

RURAL WOMEN: COMMUNICATION, EMPOWERMENT AND THE FACILITATING ROLE OF ICT

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars describe empowerment as an ongoing, fluctuating, lifelong transformation and liberation process involving positive changes in the individual's psychological well-being (self-esteem and self-concept), the development of meaningful social relationships (friendship, and informal and formal support) and the pursuit of positive experiences. This article argues that Information Communication Technology (ICT) can play a facilitating development communication role in the processes of empowerment and thus development of rural African women. The study was conducted at the International Computer Driver's Licence (ICDL) Centre in rural South Africa with 30 conveniently selected women with a grade 12 educational level. The aim was to establish the following: How do women become empowered through communication facilitation processes as experienced at the ICDL Centre in order to contribute towards their own development?

The most evident empowerment aspects were:

- *personal fulfilment, improvement of quality of life, more self-confidence, and could get a better job and higher status in the community;*
- *close relationships within family and a higher level of emotional support were crucial; and*
- *role models are predominantly female, especially the maternal figure who places a very high value on education.*

In all of these findings communication was experienced as central to the process of empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

In many nations, women have historically faced unequal social, economic, legal, political and cultural treatment because of their gender (Daly 2001: 45).

Women, also in South Africa, are still the captives of a male-oriented culture, inequalities between women and men have persisted and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for everyone's well-being (United Nations 1995: 3; Esterhuysen 1997: 18; Daly 2001 and Robins 2002).

In this article, the *research aim* is to investigate how a selected group of rural African women, through their involvement with Information Communication Technology (ICT) training, experienced the empowerment qualities of such a skills training experience through communication processes. The training took place at the Mmabatho International Computer Driver's Licence Centre. The argument is that through the communication facilitation process, empowerment manifests itself far beyond the development of particular technical skills.

Traditional views on the role of women in society have resulted in women not playing their rightful roles in many spheres, including the ICT context (Van der Walt 1999: 26). This is a particularly great concern for women being exposed to ICT training, but still being dominated by patriarchal systems (Robins 2002). However, Lennie (2002), states that it has been well documented that, given the opportunity, women are enthusiastic adopters of ICT.

The theoretical framework of this study focuses on women in development in the context of empowerment processes as facilitated through ICT training communication. The framework acknowledges the contributions of a myriad of theorists to the study of women, communication and empowerment in the developmental context such as Charlton (1984), Moser (1993), Du Toit (1997), Angiagolu, (1998) and Lennie (2002). However, for the purposes of this article, no in-depth discussion is presented regarding the different ideological arguments or schools of thought. The theoretical emphasis is on ICT as communication facilitating process in the empowerment context of rural African women.

EMPOWERMENT

The last decade has seen an increasing emphasis on the concept of empowerment as a means to combat social problems such as poverty, health and education (Lennie 2002). With the democratisation process that occurred in South Africa in the nineties, the focus of empowerment is to address the needs of people who have been devalued and marginalised in society, especially women (Arai 1997: 1).

Empowerment as a process

Scholars such as Haricharan (1995), Robins (2002) Lennie (2002) and Mulama (2003) describe empowerment as an ongoing, fluctuating, lifelong transformation and liberation process involving positive changes in the individual's psychological well-being (self-esteem and self-concept), the development of meaningful social

relationships (friendship, and informal and formal support) and the pursuit of positive experiences. It is the process of transforming powerlessness into control (Arai 1997: 1-5; Gutiérrez 1995: 229; Engberg 1995: 95).

Empowerment as a process of change

According to Arai (1997: 3-4), empowerment is presented as a four-stage process:

1. *Awareness*: The empowerment process begins with the individual developing awareness on some level of a desire for change.
2. *Connecting and learning*: Based on this awareness of a need or desire for change, the individual begins a process of connecting with other individuals, groups and resources, and learning new skills or information. As an outcome of this stage, individuals are able to expand their opportunities and choices. Depending on the needs of the individual and the changes desired, connecting and learning will take a number of different forms, e.g. a new job.
3. *Mobilisation*: As people learn new skills and acquire new information, they become ready to take action. The mobilisation or action stage involves participation. This participation could lead to increased feelings of competence, purpose in life and opportunities for participation. This will lead to increases in self-esteem and could prompt the individual to take further action (Sotshongaye & Moller 2000: 132).
4. *Contribution*: The final stage in the empowerment process involves the integration of the skills, knowledge and resources acquired in the previous stages into the individual's everyday life. In this stage, the individual experiences feelings of belonging and acceptance, and of being able to contribute to the community (Arai 1997: 4).

Empowerment occurs at many levels

Empowerment is often defined for different levels of analysis. It implies the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situation (Gutiérrez 1995: 229; Israel & Checkoway 1994: 149; Engberg 1995: 95). In all of these levels communication manifests itself as a fundamental and integrated part of the empowerment process.

Empowerment on a personal level involves experiencing oneself as an effective and capable person (Humm 1990: 78). One way of increasing personal power is to identify and understand the power one already has. It involves the ability to make choices for oneself and act upon them. Arai (1997:1) indicates that the emphasis is on individual choice. Individual or psychological empowerment refers to an individual's ability to make decisions and have control over his or her personal life. It is similar to other constructs such as self-efficacy and self-esteem in its emphasis on the development of a positive self-concept or personal competence.

Empowerment on an interpersonal level (social power) is derived from factors such as one's social position, role, interpersonal skills, credibility or attractiveness. A strong network of social support is an important part of the empowerment process (Arai 1997: 4).

Empowerment on a political level is most commonly gained through collective action and collaboration with others. In this instance, political power is, for example, to make government agencies responsive to women's issues.

These levels of empowerment are linked and influence each other (Arai 1997: 4). For example, if a woman obtains economic power, she will get a better job and earn a better salary. This will enable her to support her family better which could lead to empowerment on a personal level because she could feel confident and competent. This could also lead to empowerment on an interpersonal level because she could get a higher social position because of her credibility or attractiveness. This could lead to empowerment on a political level because of her collective participation in issues that concern other women.

Community involvement acquires a different meaning in terms of setting particular standards and performing the role modelling function. Historically speaking, a particular context is established.

Empowerment through participation

Dakile-Hlongwane, as quoted by Dlamini (2000: 29), believes that empowerment requires vision, resilience and focus on participation. Mokgohloa (1995: 2) refers to empowerment as taking charge, being in control and the participation of people in their own development – be it at group, individual or community level. One of the ways in which disadvantaged people empower themselves is by *becoming organised*, and collectively participating in developing the clout and the power to achieve aims that are impossible for isolated individuals (Horn 1994: 85).

For the purposes of this study, then, the concept of empowerment is a process of transforming powerlessness into control through communication facilitating processes and means. Empowerment begins with the individual's self-defined needs and aspirations, and then looks at the capacity development, resources and supports that are required to achieve those goals (Servaes and Arnst 1999)

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Communication technologies are important for the distribution of alternate, balanced and equitable portrayals of women's situations, and developing active strategies to improve their situation. It becomes clear that an important task for the new information technologies is not only to allow women to gain information, but also to disseminate the information they already possess and generate. The South African government aims, through all the regulating bodies, to provide greater telecommunications access to previously disadvantaged communities, especially women (Lesame 2005: 2). See also the White paper on Science and Technology 1996.

However, the "information highway" is still predominantly male oriented (Robins 2002) and often a forum for gender discrimination. Access of women to information communications technologies cannot be assumed to occur "naturally" when non gender-differentiated approaches and technologies are implemented. Johnson (2003) argues that a large part of the challenges deals with the absence of gender-sensitive policies and design rules.

As economies increasingly become information driven, the issues of women's access to ICT and the dissemination of information will increasingly become important. In this respect, the Tele-centre concept could play a major role as a facilitating initiative (Mmusi 2005: 169).

Tele-centres and development

ICT is also seen as holding great potential for facilitation of education, as will be evident from this study. Through ICT, various new possibilities are offered for distance learning, home schooling, and informal and lifelong learning. Computer and telecommunications technologies have considerable capacity for facilitating access to education for the traditionally disadvantaged groups, e.g. women (Byron & Gagliardi 1998:1). However, Johnson (2003), warns that the sustainability of such centres remains a serious challenge to the ICT providers. This challenge often leads to the demise of very good intentions. In this regard, Mmusi (2005) confirms these challenges in the South African context.

The ICDL Centre at Mmabatho is not a tele-centre, but it is more of a Computer Learning Centre (or Computer Education Centre). As is evident from the ICDL Centre at Mmabatho High School, ICT reduces the dependence on traditional formal structures of schooling and permits the development of more community-based learning facilities, e.g. tele-centres or also called "virtual village halls," "tele-learning centres", or "tele-cottages" (Share 1997:1). Tele-centres may employ various of types of ICTs and offer services such as access to telephones and fax machines, photocopiers, printing equipment, e-mail, the Internet and electronic networking. Tele-centres are also a venue in which new ICTs, such as the Internet, can interface with conventional ICTs (print, radio and video) (Anderson et al. 1999: 1; Fuchs 1997: 4; Sibanda 1998: 80). Tele-centres are aimed at providing ICT access to those who do not have such facilities in their own home or workplace, to ensure that they are not excluded from accessing increasing amounts of electronic information. Tele-service centres typically have trained staff dedicated to support and train the users (Ellen 1998: 2). However, staff do not have a traditional role as teachers who are the unique sources or controllers of knowledge, but it seems clear that they will be needed in more varied roles, for instance, as facilitators (Byron & Gagliardi 1998: 1; Kaira 2001: 2).

Tele-centres are not just technology centres; they can also be living laboratories, facilitating the local sharing of information and ideas. A tele-centre can take full advantage of global information and facilitate the creation of a common local development vision. Tele-centres are not only a way of providing simple, single-point access to external information and services, but also a facility for local residents and groups to organise village meetings, video conferences and technology training to address their development needs (Anon. 2000a: 1). The driving force behind tele-centres is to spread the benefit of empowering new technologies (Fuchs 1997: 2). Tele-centres can be commercial, community or education-oriented, giving priority to learning, productivity and communication services that will be paid for (Owen 1999: 4). The “community” tele-centre is attempting to generate a public good (Fuchs 1997: 3). Rural colleges and schools as well as extension services can use tele-centres for professional training, as a facility for distance learning and for farmer tele-training (Campbell 1995: 4).

The tele-centre “movement” has been around for just over a decade. Starting first in Scandinavia in the mid-1980s, it moved quickly to Western Europe, Australia and North America. In the 1990s, it was adopted in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Fuchs 1997: 4). In South Africa the first tele-centres were commissioned in 1997 (Mmusi 2005: 157).

To be effective, tele-centres need to be integrated into communities so that they can reduce, instead of increase, the communication gaps between the information rich and the information poor (Anderson et al. 1999: 2).

A good understanding of local communication patterns and processes is essential for tele-centre development to ensure appropriate applications of technologies and content to the local situation, and for harmonisation and integration with existing communication channels and processes. This includes cultural and social norms, where and how people communicate, what is being communicated, and by whom. Mmusi (2005) shares these viewpoints, as demonstrated by her research on tele-centres in the South African context. Tele-centres must be experienced and perceived as community based and owned for successful results.

Mmabatho International Computer Driver’s Licence (ICDL) Centre

The study was conducted at the ICDL Centre at Mmabatho High School where the majority of the respondents are Tswana speaking, single and without children. The ICDL Centre is internationally accepted and administrated worldwide by the European Computer Driving Licence Foundation. In South Africa, the ICDL Centre started in 1997 (Van Niekerk 2001). It has been rapidly gaining recognition, with 179 Training Centres in all the provinces by 2000. Currently in South Africa alone, 354 ICDL centres were counted on the ICDL Website with an additional more than 300 centres in the rest of Africa.

METHODOLOGY

Problem statement

In the context of the literature/theoretical exposition discussed earlier, the following research question arises: *How do women become empowered through ICT communication facilitation processes as experienced at the ICDL centre in order to contribute towards their development?*

Research questions

Against the background provided by the overarching research problem of this study, the following research questions serve as guidelines for probing further into the research problem under discussion:

- What are the *communication participatory facilitation experiences* that occur in the context of programme delivery?
- What were the women's experiences of the training with reference to their empowerment at *intrapersonal, interpersonal, family and community level* involvement as participants?

Research design

Given the above, the research opted for a mainly qualitative research design. In this section, attention will be given to the research design, including the role of the literature study, the construction of the questionnaire, the pilot study, the preparation and planning of the study as well as the conducting of the research. Attention will also be given to data verification.

Construction of questionnaire

A questionnaire, with relevant questions on the empowerment process, was developed.

Pilot study

The purpose of a pilot study is usually to determine whether the information-gathering instrument measures what it is supposed to measure (Strydom 1998: 183).

From the pilot study, it was evident that this is a relevant topic and the respondents found it interesting.

Sampling

It was decided that 30 conveniently chosen respondents should be used in this research to ensure that the study would be rich in the description of the people involved. In collaboration with two of the facilitators at the ICDL Centre at Mmabatho High School, Mr Abe Gaubuse and Mr Chibbela Nkondo, class lists of female students were used.

Conducting the research

The interviews were held on three consecutive days between on 25 and 27 October 2000. The interviews were held at the ICDL Centre at Mmabatho High School, or at the

homes or workplaces of the respondents. An interview lasted for about thirty minutes. A tape recorder was used during the interviews as well as written notes to record the responses of the respondents. Confidentiality was guaranteed. After the interview the researcher transcribed the tapes and the data was correlated with the moderator's written notes. The information was stored systematically for retrieval and analysis.

Data verification - ensuring internal validity

A qualitative researcher must state the parameters adequately. To ensure validity in this particular study, the following was done:

- The questionnaire was drawn up under the guidance of a senior researcher in the field of development communication;
- A pilot study was conducted;
- *Investigator triangulation* was used to ensure data verification during the interviews. A second, well-qualified person was used as an internal control mechanism. This moderator assisted the researcher during the interviews and took written notes (Marshall & Rossman 1989: 146). See De Vos (1998) in this regard; and
- *Methodological triangulation* was used to ensure data verification as explained elsewhere.

Analysis of data

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data. Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; an approach strongly applied to this study (Marshall & Rossman 1989:112). The model of Morse and Field was applied to the data analyses.

The approach of Morse and Field

According to this approach, four cognitive processes appear to be integral to all qualitative data analysis methods: comprehending, synthesising, theorising and recontextualising. These processes occur more or less sequentially, because the researcher must reach a reasonable level of comprehension before being able to synthesise, and until the researcher is able to synthesise, theorising is not possible. Recontextualisation cannot occur until the concepts or models in the investigation are fully developed. It remains important to state that these qualities were used to strengthen the process of data analysis and not to deal specifically with each aspect in a dedicated way. It was used to conceptualise the process of categorising analysis and interpretation, and eventual synthesising.

Categories for qualitative analysis

The researcher used words, phrases and themes within the data for later retrieval and

resorting. The researcher managed the data manually and used highlighting pens to mark certain words and phrases that were important. Then certain categories or themes were identified, leaning very directly on the conceptual category development approaches of Marshall & Rossman. The researcher tried to uncover underlying meanings in the text and metaphorical references. This was achieved by means of intra-participant microanalysis or the line-by-line analysis of an interview transcript.

The following categories were used as they were structurally part of the questionnaire used in the study: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Community as categories of analysis.

Demographic information

An abridged description of the basic demographic information indicates that 40 per cent of the respondents had a grade twelve education and 26.6 per cent indicated education higher than grade 12. The bulk of the respondents, namely 43.3 per cent, were in the age group from 20 to 30. The youngest person was 19 years old and the oldest 50 years of age. It is important to note that five respondents did not complete the course because of a lack of time or finances.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

As stated, the process of empowerment is approached by analysing the following integrated levels of the research, namely, intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, institutional, self-realisation within the historical context. The process occurs in an integrated way and at each level. The view is that there is constant interaction between the different levels and they influence each other continuously. Communication as an integrated process is regarded as central to the process of empowerment in all the identified levels of analysis. It is again more important to state that in the process of synthesis development and conceptualisation, the researcher applied the orientation of Morse and Field, as quoted by Poggenpoel (1998: 341), with the emphasis on comprehension, synthesis and recontextualisation of the data. On the other hand, the approach of Marshall and Rossman (1989: 112-120) was used with reference to the organisation of data, the generation of categories, themes and patterns as well as the discussion of theoretical statements and the possible alternative explanation of the data.

The process of the empowerment of women at intrapersonal level

The process of the empowerment of women at intrapersonal level was operationalised on interrelated levels, such as at skills, technical and social value levels. Technical skills indicate, for example, the ability to apply computer skills, which makes a difference to their practical performance in the workplace. Social skills involve skills such as the ability to communicate effectively in a certain group, or to maintain oneself. Values indicate the importance of something in comparison with others. It is something that is considered to be of great worth. It also indicates certain standards or principles accepted by a particular group, and thus it adds particular value to a person as a human being. Information Communication Technology (ICT) reinforces and affects in this context

one's own value and identity, and assists with providing stability to a person's life. ICT plays a major facilitating role in this regard.

From the research, it is evident that on the level of practical skills, these women want to be computer literate. Computer literacy in this sense means being familiar with certain computer terminology; being able to use e-mail facilities, the Internet, and a word processing programme, knowledge of spreadsheets, and using a programme for documentation layout. All of these are intended to enable people to be functional at higher levels.

The importance of computer literacy in today's society motivated them to do this International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL) Centre course in order to learn basic computer skills. The mastery of these skills led to personal fulfilment and self-confidence. Acquiring of these skills also led to the fact that the women started functioning on a higher level and this, in turn, resulted in a higher level of acceptability in the community. A total of more than 50 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had learned certain computer skills and they felt that they were computer literate and well qualified. Not only did they experience a better self-esteem, but also a feeling of sufficient empowerment to explore new horizons that they had never dared to challenge before.

It appeared that most of these women received emotional support and encouragement to study from their husbands/partners, children, family and friends. The support motivated them to learn some technical skills (e.g. to use e-mail facilities) and social skills (e.g. how to communicate well electronically). The encouragement that they received also resulted in the development of personal fulfilment, in the sense that they got personal fulfilment out of completing certain computer tasks. Their ability to complete certain computer tasks gave them self-confidence, because 50 per cent of the respondents indicated that they felt well qualified. It also appeared that one of the motivational reasons for doing this ICDL Centre course was to improve their lifestyle or circumstances. On the level of practical skills, some of the respondents indicated that they wanted to reach certain goals, e.g. to start a business or find a job. The goals of these women were directed with a specific plan and they were motivated to reach their goals.

It can be said that community involvement, especially religion, plays a very dominant role in the lives of these women because 73,3 per cent of the respondents indicated that they took part in religious activities in their communities. It can thus be stated that they value their faith in religion as very important. Out of the importance of their religious principles flowed their service to the community, to serve the community through skills that they have learned (e.g. at administrative level). As already mentioned, one respondent indicated that some people felt more comfortable asking help from women. Thus, it could be concluded that some of these women can easily give advice to other people, which is in line with the traditional role of women in modern society.

From the findings, it appears as if the existence of a role model featured very strongly. A role model in a society is regarded as someone with certain status, self-confidence

certain skills, and their behaviour is likely to be copied by others. They are people who have achieved something (for example, giving emotional and financial support) and others admire them for it. It can be said that the values (namely self-fulfilment, self-confidence, etc.) as well as the skills (e.g. social [managerial] and technical [computer]) portrayed by the role models, are those that the respondents desire to live up to. The respondents perceive their role models as empowered women and they look up to them.

From the research, it appears as if the maternal figure, the mother, played a very dominant role in this particular group. Some of the respondents indicated that they admired their mothers, because the mother figure gave them financial and emotional support. The mothers also encouraged their children to study, even if they were not educated themselves and experienced financial difficulties. They valued education as very important. On the intrapersonal level, the significance of this important statement showed that education was seen as a tool to empower oneself and to make a better life than the previous generation, which lacked educational and financial prosperity. The role models also improved their own situation by encouraging their children to study. If their children were educated, they would earn more money and the family would prosper and achieve a higher status in the community. This group showed the characteristics of a collectivistic society. According to Van der Walt (1992: 281) a collectivistic society is characterised by the fact that the individuals have meaning only within the society. The whole is more than the sum of the parts (individuals). The universal is more important than the individuals and thus also normative for all the sub-groups and its members. In agreement with this, the collectivists also experience the universal bond of the brotherhood of humankind. The individual gets a corporate personality. The sense of belonging to a certain group gives meaning to life.

It seems as if there is a connection between emotional support (e.g. motivation) and the decision to choose someone as a role model. There is also a link between financial support and the decision to choose someone as a role model. It is also evident that the role models of these women have strong characteristics. They are dynamic and determined, and have strong leadership skills.

It is also worth noticing that none of the respondents mentioned her father in this regard. One possible explanation for this could be that the fathers were not very involved in the upbringing of the children because of migrant labour and cultural customs. This however needs to be investigated further. Thus, it is evident that the role models of the respondents are predominantly women (mother, aunt, pastor's wife, Albertina Sisulu, Felicia Mabuza-Suttle) and could be regarded as empowered women themselves due to their well-documented profiles in society.

The empowerment process at interpersonal level

The process of empowerment at interpersonal level involves the facilitating sources of information as well as the input and knowledge that these women use to facilitate the empowerment process. Eventually it relates to relationships with one another and with specific people in specific conditions.

It can be stated that there was apparently very little flow of information between the respondents and their families about the ICDL Centre course because 70 per cent of the respondents indicated that they did not obtain information about the course content from their families as a collective. They did, however, receive support from certain individuals to register for the course.

It appears as if some respondents received some input from their husbands/boyfriends and some did not. On the practical level, these women received input on basic computer skills. They also received encouragement and support. It can thus be concluded that the husbands/boyfriends played an important role in the process of the empowerment of some of these women by encouraging them to take the major step of enrolling for the course.

The respondents who indicated that they have children, received input and encouragement from them. On the skills level, some respondents indicated that they exchanged ICT information with their children. It seems as if the children/younger people know more about ICT than the older generation presented in this group.

From the findings, it was also evident that the colleagues of the respondents acted as sources of information because the respondents indicated that they gave each other advice and studied together. Motivation in the form of encouragement and a feeling of self-worth were also manifested in this regard.

It appears as if the respondents received input from their friends in the form of advice and encouragement. The input from friends was not only on the level of values, but also on the practical level. The respondents indicated that they studied together and advised each other, which increased their feeling of self-worth.

Thus it can be stated that the colleagues and friends of the respondents played a very important facilitating role in the process of empowering of these women through committed encouragement and support.

The facilitators at the centre played an important role in the process of empowering these women, especially on the level of practical skills. However, it is worth noting that a number of respondents indicated that the facilitator was impatient and not knowledgeable enough. From the findings, it appears as if the women expected a facilitator who would be more patient, well prepared and knowledgeable. The respondents had higher expectations, but in spite of their frustrations, they did not give up.

The research results reveal that fellow students played a major role as sources of information because almost everyone indicated that they assisted each other in class, for example by showing each other the different techniques (e.g. how to draw a table or pie chart in Excel). Assisting each other also took place on the emotional level, because the respondents indicated that they motivated each other. It also appears as if the group cohesion was very tight because the students had the same frame of reference. They were all studying the same course and experiencing the same kind of difficulties, e.g. lack of time, lack of money, lack of computer skills, but they wanted to succeed!

When comparing the different sources of information at interpersonal level, in the empowerment process, namely the family, husbands/boyfriends, children, colleagues, friends, the facilitator and fellow students, it appears that fellow students acted as the biggest source of information and knowledge input in this regard. One possible reason for this is the act of "sticking together" sharing knowledge and motivating each other. The fellow students formed part of the educational environment at the study centre and played a very important role in the empowerment process. They served as a strong information source and served as a very positive reference point.

The process of empowerment at community level

It appears as if the role models had symbolic value in the sense that they valued education as being very important. From the research, it appears as if the role models, mostly the mother figure, would sacrifice almost anything to educate their children. It is worth mentioning that some respondents indicated that, although their role models felt very strongly about education, they were not educated themselves. Thus, there was very little exchange of information about this course between the respondents and their role models.

It also appears as if the organisations in the community, especially the church as an institution to which the respondents belong, were not facilitating agents on the level of practical skills in the process of empowerment. The reason could be that the majority of the respondents indicated that they did not obtain information about the course from talking to people at the organisations to which they belonged.

One could assume that the process of empowerment in the church takes place mostly on the level of values, where values such as involvement, support, etc. are stressed and reinforced.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of a holistic synthesis for this study is done through data analysis, the interpretation thereof and the integration of theoretical viewpoints, as discussed in the previous sections. This important process of synthesis development also includes addressing of the research problem as defined, the research objectives and the theoretical statements.

It can be said that the process of empowerment starts at birth and is facilitated through knowledge and education. It can also be said that the facilitating tools through which these women gained information were people like the family, friends and as role models in the community. The process of empowerment is influenced by the context in which these women live. The ICDL Centre course contributed to this process by facilitating the empowerment process through ICT.

The most evident empowerment *themes* revealed by the research are the following:

- The importance of computer literacy in this group is highly regarded highly, because it adds value to a person's identity and self-worth to ensure better job opportunities, more money and a higher standard of living.

- The personal fulfilment that these women received from this learning experience improved their quality of life in the sense that they had more self-confidence and could get a better job and earn more money. This qualification also leads to a higher status in the community.
- Close relationships within the family do exist, which means a high level of emotional support.
- The children of the respondents act as an important source of information because the children/younger people are apparently more knowledgeable about information technology than the older generation.
- Role models are predominantly female, especially the maternal figure who places a very high value on education.
- Relationships with friends and colleagues play a very important role because the empowerment process is enhanced through the exchange of information and the giving of emotional support.
- Religion and the church as an institution play a very important role in this specific society.
- The role of the fellow students played a major role in the empowerment process because of the relatively similar frame of reference and the group cohesion that exists.
- Apparently communication processes take place more often interpersonally (between family, friends, children, role models and colleagues) than via the mass media/science and technology.
- Modern society requires women to be multi-skilled in order to fulfil their roles as mother, wife and career woman.

The *obstacles* that these women experienced in the process of empowerment were the following:

- The fact that 16,6 per cent of the respondents did not complete the course because of a lack of time and finances indicates that this was definitely an obstacle.
- It is worth noting that a number of respondents indicated that one of the facilitators was impatient and not knowledgeable enough, therefore an obstacle in the process of their empowerment, and it was evident that the respondents who grew up in South Africa experienced racial discrimination under the apartheid system. They were sometimes prevented from going to school and studying because the police harassed them and certain jobs were reserved for specific races.

Guidelines/recommendations for the future use of programmes to empower women:

- Programmes that focus on the empowerment of women should emphasise the requirements for a woman to be multi-skilled in order to fulfil her role as mother, wife and career woman.
- Attention should be given to the abilities of the facilitator involved in women empowerment programmes. The facilitator should be someone with enough knowledge and patience.
- Programmes to empower women should make use of learning techniques that focus on interpersonal communication.
- Marketing strategies for relevant programmes should rather focus on interpersonal communication, such as word of mouth because it was evident that communication processes took place interpersonally more often than via the mass media/science and technology.

The ICDL Centre at Mmabatho proved to be a successful empowerment process tool to empower women through information and the learning of skills. The fact that ICDL centres have almost doubled in numbers since 1997 to more than 354 in 2005 is an indication that it has been highly successful as empowering facilitating centres across South Africa.

It is, however, evident that development strategies must include not only the learning process, but also the involvement of the women's support systems of women in order to embrace their identity and special abilities, and to contribute towards community development and the upliftment of a society as a whole. The process of empowerment is, however, never completed, but a better quality of life must be the aim and ultimate goal.

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