



INTRODUCTION TO GRACE

March 2007

The **Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment** (GRACE) project aims to explore the ways in which women in Africa use ICTs to empower themselves, the external, structural barriers as well as the internal factors which prevent or enable them to use ICTs to their advantage, and the strategies they employ to overcome these impediments. The research is highly original on two levels: the subject matter and the research coordination approach.

The project comprises 14 sub-projects, reflecting 14 research sites in 12 countries. While coherent with the general aim of the overall research initiative, the sub-projects differ from each other greatly in terms of target group and research focus. Furthermore, the concepts of gender and empowerment which frame the project's general direction and commitment do not have unequivocal meaning within the sub-projects.

The project aims to contribute to debates focusing on women's empowerment and ICTs through finding its own understandings of what "empowerment" and "gender" may mean in multiple African ICT contexts. The lessons learnt will be shared with policy makers and educators in the form of contextualized and local-specific recommendations.

The approach to the knowledge construction process informing the work is central to the results. In order to achieve a sense of women's realities in the 12 countries, the focus of the approach taken has been to create the space for the 14 research teams to develop their own methodology grounded in the enhancement of their critical reflexivity towards self and others and their creativity. The research questions and methodologies, the research trainings, as well as the ongoing mentoring and support programme accompanying the research are grounded in the principles of critical emancipatory research, better known as action research. Because very little research has taken place

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in Africa into gender, empowerment and ICTs, emphasis is placed on the use of qualitative research techniques as these techniques yield in-depth data and are able to highlight the various dimensions and aspects of the phenomena.

An important focus of the overall project is capacity building. Researchers are being provided with opportunities to develop research capacity as well as capacity to use ICTs effectively. The project made provisions for intensive training and ongoing mentoring and support. It endeavours to integrate the research and the ICT aspects into a holistic capacity building experience for the participants. Longer term objectives include:

- ✚ The formation of a research network that can do ongoing gender, empowerment and ICT research in Africa.
- ✚ The establishment of a research base in various institutions throughout Africa that can contribute to the debates around gender, empowerment and ICT issues.
- ✚ Public policy influence at local, national and regional/global levels.

Capacity building workshops were held in July 2005 and June 2006, with a third workshop planned for July 2007. At the first workshop the GRACE researchers consolidated their methodological approaches, learnt how to use a qualitative analysis ICT tool (NVivo), gained other advanced ICT and knowledge networking skills, learnt how to use digital cameras and recorders and how to edit sound and images using their computers. The second workshop focused on enhancing research writing skills and provided an opportunity for focused discussion on the research conducted.

Site visits were made by the Research Director prior to the second workshop. The project coordinator also worked closely with each research team through their design and implementation of their individual research strategies. This has been followed by detailed responses to draft research reports and chapter abstracts, ongoing provision of relevant literature recommendations, and discussion of issues and analysis. Online communications are conducted via a specific research-space list and directly between the research coordination team members and the researchers. Results will be documented in a professionally edited online and printed publication.

This 2.5-year project (April 05-Sept 07) is being implemented by Research for the Future, based in Cape Town. For further information, contact Ineke Buskens, the Project's Leader and Research Director: Ineke@researchforthefuture.com or visit our web site to be launched in April '07: www.GRACE-network.org

