did simultaneous translation. Organisation and facilitation was done by Saskia Harmsen and Judith Veldhuizen from IICD.

Following is a selection of excerpts from the stories the participants shared in relation to the following topics:

- Gender, the context and the role of men
- The ICT tools, how they are used and what their added value is for the projects (from 4 PSO supported projects)
- Some deliberations ... lessons learned

## Gender, the context and the role of men

### **Luz from AMJUPRE, Ecuador**

In Ecuador we have different districts where the word 'woman' did not even exist, e.g. in the constitution itself. Women made an effort to change that, they used the word woman, but up to the end the constitution spoke about citizen, the Ecuadorian, children and men, but did not mention women. It took decades and decades of struggles of women to change that, to make the people aware that they should respect women and to bridge the gap. This new constitution of 2008 emphasises more and more the rights of women, but that doesn't mean that rural women (farmers) are really empowered. We had a situation in Ecuador that if you were beaten by your husband there was nothing you could do; he was still your husband. That was the situation even till the constitution of 2008.

It is easy to govern from the perspective of men, they think they know how to solve our problem but we ourselves have to say how we want to change the system. We have to empower women and give them more knowledge. In Ecuador we struggle with the project to get this done. We should reach more men and we should do some awareness raising among men. It is important for women to have a space for themselves to feel empowered, but at some point you have to start exchanging with men, at a different stage.

I hope that 5 – 10 years from now urban and rural women will have a broader and clearer vision about the rights of women, and it's not only for the women: men benefit too. By empowering women we are empowering daughters and mothers and citizens so that we can be stronger and we as women can contribute to change and to the society as a whole.

Political laws are written by men to benefit men. In Ecuador we always said the bible was written by men to benefit men, and in politics it is the same. God has not created women to make them less equal or to be mistreated but to be happy, that's why we have to defend the equality of opportunities. If we talk about citizenship, both men and women have to live together in a good and harmonious way.

The problem is to change systems. It's a long road we have gone. It is good to know the situation in other countries so we can correlate. We all have to change, from the inside to the outside. If I don't want to change, how can I expect someone else to change? We want to work at making men more aware of the situation so that they don't put up obstacles anymore for their sisters and mothers. Everybody has to be independent, that's our fight.

### **Eliana from CIDOB, Bolivia**

We come from different countries but we kind of share the same realities. In my country when we hear of gender we tend to think only of women. But for me the concept of gender implies men as well, and mutual support. It is important to work with women and especially helping them change their mindsets. In order to do so we need to help them gain more self respect and a better image of themselves. If you don't have that it is difficult to get that reflection, that respect from others. This is not specific for rural areas.

It is true we women need some time in the beginning, to discuss and establish things, to learn to get the self respect and a better self image. But at some point we have to bring men on board as well. I have seen that women who were on top, who were leaders, got married and the women would explain to their husband what it is they wanted. The men asked them; what are you learning there? And they beat them and the women stopped coming. I work in rural areas and I have been able to witness a lot of inequality between men and women, also violence. We work with native women from the West Checo and the Amazon. They don't take part in political decision making generally speaking.

Gender means a harmonious relationship between men and women. We have chosen to bring male colleagues on board, to involve them, we wanted to avoid clashes. And we want to learn from them as well, it is important to share, to learn, then you can hear positive and negative things. You can learn from the negative things. You can decide not to copy, not to do something. It is important to see how men and women can take part in decision making processes at municipal level and see how these structures work.

**Hassan from Navrongo CIC, Ghana**

Gender issues are not men against women, or women against women, it is about how you can give people the possibility to make use of the information age.

You do not need to have men give women freedom, they can do that themselves.

But we – men - can participate.

**Ousmane from COPROKAZAN, Mali**

Gender issues are always recurring as a theme, the solution is difficult, women should free themselves, indeed like Hassan said, but: example of a woman who had such leadership capacities, she was so busy with these activities that she asked her husband to get another wife so the activities at the house could be shared. It is important that a woman can make this choice.

Sometimes there can be a conflict between husband and wife and in Africa sometimes this can mean a divorce. I believe it is very complex, can't see a clear cut solution. But when you think about things we can maybe see possibilities and we can find ways that women can become more liberated and will be able to participate more fully in the development.

To raise awareness with the men you first have to raise awareness in the society. If I do a job of my wife and someone from the community sees that they will comment. If my mother sees me doing the dishes she won't agree. Even if you train the men, it is the environment that is not aware of what is happening. I think we have to raise awareness with men and his environment.

**Patricia from WADEP, Ghana**

Between women there are also power relations, some don't want others to do equally well.

Learning point: even amongst women we are marginalising those who don't have the same position, so we need to be aware and very critical when we want to bring them up, know the power relations.

If good sensitisation has been done and the man has agreed to play certain roles without thinking that those roles are for women, I don't think the woman would encourage the husband to bring in another woman. That also goes into the sensitisation of other women because in such situations the in-laws, the sisters, are the people who put pressure on the woman, who label her as a defiant wife or mother because she is not playing the role for their brother. The men see it as a privilege to have a second wife and quickly go do it because they already wanted to do it. We have a lot of sensitisation to do.

**Aicha from IABER, Burkina Faso**

When we discuss gender issues, we should start from the beginning: in our country women don't have a status formerly speaking, many women who live in rural areas don't exist officially for the administration. Perhaps we should start there before we discuss how we can involve them in activities. Basic rights should be addressed first, before being able to address them with activities; the formal, official situation should be a first step.

Women's education in our culture is geared towards women being very passive, for years women have been told to be quiet, and then when at the age of 20 or 30 they want to abolish this and they should suddenly become leaders. We should address young women and children, this work should start at childhood. I'll give an example: The teachers should not tell the girls to sweep the floor of the classroom, while the boys are playing. That's where it should start.

I agree totally with Luz when she says that you need to empower women and give them enough knowledge. But isn't there another prior step that should first be taken: to change the mindset, also of women? Because we believe that men should change, but women should change too.

When in Burkina the fatherly code was written, only monogamy was registered and the women in Ouagadougou went and protested to have polygamy registered. Why: because they thought if it is not official husbands will go and find women elsewhere and if it is legal we will be able to share things 50/50. Women themselves asked for polygamy.

I would like to talk about the donors. You that are making sure that we can have projects, but you have to address the right target group. The awareness has to go to women as well as men. There is a lot of work that has to be done with the women, because if you give a woman a computer or a micro-credit and the husband asks her to give him the money or the computer she will do it. So we first have to work on the mentality of the women, we have to communicate in the direction of women first of all. As soon as we have the awareness then we will have the change of mentality and the spirit of the women will make the men accept what she is doing. If you don't work on the mentality it is not going to work.

**Masséni from CFTS, Mali**

We have the same situation; women very often are faced with violence. When I wanted to come here, my husband wanted to impose on me and I explained this to his friend. But in the end I found a solution by packing my bag and dropping it somewhere else. He wanted to call his friend to assist with this problem, but finally he agreed on me going to the workshop and he even took me to the station. I wanted to tell this story to say we have a similar situation in Africa like in Ecuador. If you do something for the needs of your family the husband will be happy, but when you ask to go outside to work he will oppose to your activities.

You have to first raise awareness with the women. If you give freedom to the women they don't understand what is happening, because they are not trained for it.

**Caroline from Ndola Resource Centre, Zambia**

Even in Zambia it is believed that a woman is supposed to be stationed at home. Each time you bring gender issues to the table it is very important to include men, because you find that men are always there to stop women from participating.

Two women stopped coming to the trainings, so we went to follow up with them and found that the husband had stopped them from coming. We spoke with the husband and explained about the whole programme, and he was okay with it now that he saw that it was women training fellow women.

**Norma from Casa de la Mujer, Bolivia**

This gender issue is very complex and broad. It is important to strike a balance. For mothers it is important to know from the beginning who will raise the children and plan common activities. Men can also do the dishes. Men can go to meetings and to trainings on gender issues, just as women can. It is important to raise men's awareness.

Objective is not for women to declare war or revolution. Just to claim the rights, it is not about imposing or claiming in a hostile way. It is all about being equal.

**Assetou from Femmes et TIC, Mali**

A lot of you have been talking about awareness raising. Of course it is important, but how to do it? Culture, tradition, makes it difficult to raise awareness. I use to say; the problem of women are women themselves. We made the radio programmes and helped the women victims of violence. I take the example of excision; 80% of the Malian women are in favour of excision, 67% of men are not. And very often men have been witnesses, and they say they don't want that for their daughters. But when they are away the mothers take the daughters and they are excised. When raising awareness has to be done, we have to find a methodology. I don't know how to fight the mentality of the people who don't want to change that.

Malian women their goal is not to work but to get married. As soon as she is married everything is all right. You have to know where to act, it is not enough to sit around a table and tell them that there are other options.

**Chimika from WIDnet, Zambia**

In Zambia poverty is prevalent and the most effected are women and youth. They hardly have the appropriate information, they are quite limited in their sources of information.

Gender equality is not about concentrating on one sex and hoping they get to know everything. It is about us working together with the men, so we felt if the men came on board that would be a good role in trying to reach the gender equality idea.

We have had focus groups meetings with the women, but the first time we did it together with men so we didn't get accurate information. Because in our culture, women - in rural setups especially - do not speak when men are there. It is different with the elite and those with more education because they have changed. So we decided to divide the groups where a man would coordinate a focus group for men alone, and a woman for women alone.

## The 4 PSO supported projects on: the ICT tools, how they are used and what their added value is for the projects

### **Eliana about CIDOB, Bolivia** ([www.iicd.org/projects/bolivia-cidob/](http://www.iicd.org/projects/bolivia-cidob/))

We started in 2001 with ICT initiatives. The first one to support initiatives for native territories through computer based systems. We helped systemising this database, and in 2007 when this first project was finalised we had reached more than 50% of the territories. We now have computer based systems where you can find all data that is relevant and useful for all these managers and leaders of native people. And this enables them to put pressure on the state and to do some follow up for their work. We are half way.

One of the initiatives aims at helping women to take back ownership of this movement. One of the problems with these kinds of movements around territories is; women are always kept aside, while they are the ones that fight the most. They have attended all demonstrations, with their children; they were in the front lines. But when it comes to acknowledging these movements these women become invisible and it is done on purpose. They play down the importance of women in this movement at territorial level. By means of ICT this project, that deals with leadership of women participation in the decision making process in native territories, gives the women visibility.

All these components help us strengthen the communication systems for these people by using all the tools that are available. In this process communication is seen as the spine of our work and that is how we approach gender related issues.

Women were always kept aside, they were never very aware of their rights, of the laws, of the topics and the issues that did affect them and did affect the native people. The decisions were always taken by men. So the main objective was to improve their skills and their knowledge **to** empower indigenous women to take part in the decision making process, whether at regional, national or territorial level: we promote exchange of knowledge and experiences of native women through a virtual network. We are speaking of 3 regions. It is important that they do not feel isolated and lonely. They must join forces to better reach their objectives. Via internet and email this is made possible.

The radio is the only means of communication for some communities. That is why I dwelled so much on the exchange, it is important to have a convergence of communication tools. Convergence is very important.

Right after providing the knowledge on how to use Skype, messenger, email, internet, we found that most of the colleagues choose to use blogs. Because they are perceived to be more personal, individual, and help them channel their views, break the silence. And it was important to work collectively in a network, and these blogs help them to communicate. And as soon as one of them writes something all the rest receive a message.

Another finding: Manuals, handbooks, are not useful for ICTs: the most useful teaching is to practice by using the machine and comparing with what is written in the manual. That is how you learn the best. Proposals were drafted and put online in order to be disseminated. We proposed a manual to create your own blog. We drafted this manual first in Spanish and then had it translated in 3 local languages to reach more native women. We have taken care of the translation in order to allow our colleagues to train other women.

What we have achieved is that women according to their own needs and their own interest may see that ICT tools are useful and they have them at their disposal. We give basic computer training, we have shown the internet world and we have been showing different tools available. They have chosen blogs and with blogs they have found a way to say things directly, with their own voice. Sometimes you will find that the text is not really good, or the way they write is not really excellent, but it is their own voice.

The media was reporting what was happening in the city but not what was happening in the region. And these women through their blogs told the stories of what they went through and how they had to struggle for their own right. And this tool in this case was very useful to show and to tell first hand what happened. Because the media come but they don't always tell the truth. That is why I say blogs are a very powerful tool because no one can make us shut up and this is a tool which gives us a voice.

We get visibility through the use of ICTs. The fact that by using ICTs they gain access to information on their rights, information on the policies that are discussed at the government/state level, that defend/advocate their interest, is already a powerful tool and makes us stronger. With ICT we are able to prepare proposals and exchange these proposals, which is very empowering; it gives us a lot of strength.

**Chimika about WIDnet, Zambia** ([www.iicd.org/projects/zambia-widnet/](http://www.iicd.org/projects/zambia-widnet/))

One of the major objectives of the project has been information and knowledge sharing amongst organisations that have been working in the women's movement. WIDnet was established to help provide a source of information for women and girls. Hosted by ZARD, as they carry out a lot of research on women issues in Zambia: on HIV/AIDS, education, gender and development, participation of women in local government, women taking up leadership positions. All this research that is done is brought together and is available to the public. But to make the information available to a wider audience than just the ones that can visit the centre, we wanted to make a project website where all information can be stored and accessed.

We felt that if this content is going to be available on the internet, e.g. results of the researches, the target group should also be able to make use of these facilities and the tools, to be able to go on the internet to find whatever they are looking for. So we started what we called a literacy training programme, basic ICT training and awareness raising for particularly women and girls. It is not only about building basic ICT skills, but it is also to make these women and girls aware of the emergence of the different ICT tools out there. We trained the people to utilise these tools in whatever way they feel comfortable or profitable for themselves.

Initially we noticed that information sharing between organisations in Zambia was not very common. We wanted to open up that system and make more organisations work together, share that information and they would be able to reach more as a group working together than as an individual organisation. Therefore we tried information sharing through our website. The content is provided for by other women's organisations that are working in the women's movement. We were the only one of the partners that had a website then, so all information would be made available through our website.

What we noticed was that our project website was a one way information flow. We got content from our partners and uploaded to the website, everything was down on our side. Our website was not very social, and content would not be dynamic. Therefore we had our website upgraded so people can now directly comment on content on it. That was a result of the ICT awareness programmes we were running.

We conducted a Web2.0 awareness training, these were targeted at information officers from partner organisations, researchers and academia from higher education institutes. A lot of researchers have done research about gender but they do not have formal publications. They saw the web offer a way to publish some of their work that had not yet been published, but that they regarded still to be valuable and they wanted to share with a larger audience. They found this was an easier way and even cheaper.

Most of the people we have trained in these tools have opted for blogs, and they also found RSS-feeds useful. It keeps them updated and they won't have to go through the hassle of searching. We have just done the web2.0 awareness and the people relate on their blogs, and they love the fact that after posting an article people are able to comment and feedback on what they have written. So we are hoping to see a lot more action around the blogging.

Some of the training that we did was on how to use Word, Excel, how to use Windows XP. Initially the trainings were targeted at women and girls alone, but things changed when word got out. They were targeted at women and girls from low income communities, but everybody heard about it so we had an overwhelming response. We only had 6 computers, which we used for the training. Since doing these trainings I feel people learn more by doing things practically, that is why we were only taking 6 people at a time. With the overwhelming response even boys and men demanded training. They were against the idea that we were discriminating them, therefore we made it possible to include the men as well as the women, but we always take more women than men. At first we were a bit reluctant, but then we thought: if men also want to learn, why not include them? It's all for a good purpose, isn't it?

We have trained a lot more women than boys in ICT tools. Most of the boys and girls are school dropouts or have never even been to school and the training worked really inspirational.

What didn't work well was the information sharing. We are hoping that by making our website more interactive that partners will open up and share information more.

Access and connectivity is an issue. Everyone only has access via the centre – that's why we leave the centre open after the training so people can come in and use it. The information they obtain from the internet varies on their needs: educational purposes, women's rights, HIV/AIDS, and the women from the rural areas look for information about safe motherhood issues and family planning. In Zambia lack of information has been a key source of disempowerment of people. Not knowing what is there has been something that draws us back. That's why accessing some of this information, not only online but also in hard copy from the centre, has been very helpful.

Connectivity is still a problem in Zambia. It is not something I can tackle on my own, it starts with our government. Rural areas are hardly electrified. There is a Rural Electrification programme, it starts with government improving infrastructure in rural areas, then it will be easier to take these programmes to rural areas. We have brainstormed on how we can go deep into the rural areas and train. That's why I have asked other projects, that use other technologies apart from computers, what tools they use to reach rural areas, and I asked about mobile phones. I am very interested in mobile phones as it is owned almost everywhere, it is quite cheap for us in Zambia to have a basic mobile phone that you can make calls with and send sms.

With regard to our project and as far as information sharing is concerned, we have been able to reach a wider audience with the help of ICT. Researches around gender and development have been published using electronic newsletters, which have over 500 recipients. It's cheaper, because with just one click on the button you email everyone on the group. And we have printed materials. We have also been able to share information using our website.

**Norma about CASA de la MUJER, Bolivia** ([www.iicd.org/projects/bolivia-casa-de-la-mujer/](http://www.iicd.org/projects/bolivia-casa-de-la-mujer/))

We have a consulting centre for women that are victims of violence. The demand is higher every day for advice on violence related issues and we are not able to help all. That's why we thought of this innovative solution to help them online: a virtual way to reaching the communities by using online consultation. The general objective is to build a mindset and a culture of non violence, observation of human rights, peace and value of dignity. There are more reasons why we started with this: we wanted to use this in 3 districts that are remote, at the outskirts of the city and they lack this kind of help.

Generally speaking these women are poorly organised, they do not take part in activities in their district because they often have 2 or 3 jobs, they make very long days. That is why they cannot attend meetings and trainings etc. Sometimes people can not come to us because of cost, of time limitations, that's why we offer the same service online. For the centres we are bound to opening hours from Monday to Friday. But people can send their questions in the evening and over the weekend - they know how to use the computers – which we answer when back in the office. We work in the periphery of the city, we do not work in rural areas. But we hope through this virtual system, the consulting room, everyone can make use of the services. But this means we will first have to spread the word, the news that we can offer this service.

They live in a culture of violence towards women. We want to articulate their participation through a certain platform. We use internet and the radio. We broadcast programmes on the radio on women, on empowerment, on orientation and they can consult us online through the virtual platform. We have a female legal expert that attends these women, gives them advice. We have 6 terminals and radio. Women do use radio - the radio programme is an open microphone - to share their experiences and we broadcast these as well. We have a programme called 'women in action', where we provide legal advice. We have a programme where we deal with ICTs, how it can help them to take more part in this online tool.

We receive feedback from the women, and questions that we answer by email. They feel empowered as we have helped them tell their stories on blogs. We also use video, where you can see people who make testimonies of the abuses they have been victims of. Thanks to these tools, the ICTs, they manage to lose fear and they manage to tell us about their lives and they feel more comfortable online than in front of the lawyer because they are ashamed.



As far as ICT is concerned we have basic and advanced level, depending on education level. The basic one is how to use the computer, how to turn it on, to recognise the different parts. The advanced one is internet, how to use blogs, Facebook. They also have their own Facebook account and they have a group. We have tools in place, which are handbooks for the users, to be able to remember some concepts and to be able to replicate what they have learned. So they have a practical blueprint which I have in digital form, so they know how to follow the different stages of the training.

The women who know about blogs and other tools, these 600 women, can have access to our online advice system and they can use this online platform to exchange experiences and to support other people. And we continue with the radio programme to make other people aware and to call women to action.

Regarding the cell phone: also part of our project, but next year we will do more. And we are trying to find out with telephone companies if they have e.g. text messaging services. We will have that in place in 2010. But people have their own cell phone, it is more a necessity than a luxury, although in our country it is relatively expensive to have a cell phone. But it is becoming easier now to have access to a cell phone. We have it in our plan that women will also be able to communicate with each other, but so far that is not possible through the cell phone companies.

With the setting up of the information centres we have been able to bring information in a more timely and more direct way than before. This has been an institutional challenge; we had to learn a lot about technologies to update our knowledge in order to teach other women how to use them.

**Luz and Pauly about AMJUPRE, Ecuador** ([www.iicd.org/projects/ecuador-amjupre/](http://www.iicd.org/projects/ecuador-amjupre/))

We run a school to train women in rural areas in order to hold local management positions. The objective is to give more potential to connectivity between rural women to have them become leaders and to make them to participate in local management through use of ICT. Making it possible for them to be included in the decision making process by providing them basic skills and tools in order to better plan finance, and manage these projects.

The modules of this training: on the one hand the political side and on the other hand the ICT based aspects. One of the modules is the knowledge and use of different ICTs for empowerment to trainers: by using mobile phones as a communications tool, by using email as our main link with rural women, with conventional traditional telephones and fax, by using Facebook, by using pictures and helping them get to the portal of AMJUPRE. When we say empowerment through training that is something very important to us. We train women and they replicate this knowledge, it cascades down to other women. It is crucial that they teach these other women.

We know that on the internet you find positive things and negative things. One of the positive things is that you are entitled to know about your rights and you have to demand those rights to be complied with.

As for the cell phones, this is a more direct communication tool we have. Fixed lines usually do not connect to rural areas, there are not many. That's why we provide cell phones and we help them use it to provide information and keep on communicating. As for the email, this is another link that helps us send them information, whether we are speaking of workshops, newsletters, the work we have done, pictures that they may be in. Facebook is part of our training, of the empowerment, we use it not continuously but I can send them a message on Facebook. They can comment on each other's links and stay in touch and have a network. We have provided an advanced course to help them find portals and download pictures.

Women are becoming interesting because they acquire new knowledge at local level; they are being more and more consulted. On water projects, health projects, and these knowledgeable women are becoming more and more visible. And the mayors, most of the mayors are men, are finding these women now and make agreements with them, strategic alliances. ICT tools now enable us to transmit this knowledge. To support the change in the mindset, higher skills, higher participation and men can no longer tell the women they don't know anything about these topics.

Another problem that ICTs help tackle is the geographic situation: the distances which causes communication problems. Women need to leave their areas and the distances are long. Lack of economic means is of course another challenge. We have the Galapagos islands that are part of the territory but that we have difficulty reaching. Now we are usually in contact by means of cell phone and email.



It was not easy to get women who started holding positions in local authorities sit in front of the computer, to touch the mouse, to start writing letter by letter, to learn to find the letters on the key board. But now they are already able to write their reports, they can learn from people that do a better job. It has really been a giant step to have a mandate and to be able to be efficient, to teach them to use email, Facebook, web pages. Incredible: someone from a rural area and she has a completely different view on the world now!

Cell phones; it has been a basic tool, the strongest one in order to provoke and convince people. You don't find a fixed line in the rural areas, that is only in the urban areas. At rural level you don't even have electricity most of the time, so they won't even have a line. With the cell phone we can ensure presence in certain areas, we can send messages from AMJUPRE and they can send messages from their community as well. That's how we use it.

Accessibility: this is something completely new to us, rural women. It was a part of daily life for urban people but for us it was a new toy. Although completely new; it was interesting and women were really open to it. Women have from passive become active players through the use of ICT. They became less dependent, they feel less inferior, and it has been a huge boost to their self esteem. They feel more valued, they don't feel anymore as lower class beings. Very often when people are less educated in Ecuador we speak of 'new illiterates'. And it is in some way related to gender issues, because we empower women that are present at local level. And they help us spread the message and the knowledge and they don't feel ignored in local government anymore, because they are acquiring more knowledge and more skills and they gain more respect. I think respect is important for every human being and it helps us bridge the gender gap. Now women are able to decide on their budget, plans, setting priorities, take all sorts of decisions. And through the leadership schools and through the ICTs it has really changed their lives in my experience.

With this leadership experience and the ICT tools we have supported grass roots women to government. Since 2 years we use the ICT tools and it has been incredible. I would love it if you could come to Ecuador and if you could see for yourself what their faces look like, how happy they are, the freedom they have. It is like they were born again. They feel like they can do a lot, they feel empowered, they feel committed to bring this message along to other women. They are able to spread the word and to establish social contacts with others. Of course some are more empowered than others, but all of them received the message through ICT tools. Because of the training on ICT and different tools and empowerment there is now a network between the women themselves and also with some strategic partners, so they don't feel alone anymore in their community. They are interconnected also with aldermen and other authorities and they can consult each other, they debate on their activities.

Another example: we organised a focus group and very simple women came and told about coming to school at AMJUPRE and that they learned about ICT tools. They are working as craftsmen, with a kind of bark that enables us to make lots of crafts, they do wonderful work. And now through this ICT they were able to improve their sales, they are improving their social and economic standard of living. Others are also trying to do this, so the governance can be more transparent, more agile. This ICT is like opening up a door to the world, to a different level, to a different lifestyle. These women are happy and committed to really make a radical change in their lives. They have made a breakthrough with communications in their lives.

## Some deliberations ...lessons learned

Contexts differ, cultures differ, politics and religion differ in the countries that the participants come from. There is not one way to go, one strategy to follow when dealing with gender related issues. Yet, a lot can be learned from one another and inspiration was taken from the personal stories shared.

What works in one place, doesn't in another. For example: being trained by a woman from their own community was not accepted in the rural area in Mali: the trainer was not regarded as being capable, was not trusted as being a specialist as she was one of them. In Zambia, on the other hand, a woman trainer from the community is respected, trusted and regarded a role model for what can be accomplished. In Ecuador initially women that had followed training and in turn were training other women were looked at with suspicion. The solution there found was to – on the spot – print certificates to give proof of qualification. It worked: the trainers were acknowledged and trusted to be competent for the task.

Having access to information, and therewith becoming more knowledgeable, and learning new skills can be perceived as threatening to those who don't have that knowledge and skills. But it was also found, e.g. in Ecuador, that women who had become more knowledgeable – e.g. on land rights, governance, water and health issues – became important sources of information and were consulted and involved in community matters that they had previously been kept out of.

Trying to influence policy that has an impact on gender related issues is difficult. Different approaches are being followed. Where some follow a bottom-up approach, showing impact on the ground in small scale projects to proof positive change and using this to make a case for bringing it to the regional or national agenda, others believe it works faster top-down: lobbying through high positioned officials that have a stake in regional and national policy making.

Although in all represented projects ICTs play an important role, in the stories shared this did not play the lead role: the use of ICTs has obviously evolved to being an intrinsic part of the activities. For all participants it was clearly not a goal in itself to use ICT tools: it is considered a useful, necessary and convenient factor to their work, which made it possible to take their activities to a higher level, increase impact, support reaching their goals.

When asked what it was that the use of ICTs did to strengthen their activities with regard to gender, the most heard answer was: empowerment. But also: visibility, networking, communication, access to information, cooperation over distance, time saving, cheap, having a platform to express yourself, self esteem, independence, decision making power, content development, knowledge sharing, recognition, a window to the outside world, inspiration ...