
ICT Usage by Women in Albania and its Potential to Promote Gender Equality in Governance and Decision-Making Processes

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Abstract:

ICT is an important tool to reduce discrimination and to empower women for all type of activities. It is used as an important mean to communicate and to enrol in decision-making processes, which may contribute in many processes, such as women capacity building, access to public services and employment.

This study aims to analyse the gender ICT indicators, obstacles that women face and to identify the potentials of using ICT to empower women. The methodology used to analyse ICT usage by women in Albania combines surveys and roundtable meetings as primary sources with review of existing materials such as legal basis, previous research and publications as secondary sources.

Based on the survey conducted in 6 regions, 84% of women or anyone in their household has a PC at home and 72.94% have used a computer every day or almost every day, in the last 3 months. The main purpose of using internet was communication and participating in social networks. Despite the high rate of Internet usage, women face many obstacles in using it, such as concerns about privacy and security, limited knowledge and lack of time to learn how to use it, high costs, lack of internet.

Key words: ICT usage, women empowerment, gender equality, governance

1. Introduction

More and more Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming an important tool to reduce discrimination and to empower women for all type of activities. Also, it is used as an important mean to communicate and to enrol in decision-making processes. In the Beijing Declaration [1] it was stated that, “ICTs are a powerful tool that women could use for mobilization, information exchange and empowerment”. Also, ICTs can contribute in many processes, such as women capacity building, access to public services and employment.

According to Sachs [2], compared to quantitative easing and other macro policies, gender equality is possibly the most powerful action the government can take to promote long-term, sustainable growth.

Understanding the unique characteristics and motivations of females is central to building a sustainable economic future [3]:

- Women communicate in different ways;
- Women start and run businesses in different sectors, develop different products, pursue different goals and structure their businesses and business processes in a different fashion;
- Women learn in different ways: gender-sensitive education improves the learning experience.

Nevertheless, some researchers argue that women are taking less advantage of the process of building the Information Society and benefit less than men from this process. This is reflected in the low numbers of women as ICT users, producers and policy makers. Structural inequalities and the existence of gender-specific resource constraints, including income, time, educational bias and cultural factors appear to be responsible for this situation. In particular, family responsibilities and lower incomes leave women with less time and disposable

income to access information technologies in particular outside their houses. Women and girls on average receive less education and training, especially in developing countries, and therefore may lack the language and other skills required for engaging in activities leading to the creation of the Information Society.

Modern technology can help enthrone candidate-led and issue-based democracy [4] as was the case with President Obama when he was campaigning for the office of the President of the United States of America, especially for the first term in 2008.

Studies have shown that candidate-led and issue-based political campaigns are usually far more effective than party-led campaigns. This is not to say that the political parties will not be involved in the campaigns. It rather allows the candidate and their antecedents to be projected in the front burner of the campaigns.

Widely reported as being the most sophisticated online campaign yet in international media, the Barack Obama election campaign in the 2008 US presidential elections remains a reference point in the modern use of ICT in political mobilization.

Currently, few gender ICT statistics are available because many governments do not collect ICT statistics consistently and regularly, and rarely are the data disaggregated by sex. The best practices are generally found in developed countries, with most developing countries lagging behind.

This study aims to analyse the gender ICT indicators, obstacles that women face in the usage of ICT and to suggest some strategies that should be used to address the gender digital divide issues.

2. Methodology

The methodology used to analyse ICT usage by women in Albania combines surveys and roundtable meetings as primary sources with review of existing materials such as legal basis, previous research and publications as secondary sources. The combination of these instruments we allowed us to assess:

- The level of access to ICTs by women;
- The obstacles for not having access to ICT;
- The main activities for which women use the Internet;
- The level of e-Skills;
- The perception of women on the role of ICT in their daily activities and the benefits of using ICT.

A Survey was conducted during the period of December 2013–January 2014. The survey was carried out in 6 cities: Tiranë, Shkodër, Korçë, Lezhë, Berat and Librazhd. The sample has a number of 340 respondents. For this purpose, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared by the staff and was conducted on a face-to-face basis with respondents.

The respondents were women selected randomly. The distribution of respondents by city is stated in the table below.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Berat	67	20%
Korçë	66	19%
Lezhë	18	5%
Librazhd	15	4%
Shkodër	85	25%
Tiranë	89	26%

Table 1 - The distribution of respondents by city

Also, existing publications and reports related to ICT usage were reviewed. This included, but is not limited to: UN Publications on ICT usage, ITU statistics on gender-based ICT statistics, INSTAT statistics, Women's Network Equality in

Decision Making publications.

3. ICT's Potential For Women Empowerment

Women's empowerment is focused on increasing their power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, including in relation to access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of benefits. For women who can access and use them, ICT offer potential, especially in terms of reducing poverty, improving governance, overcoming isolation, and providing a voice.

3.1. Enabling women's economic empowerment

According to UN [5], ICT interventions that are directed at economically empowering women capitalize on the potential of these technologies as knowledge and networking tools for women as producers and distributors of goods and services. The tools are used to connect women to new and wider markets, broaden their social networks and provide them with information that opens up important economic opportunities.

3.2. Enabling women's socioeconomic empowerment

ICT provides opportunities for women's socio-economic empowerment in many areas, including in health and education. Organizations such as Satellife [6] and HealthNet [7] are examples of projects that have been successful in providing health information and connections to developing country health professionals.

In Albania, *SIV.al* [8] is a very good example of using ICT to provide healthcare information related to immunity system and vaccines. Also it provides a guide on the benefits of vaccines and a calendar of required vaccines, based on the child age, starting from birth to 14 years old.

3.3. Enabling women's political empowerment

People around the world are using new technologies in unprecedented ways for networking, movement building, political participation and advocacy. Women and their organizations have pioneered strategic and empowering uses of ICT to promote women's rights.

Last year, for the 2013 Central Government Elections, over 40 profiles of women candidates [9] from different political parties were prepared, professional, with clear vision and able to improve Albanian politics. This project was financed by SIDA, aiming to support equal rights without gender discrimination is the base of Democracy.

3.4. Empowering women in the context of violence against women

A virtual space can provide positive information on violence against women and a safe place for victims and survivors of violence to discuss their experiences or to seek help. For women to benefit from these spaces, they need access and capacities to utilize ICT in this manner. For ICT to be an effective tool for advocacy on violence against women, the needs and realities of women must be identified and addressed. This requires capacity-building efforts for women to enable them to trust and use ICT as a medium for communicating about their experiences. Affordable access points for women must also be provided.

4. Evaluation of ICT Usage by Women in Albania

During the past ten years information society has known a very rapid development in Albania. In October 2002, the countries of South-East Europe signed a common agenda (electronic South Eastern Europe) based on the European experience and the strategy of Lisbon thus realizing the possibilities for development and use of new technologies and the modernizing

potential they have to offer [10]. The first strategy on ICT was developed in 2003 that included 14 objectives and contained several measures of priority to enable the development of IT sector in Albania [11]. Nevertheless, the digital divide issue was never addressed properly neither in the first strategy, nor in the second strategy, Cross Cutting Strategy on Information Society 2008-2013. Also, gender based statistics on ICT usage are very rare in Albania. For the first time, INSTAT produced some ICT usage indicators, during Census 2011.

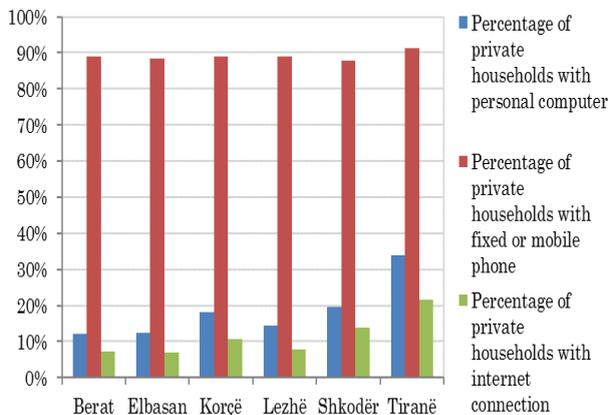


Figure 1 - ICT indicators for private households by prefecture

Source: INSTAT, Census 2011

In summary, we could say that we have a high rate, 89%, of private households with fixed and mobile phone. Also, 20% of private households have a personal computer and 12% of private households have internet connection. According to ITU [12], during the last 10 years the internet users have grown rapidly in Albania. In 2005, we had only 6.04% internet users and in 2012 it increased to 54.66%.

The results of the survey may be grouped in five main groups:

- ICTs access and usage;
- Internet usage;
- Opportunities and challenges of using internet;
- E-Skills.

4.1. ICTs access and usage

Based on the survey, 84% of women or anyone in their household has a PC at home. Moreover, 72.94% have used a computer every day or almost every day, in the last 3 months. The percentage of women that have used a computer, at least once a week (but not every day) is 12%, at least once a month but not every week, 3.82% and less than once a month is 9.41%. With regard to the place where women used computer in the last 3 months, the responses are shown in table 2.

<i>Places where computer is used</i>	<i>% of total</i>
a. At home	60%
b. At place of work (other than home)	24.71%
c. At place of education	2.94%
d. At another person's home	4.41%
a and b	1.47%
e. Other (e.g. public library, hotel, airport, internet cafe, etc.)	5.88%

Table 2 - Places where computer is used

Based on the figures in the table above, we can realize that the main place where computer is used is at home, 60%.

4.2. Internet Usage

With regard to the internet usage, 80% of women or anyone in their household has access to internet at home. Moreover, most of them are very active internet users, 71.18% have used internet every day or almost every day, in the last 3 months. Percentage of women that have used internet, at least once a week (but not every day) is 11.47%, at least once a month (but not every week) 5% and less than once a month is 9.71%.

For those who didn't have access to internet access at home, some of the main reasons are: having access to internet elsewhere, 43%, high equipment costs, 37%, high internet cost, 34% and lack of skills, 25%, etc.

With regard to the place where women used internet in the last 3 months, the responses are shown in table 3.

<i>Places where internet is used</i>	<i>% of total</i>
a. At home	34.71%
b. At place of work (other than home)	22.35%
c. At place of education	2.06%
d. At another person's home	4.71%
a and b	25.59%
b and c	0.59%
a and c	0.29%
e. Other (e.g. public library, hotel, airport, internet cafe, etc.)	2.65%

Table 3 - Places where internet is used

Despite the various mean of communication through internet, that are used recently, still for most of the interviewed women, mobile voice call is the main mean of communication. Based on the survey, 73% of the respondents use mobile voice call is their main mean of communication, 10% use SMS, 5% use e-mail-s and chat rooms. Only 1% of women use Skype as their main mean of communication.

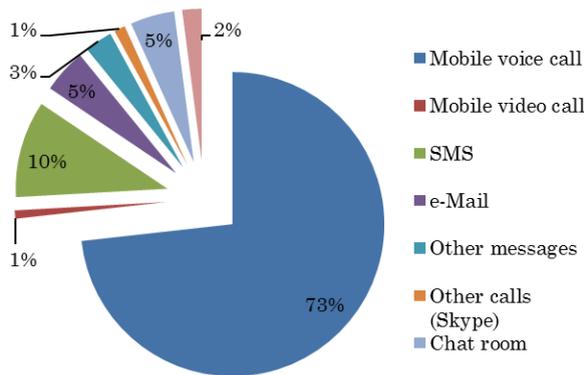


Figure 2 - Main means of communication for women

4.3. Opportunities and challenges of using Internet

Despite the high rate of ICTs usage, we analysed the purpose and activities for which the internet is used, in order to realize if it contributes increasing women power to take control over decisions that shape their lives, participation in decision-making processes and control over distribution of benefits.

We were focused in five main areas of activities, including:

- Communication;
- Access to information;
- Civic and political participation;
- Learning;
- Professional life;
- Other on-line services.

In the figure 3, below are shown all the activities for which women have used internet, for private purpose, in the last 3 months. The main purpose of using internet was communication and participating in social networks, such as creating user profile, posting messages or other contributions to Facebook, Twitter, etc. Thus, 68% of the interviewed women responded that they used internet to participate in social networks.

Also, access to information comprises activities such as reading and downloading news 49%, seeking health-related information 40%, looking for information about education 39%, finding information about goods or services 31% and downloading software, other than games software, 13%.

Civic and political participation was another area that we explored, in terms of analysing the rat of reading and posting opinions on civic or political issues via websites (e.g. blogs, social networks, etc.) and taking part in on-line consultations or voting to define civic or political issues (e.g. urban planning, signing a petition). Thus 45% of the interviewed women responded that they take part in on-line consultations or voting to define civic or political issues, but only 22% of them take part in on-line consultations or voting to define civic or political issues, thus making women not such a strong voice in the decision making process.

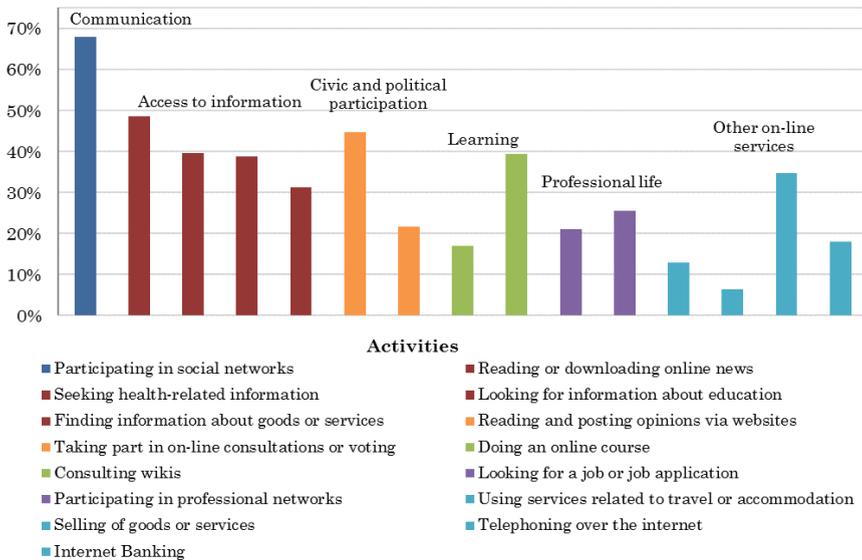


Figure 3 - Activities for which is the Internet used in the last 3 months, for private purpose

Also, ICTs are used as an important tool to promote formal and informal learning process of women and girls. We analysed two main learning activities, consulting wikis (e.g. Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia) in order to obtain knowledge on any subject and online courses.

Therefore, 39% of respondents used internet to consult wikis and 17% of them used internet to do an online course. Some other online services for which women used internet are: looking for a job or sending a job application, participating in professional networks (creating user profile, posting messages or other contributions to LinkedIn, Xing), using services related to travel or accommodation and selling of goods or services, e.g. via auctions (e.g. eBay). In figure 3 are shown all the activities for which women used the Internet, in the last 3 months.

ICT is considered an important tool to provide better public services to citizens and businesses. From 2001, European Commission uses a five-stage maturity model [13], which reflects how businesses and citizens can interact with public

authorities.

Governments' service delivery processes are described according to the following stages: information, one-way interaction, two-way interaction, transaction and targetization. The fourth and fifth stages can be referred to as 'full online availability'.

Figure 4 shows activities for which women used internet to interact with public authorities over internet in the past 12 months.

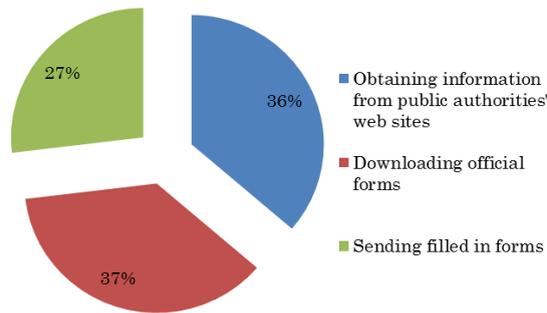


Figure 4 - Interaction with public authorities over the internet

Despite the high rate of Internet usage, women face many obstacles in using it, such as concerns about privacy and security, limited knowledge and lack of time to learn how to use it, high costs, lack of internet.

Figure 5 below shows the obstacles of using internet for each city. In general, the main obstacle of using Internet was concerns about privacy and security. In fact, each city has its own main obstacle of using Internet. For Tiranë and Librazhd the main obstacle is considered the concerns about privacy and security, for Lezhë it's the lack of Internet service, for Berat and Korçë it's the high costs of devices and internet service and for Shkodër it's the lack of time to learn how to use the Internet.

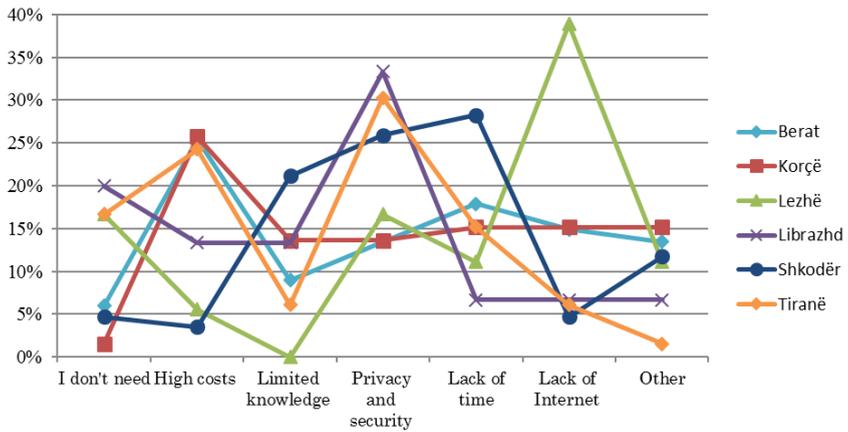


Figure 5 - Main reasons for not using Internet by city

4.4. e-Skills

Having basic computer skills is very important for the women economic, socioeconomic and political empowerment. We analysed the women competences in using basic skills, such as MS Office Package, scanning and printing. Based on the study, we realized that most of the interviewed women had above average skills on all these activities, except in Adobe Photoshop.

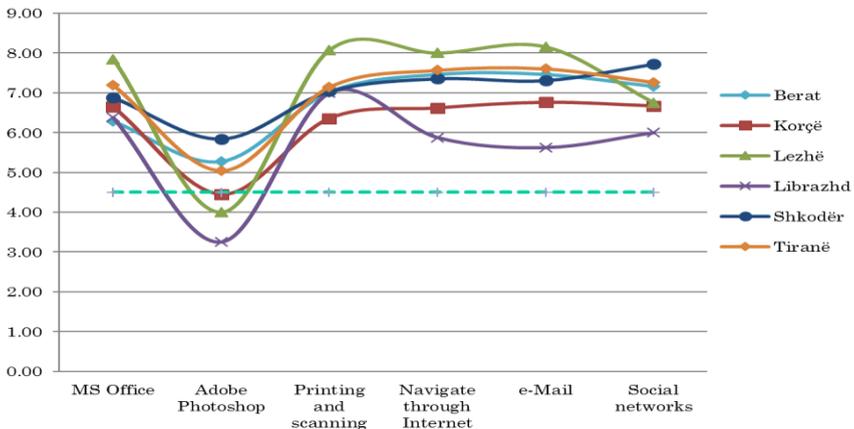


Figure 6 - Level of competencies on basic applications, by city

Figure 6 shows the competence level on basic computer tasks and applications, analysing each of these skills on city base.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

ICTs are becoming an important tool to reduce discrimination and to empower women for all type of activities. Also, it is used as an important mean to communicate and to enrol in decision-making processes, which may contribute in many processes, such as women capacity building, access to public services and employment. For women who can access and use them, ICT offer potential, especially in terms of reducing poverty, improving governance, overcoming isolation, and providing a voice.

According to UN, ICT interventions that are directed at economically empowering women capitalize on the potential of these technologies as knowledge and networking tools for women as producers and distributors of goods and services. ICT provides opportunities for women's socio-economic empowerment in many areas, including in health and education. People around the world are using new technologies in unprecedented ways for networking, movement building, political participation and advocacy. Last year, for the 2013 Central Government Elections, over 40 profiles of women candidates from different political parties were prepared, professional, with clear vision and able to improve Albanian politics. This project was financed by SIDA, aiming to support equal rights without gender discrimination is the base of Democracy. A virtual space can provide positive information on violence against women and a safe place for victims and survivors of violence to discuss their experiences or to seek help.

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auctions (e.g. eBay).

Despite the high rate of Internet usage, women face many obstacles in using it, such as concerns about privacy and security, limited knowledge and lack of time to learn how to use it, high costs, lack of internet. In general, the main obstacle of using Internet was concerns about privacy and security.

Having basic computer skills is very important for the women economic, socioeconomic and political empowerment. We analysed the women competences in using basic skills, such as MS Office Package, scanning and printing. Based on the study, we realized that most of the interviewed women had above average skills on all these activities.

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