

Can broadband empower women?

Poverty is not just a devastating problem worldwide, it is also a disempowering one. In many emerging economies and rural areas, women remain economically and socially marginalized, under-educated and with relatively poor employment prospects. The UN has placed empowerment as a Millennium Development Goal in its own right as MDG-3. Results are mixed, however: many countries have achieved or nearly achieved primary school gender equality according to current UN MDG reports, but beyond first stage education, and in employment, progress remains painfully slow.

Gender inequalities dot the landscape. Lack of education leads to diminished prospects for employment. Women are disproportionately represented in vulnerable or insecure employment. In some countries according to current UN estimates, only 20% of those employed outside agriculture are women. Within agriculture, incomes remain low. Yet, empowered women “are key to increasing agricultural productivity”, says the African Progress Panel in its 2010 report. Moreover, the report finds that “connected women are key to developing strong knowledge economies”. In Africa, women are responsible for 80% of all food produced for national consumption and export, and experts say that with the right tools, many could increase their productivity by 20% or more.

Grameenphone IT CEO Kazi Islam says “When you are not empowering half your population, how can you expect balanced economic growth? It is like running a car on two cylinders. Women are the backbone of the family and they essentially hold and spread the core values of society much more efficiently than their male counterparts. We also find that the females are much more socially and financially responsible in our society, so when you are trying to empower them you already have some inherited benefit in these respects.”

It’s here that telecoms – and in the future, broadband – could be one critical tool in empowerment, as one towering role model shows: the Grameen social business concept originating in Bangladesh. The expansion of Grameen’s initial microcredit banking activity into telecommunications saw the creation of Grameen Telecom. Founder Muhammad Yunus, a Broadband Commissioner, explains that over 400,000 village entrepreneurs – the vast majority of whom are so-called Village Phone Ladies – have been created through this initiative. The model has been replicated, and Grameen now partners with other service providers in Africa.

ITU is also looking to see this kind of concept further expanded – particularly in the context of access to the power of broadband infrastructure. ITU’s Wireless Broadband Partnership initiative, for example, seeks to mobilize government and private sector resources, balancing

social and economic development aims with the need for investors and industry participants to generate sufficient returns as part of a long term sustainable business model that can be widely replicated. Wireless broadband capacity can be devoted to public uses, such as schools, hospitals/clinics and other government services, with remaining capacity made available to residents, businesses and others on a commercial basis.

Kazi Islam continues: “In our country, you will find women are contributing to society at a faster rate than in many other comparable countries. Organizations like Grameen have greatly contributed in incorporating them in the mainstream economy. The females become much more educated and empowered. This is helping us in various areas from family planning and managing population growth, to healthier children and families with a higher level of education.” Mr Islam says he predicts the fast growing sector of m-banking will be another key trend that reinforces this and will provide greater access to financial services and economic freedom for women.

These results, say Grameen, show “very far reaching effects”. But visionaries in the developing world are even more ambitious, and see gigantic unused potential. Graça Machel, founder of New Faces, New Voices and wife of Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, has noted: “Over the next decade, the economic power that women globally will control will exceed the GDP of both China and India combined. We are the next emerging market. The empowerment of women is therefore not only a developmental issue; it is a very much an economic issue.”