

LinuxChix Africa

an Engendered Partner for the Future of ICT in Africa

By Anna Badimo

One is often confronted with questions like “Why is it important to address the issue of Women in ICTs?” People wonder why this issue is emphasised. The truth of the matter is that the worldview is masculine. For instance, if you take a cellphone and give it to a man, he will know in a very short period of time how to navigate through the different functions. If you give it to a woman, she will battle to make it work for her. And the reason is not because women do not know the technical stuff, or women are slow, or some similar reasons. The issue is that the device was designed from a male’s understanding of the world; that is why it is easy for them to use it.

There are many similar examples of world designs where the input of women is overlooked and these same problems are found in ICTs. The end result is that women lose interest in the field because they feel that they are not being taken seriously. LinuxChix Africa was formed because we felt that to withdraw is not the solution. The solution is to continuously remind society that women as members of society have a role to play in ICT. We believe that when a change of the magnitude of ICT benefits a few, and becomes inaccessible to other members of society, then its true benefits will never be fully realised.

We also realise that we are in a continent that is facing a lot of developmental challenges, and we see the potential of ICT as a tool that can be used as leverage. For us it is important that we do not throw Information Technology solutions at developmental problems, but rather involve the women themselves in defining and designing these solutions for themselves. This requires a certain level of understanding of ICTs in order to be in a position to do so. So our position is that capacity around ICTs and FOSS should be built to the level where women can write their own future, and in a language that they feel comfortable with. Free and Open Source Software is

making it possible for us, and as LinuxChix Africa we have decided to grab the opportunity with both hands.

Just under two percent of FOSS development is currently done by women. When looking at ICT in general, there are few women, with only 10 percent of Computer Science graduates being women. What is of concern is that even the few women who are in the field are constantly undermined, and they have to work ten times as hard to prove themselves. The fact of the ICT world is that it is still male-dominated and subconsciously or consciously, decisions in that world are very insensitive to the obstacles that women face. We believe that gender equality and gender inclusivity should be part of the policies that are developed by governments and companies. It is the responsibility of every organisation to ask themselves why a man gets paid more than a woman for the same job when they have the same qualifications and the same experience levels.

We want to contribute towards building technical GNU/ Linux and FOSS skills among African women. And we want to advocate for the use of FOSS in development with a focus on the potential contribution of FOSS for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We will continue to make input to the various stakeholders towards engendering policies. Our vision is “Make the future, Be the future, Free the future for African Women”. We believe we are in an era where women must define their own destiny, and where they must be positioned to define the destiny of their own children. Our mission is to create an open sisterhood in computing through sharing, involvement and empowerment using Free and Open Source Software.

The organisation’s programmes for 2006 focus on capacity development and advocacy. We have representatives on the Free and Open Source for Africa (FOSS-FA) Council. We will be forming partnerships with the WSIS Gender Caucus, UNESCO, UNDP, SADC NGO Council, NEPAD eCommission and eSchools, SchoolNets in Africa, SADC Level Parliamentary Forum, UNECA, and so on. Our focus in terms of capacity building will be introducing FOSS in School curricula – with a gender focus, helping to form Linux User groups and Schools User groups, FOSS and teacher training, FOSS training at universities.

Our highlight for 2005 was celebrating Software Freedom Day in South Africa, Kenya, Cameroon, Malawi and Cote d’Ivoire and the partnership with OSISA for their ICT programmes. 