

The Carter Center and Access to Information

Gender and the Right to Information

Access to information is a fundamental right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and critical for the exercise of other basic socio-economic and political rights. Yet in many countries, half the population is limited in their full enjoyment of the right to information and the benefits that it provides. Access to information offers the power to assure that social services reach the most disadvantaged, supports government accountability, and promotes political and economic empowerment. With genuine access to information women can make more effective decisions with relation to education, health care, and agricultural production. Information allows women to more fully participate in public life and to bridge gender gaps. Paradoxically, it is arguable that while women are the least likely to demand and receive access to information, they are perhaps the most in need of this potent tool.

Though recent years have witnessed a great deal of research and programming related to the voice, participation and empowerment of women, access to information has been an implied rather than explicitly identified core ingredient for success. Continuing failure to engage in gender-sensitive policy making, entrenched cultural mores, lack of engagement from women's civil society organizations, information flows that actively exclude women and long-standing obstacles such as illiteracy, overwhelming household responsibilities and immobility have all played a role in creating gender asymmetries in the exercise of the right to information.

As various tools are applied to address the web of adversity facing women, particularly in developing countries and rural areas, insufficient focus has been paid to the power that information can play in confronting these multiple challenges. Therefore, the Carter Center's global access to information initiative proposes to work with UN Women to raise awareness about the gender asymmetries of information and importance of including in the international and regional agendas. The Center, however, recognizes the problem inherent in trying to make high level policy change without first gathering good "on the ground experience" working with local people. Thus, we will begin programming in four pilot countries to identify the main obstacles facing women in accessing information and consider potential solutions to overcome these challenges.

The Center will begin our work in countries with a proven commitment to the right of access to information, openness from the government to engage this issue, and an active and interested civil society. Beyond accounting for the primary impediments facing women in the exercise of their right to information, the Center will work in select countries to collaborate with local stakeholders in a review of existing or draft access to information legislation and through a gender-lens; engage local women's organization to raise awareness about the value of the right to information for their constituencies; and partner with key government ministries and agencies to apply creative solutions to overcome the information disparities faced by women.

While a number of countries are under consideration as pilots, Ghana appears to be a likely initial candidate. They were the site of a Carter Center-organized regional conference on access to information, we have strong ties to local women's groups there, and with a draft law under debate, we can actually feed our learning back into the legislative process. A \$20,000 gift from the Rudy and Alice Ramsey Foundation would allow the Center to work through established women's groups and key institutions in one pilot country, to advance dialogue and action around women's information needs and their right to exercise access to information.