Main issues rural women experience with information & communication technology

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MAIN ISSUES RURAL WOMEN EXPERIENCE WITH INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

"I think the technology is there as a tool it is not there of itself it is a means to and end. It's a case of well what are we doing that the technology can help us do better"

"It is a familiarity. I suppose it is like a colour television, before everybody got colour television it is very hard to visualise what it would be like. But everybody has got it now and nobody would dream of watching black and white TV if they had the choice"

Teresa Maiolo

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INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA, FOCUSING ON RURAL WOMEN.

This brief report will outline the main issues rural women encountered with information and communications technology. This information was derived from interviewing twenty-one rural women from the South West, Eastern Goldfields, Murchison, Gascoyne, and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. Recommended actions are given to address each of the main issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREAS OF IMPORTANCE</th>
<th>Issues:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The technology's ability to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making.</td>
<td>• Access to communication and information – Two essential ingredients in decision-making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Rural women's use of information and communication technology. | • Variety of technology use among rural women.  
• Current uses – work, education, meetings. |
| Limitations and areas of concern with information and communication technology. | • Not the total solution, but it helps.  
• Overarching people obstacles to using technology.  
• Practical concerns – money, weather, preparation, travelling.  
• Individual technology limitations. |
| Infrastructure. | • Obstacles to resolve in order to progress future possibilities. |
| Benefits in using information and communication technology. | • Fits in with busy schedules – Rural women's responsibilities, resources and with other people who they are contacting.  
• Access to information and increase communication.  
• Provide opportunities.  
• Gives women a voice. |
| Support. | • Training objectives.  
• The scope of training – Principles to keep in mind.  
• Government support.  
• Once a technology user – still require support. |
<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
</table>
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|                     |   ▶ Personal development and new opportunities.  
|                     |   ▶ Training and education.  
|                     |   ▶ Awareness of the technologies potential.  
|                     |   ▶ Attitude.  
|                     |   ▶ Support. |
| Future Opportunities. | • **Hardware and Infrastructure Opportunities:**  
|                     |   ▶ Mobile service.  
|                     |   ▶ Interactive communication.  
|                     |   ▶ Greater opportunities to use information and communication technology. |
| Future Opportunities. | • **Service Provision Opportunities:**  
|                     |   ▶ Meetings.  
|                     |   ▶ Seek information.  
|                     |   ▶ Greater access.  
|                     |   ▶ Tele health.  
|                     |   ▶ Communication with Politicians and Ministers in state and local government.  
<p>|                     |   ▶ Community and organisation's opportunities. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Recommended Actions:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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| The technology's ability to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. | • Redefine decision-making for government: provide a repertoire of ways that I&C technology can be used. This action be integrated in Government's two-year action plan for women.  
• Develop online rural and regional networks.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Rural women’s use of information and communication technology.                     | • Acknowledge the diversity in rural people's skills.  
• Promote current uses of I&C technology by rural people.  
• Develop a network similar to farmer's Online Network.  
• Address the issues of limited infrastructure.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Limitations and areas of concern with information and communication technology.     | • Focus on people – what they want to do and not the technology – their needs.  
• Ensure rural community leaders are positive and regard the importance of using I&C.  
• Tailor I&C technology training to the diverse needs of rural people.  
• Provide case studies to rural women and men. Include different types of Information and communication technologies, and purposes.                                                                                                                                                           |
| Infrastructure.                                                                   | • Promote projects such as Online Farmwide Network which accelerate all components of the demand.  
• Provide options to rural people acknowledging their different levels of I&C technology infrastructure.                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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</tr>
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<td>- Training focused on specific purposes or outcomes, and targeted to specific groups of rural people. The scope of training be expanded to include the diversity of people – age, purpose, etc.</td>
<td>Promote personal contact; inform government agencies of the benefits rural people experience through using I&amp;C technology.</td>
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<td>- Instruct action to develop greater access to educational and training online.</td>
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Support.

- Promote the benefits of using I&C technology.
- Inform government agencies of the benefits rural people experience through using I&C technology.
- Promote to rural women new technology.
- Tailor technology training and awareness to specifically include rural women, as the rural women are the turning point for I&C technology uptake in rural communities.
INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

This brief report will outline the main issues rural women encountered with information and communications technology. This information was derived from interviewing twenty-one rural women from the South West, Eastern Goldfields, Murchison, Gascoyne, and Kimberley regions of Western Australia.

1. THE TECHNOLOGY'S ABILITY TO INCREASE RURAL WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNMENT DECISION-MAKING

1.1 Summary Information From The Rural Women's Interviews:

1.1a Access To Communication and Information – Two Essential Ingredients In Decision-Making

- Information and communication (I&C) technology increases rural women's ability to give input and communicate. It allows greater accessibility to contact rural communities. Consequently providing greater contact with the 'grass roots' people.
- I&C technology is not a substitute for all face-to-face contact. The prime use and advantage of this technology is it provides more flexibility and more opportunities to communicate. This is an important boundary of I&C technology.
- Rural women need efficient and easy access to information, and communication to be involved in government decision-making. Currently, rural women have basic, insufficient and costly information and communication tools. This situation adversely impacts on women's own resources of time, money, and energy. These demands are exacerbated in situations where resources are scare and limited, such as rural community's having no 24-hour power.
- I&C technology enables decision-making processes to fit into rural women's current commitments and responsibilities. Consequently rural women view this technology as a platform for self-empowerment and their inclusion in community change.
- Rural women are interested in technology because it can provide them with new opportunities, and services. They view I&C technology as a means to an end.
- An expanded understanding of meetings is needed if I&C technology is used for decision-making. To facilitate this expanded view it is essential that information on how technology can be used for decision-making is given to relevant people. This information would include the advantages, and the best scenarios to use I&C technology in decision-making.
- Using I&C technology for decision-making forums, will open doors for rural women and communities. Rural women's ability to easily communicate and network with people outside their community will lessen their isolation and impact on community action.

1.2 Recommended Action:

- Redefine decision-making for government, expanding on traditional committee forums. Specifically provide people with a repertoire of ways that information and communication technologies can be used for decision-making, with a focus on the advantages, best scenarios and limitations to using types of technology, such as teleconferencing or netmeeting. Ensure this expanded view of decision-making still embraces the importance of face-to-face contact. Provide this information to
state government agencies and committees, with a priority to regional
departments, agriculture, women's policy development office, local councils, and
local community groups. This action will consolidate the state Government's two-
year action plan for women.

- Develop online rural and regional networks (or nodes) to enable easier
communication between government and specific rural communities. These
online networks will include community people, groups and organisations that
want contact with specific government agencies or portfolios. These networks
can operate in partnership or independent of their local council or shire. The
specific purpose of communication is to be explored and tailored.

2. RURAL WOMEN'S USE OF I&C TECHNOLOGY

2.1 Summary Information From The Rural Women's Interviews:

2.1a Variety Of Technology Used Among The Rural Women
- From very proficient (using the internet, e-mail, fax, telephone) to halfway
proficient (using computers, fax, but not internet) to limited use of technology
(using just the fax but aware of other technology)
- One of the women, made special reference to the benefits derived from her
involvement in the Farmer's Online Network, particularly with the provision of local
call access. Rural women commented that std calls was an obstacle to using I&C
technologies.
- Other types of specialised technology that rural women use include:
teleconferencing, video conferencing, telematics, list servers, telecentres, and
community agriculture centres.

2.1b Current Uses
- Working – farming, quotes, publications, orders
- Education & acquiring information – reports, teaching children
- Meetings – women in the Kimberley, Gascoyne and Murchison regions use
teleconferencing for many meetings.

2.1c Other Experienced Issues - re: strategies
- Important to acknowledge the transition from people and communities moving
from no use of I&C technology to predominant use of technology. Strategies of
using 'word of mouth' and local newspapers, will facilitate this transition.
- Acknowledge limited technology infrastructure in remote regions of rural WA.
- Different language is used when communicating with different technologies such
as the internet.

2.2 Recommended Action:
- Acknowledge the diversity of rural people's skill in using technology when
formulating policy or instigating action. Promote the current uses of I&C
technology by rural people to other rural people. This will increase the demand
for using technology. Promotion can be done using case studies or through
personal informal networks. Develop a network similar to the model used by the
Farmer's Online Network.
3. **LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF CONCERN WITH I&C TECHNOLOGY**

3.1 **Summary Information From The Rural Women’s Interviews:**

3.1a **Not The Total Solution But It Helps**
- Technology fits in the whole system, with people at the centre. These people need to believe in themselves, and be self-empowered before the use of technology can be truly optimised.

> "I think the technology is there as a tool it is not there of itself it is a means to and end. It’s a case of well what are we doing that the technology can help us do better. So one of those things is obviously exchanging information. So far with the project we have been working on, we haven’t actually used technology for that, because the committee has been local and it’s been using the traditional thing like the telephone and paper. People are comfortable with that. But as time goes on maybe things like drawing up plans or ideas or doing presentations, if you’ve got a funding body for instance and you want to convince them that this is a great idea.”

(Mary Smith)

3.1b **Overarching People Obstacles To Using I&C Technology**
- There is a lack of knowledge, skills and positive attitudes towards technology, among many rural women. Often older women find technology daunting (with the language used) and they lack the confidence to instigate action. Rural women also have specific training needs such as knowledge and skills in ‘trouble shooting’ problems encountered with I&C technology. Some training has not been effective. Rural women suggested improvements revolving around the trainer’s addressing diverse needs with – rural people’s proficiency with the technology, age, culture, and intended purpose of the technology’s use.
- There is a lack of leadership to promote the use of technology in many rural communities. Consequently there is little community awareness, services and support for rural people who desire to use I&C technology.

3.1c **Practical Concerns**
- Money: the cost of using technology such as local call access.
- Time involved to learn to use the technology, given women’s current responsibilities.
- Weather – particularly in Kimberley area where storms may interfere with transmission, and the wet season not allowing people to drive on roads and thus not attend training workshops. Also electric fences interfere with I&C technology use.
- The Chairperson and members need preparation when using I&C technology, such as teleconferencing, to make decisions.
- Travelling – to the closest Telecentre if rural women didn’t have access to the technology.
- Currently there is only a small number of people who know how to use I&C technology.
3.1d  Individual Technology Limitations

- E-mail – use it for quick, informal communication. Not recommended to use e-mail for complex issues, or emotional issues, as it results in disjointed communication. E-mail is noted as having no momentum and thus can not accommodate for dynamics in thought. Shy people may prefer to use e-mail as they can write in private and not have to talk.

- Teleconferencing – is useful for meetings or making decisions on relative straightforward issues. As people can not see each other’s face, and there is no access to non-verbal cues. It is recommended that teleconferencing is not used when generating ideas or in sensitive situations. Rural women stressed the importance of face-to-face contact when people are part of a group, making decisions. There was also concern that voting may not be legal in a teleconferencing situation. Shy people may prefer this medium for talking and there is more preparation required to conduct a meeting using this type of technology.

- Internet – is useful when accessing information. It however can overload people with information and there is no direct social contact with it. People can’t really judge you, as they cannot see you or know your personal details. It was noted that some services such as psychiatric counselling were not suited to internet delivery.

3.2  Recommended Action:

- Focus on people and what they want to do, not on the technology – this is in titles of forums, explanation of strategies, promotion of OIC strategies and actions. Ensure that how we communicate with the community is framed in want is their need.

- Ensure that rural community leaders (in the breadth of its meaning) are positive about and acknowledge the importance of using I&C. This leadership role will ensure that community strategic plans, and resource allocations, will facilitate people’s use of I&C technology.

- Ensure rural women are confident users of technology by tailoring I&C technology training to diverse needs reflected by:
  - proficiency level;
  - age;
  - culture; and
  - intended use or purpose for using the technology.

- Case studies be provided to rural women and men demonstrating ways that similar types of people have gained an advantage through using I&C technology – such as saving money, making more money, and accessing new opportunities. Include specific actions of how people can get started such as people contacts. Furthermore, inform people that different information and communication technologies have their own strengths and limitations, for particular purposes.
4. INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1 Summary Information From The Rural Women’s Interviews:

4.1a Obstacles To Resolve In Order To Progress Future Possibilities
- Insufficient, unreliable hardware – lines, satellites, prohibitive cost for the local community.
- No local call access – for internet. Some communities and people supported via telecentres, Online Farmwide Network, but majority are not.
- No 24 hour power – energy. Makes using the technology unreliable.

4.2 Recommended Action:
- Promote projects such as Online Farmwide Network which will accelerate:
  ▶ demand;
  ▶ education;
  ▶ awareness;
  ▶ infrastructure; and
  ▶ local call access, to rural communities.
- Provide options to rural people where 24-hour power is not required to use I&C technology.

5. BENEFITS IN USING I&C TECHNOLOGY

5.1 Summary Information From The Rural Women’s Interviews:

5.1a Fits In With Busy Schedules: Rural Women’s Responsibilities, Resources And With Other People Who They Are Contacting
- Fits in additional activities in people’s busy schedules, thus creating new opportunities – Using I&C technology
  ▶ saves people time
  ▶ creates an efficient work environment
  ▶ increases women’s confidence; and
  ▶ ensures many responsibilities can be fulfilled.
- Using I&C technology means rural women do not have to travel as much. This saves time and communication, and information can be accessed instantly. Agendas and minutes can be accessed instantaneously by committee members and the public
- It is cost efficient and convenient to use I&C technology, such as the fax and the internet when accessing information or communicating.

5.1b Access To Information & Increase Communication
- Access to information – when few services
- Facilitates personal contacts – networks, meetings, family & friends, colleagues, news groups, committees.

5.1c Provide Opportunities
- Provide opportunities – economic, education, teleworking, marketing, community development, facilitates infrastructure.
5.1d **Gives Women A Voice**
- Gives women a voice & influence – chat, talk back TV, surveys, no gender knowledge.

5.2 **Recommended action:**
- Promote the benefits of using I&C technology via case studies, direct information packs, promotion material, and conferences. Promote this information to:
  - rural community leaders;
  - rural people;
  - regional development, and agriculture, government agencies;
  - women's policy offices
  - local government councillors;
  - executives in rural Western Australia; and
  - Ministers.
- Promote to rural women that through using I&C technology, they can fit in opportunities in their life that would otherwise be cumbersome and not accessible. The benefits of using I&C technology include: saving time, being cost efficient, providing support and information, and facilitates self-empowerment.
- Promote I&C technology can provide different opportunities to easily contact friends and relatives who in the City, inter state or overseas. Many rural women are isolated from their children who leave home at an early age to go to school in Perth. It would be useful to demonstrate to parents the benefits of using different types of I&C tools.
- Inform relevant government agencies of the advantages rural people experience when using I&C technology. This information is a catalyst to agency’s reengineering their services to meet the needs of rural people.
- Inform government agencies of new ways to communicate with rural women. For example via ‘talk back’ TV, chat lines etc. Provide examples, detailed steps and frameworks of how these new ways can be implemented. Include in this information detailing the advantages and opportunities to be encountered by the organisation and their customers. This information is a catalyst to agency’s reengineering their services to meet the needs of rural people.

6. **SUPPORT**

6.1 **Summary Information From The Rural Women’s Interviews:**

6.1a **Training Objectives**
- To increase confidence. This has the added effect of spreading the word in a positive way and further increasing community awareness.
- To provide a non-threatening, non-daunting environment. This ensures that training is effective and a positive experience is provided.
- Ensure the training is purposeful, and not an end in itself. That is, it is not I&C technology training, but it is how do better farming, or how to do better teaching, or better parenting through using I&C technology. Make the training interesting, and grabbing for the participants. Find out what the interests of the participants in order to plan training programs.
Specific training request other than general Internet include: teleconferencing; ergonomics – sitting properly; trouble shooting knowledge; and hardware of computers.

Awareness of what the internet can do – the potential of it.

6.1b The Scope of Training – Principles To Keep In Mind

Variety
Individual and group training
Short courses to intensive courses to evening courses
Home versus centre-based
Regular opportunities
Social occasions
Partners included in some training workshops
Informal – party plans to formal courses
Mobile to TAFE training courses

6.1c Government Support

To provide opportunities to train and learn about using I&C technology. Although TAFE and telecentres provide some services, the scope of this training has been limited, not inclusive of the above principles, rural women espoused.
Need to politically push telecommunications issues such as infrastructure and its associated costs. Examples of government involvement include Online Farmwide Network delivering local call access.
To provide advice and support to service providers of rural people's needs.
In general, rural women’s attitudes were very positive with government action. There however are areas where the government can maximise people’s use of I&C technology. To achieve this outcome, rural people’s needs and unique circumstances need to be considered.

6.1d Once A Technology User

When systems for using technology are in place, there is a definite need (particularly by the service providers) for support to ensure the systems are running effectively and up to date.
These include: maintaining online systems – such as people’s names need a coordinator; technical support – need patience, efficient in time, and an understanding

6.2 Recommended Action:

Training to target specific purposes or outcomes, and targeted to specific groups of rural people. This means that knowledge of the group's needs or interests are used to plan I&C training.

The scope of training be expanded to include the diversity of people – purpose, culture, age, proficiency. Examples of specific training needs are to include computer hardware, trouble shooting, and different types of technology such as teleconferencing. Examples of training formats include individual versus group training, and informal party plans to bringing your partners along.
A non-threatening training environment is essential. Ways to promote this environment is by having an informal party plan training, a social atmosphere, and focusing on the participant’s interest or business areas.

Government accelerate the telecommunication’s infrastructure.

7. FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH USING I&C TECHNOLOGIES

7.1 Summary Information From The Rural Women’s Interviews:

7.11 Self-Empowerment Opportunities

7.111 Personal Development and New Opportunities
- Learn new skills,
- Expand careers through education opportunities and teleworking
- Have employment sections in the newspaper for teleworking
- Expanding education opportunities – broaden horizons of what people can do in the ‘bush’
- Get back into culture – heritage – Aboriginal people
- Market industries – expand markets
- Do things better, faster use it as an effective tool for anything
- Increases confidence through gains and opportunities
- Empowers people – ie, cuts out the middle people in business. For example, Aboriginal people’s art can be sold directly
- Using I&C technology is limited by our imagination – it has infinite purposes:
  “It is a familiarity. I suppose it is like a colour television, before everybody got colour television it is very hard to visualise what it would be like. But everybody has got it now and nobody would dream of watching black and white TV if they had the choice” (Sara Williams)

7.112 Training and Education
- For businesses, for children and adults
- Make the training purposeful and interesting. For example with children focus on music groups.
- Use, I&C technology to teach children who have limited education facilities. This has the potential of saving large amounts of money, and having children at home.

7.113 Awareness Of The Technologies Potential
- For people to realise it’s impact and how much it can help. This potential needs to be organised and communicated.
- This awareness will promote a positive attitude to future use of I&C technology
- Focus on the outcome or core business. This will ensure that I&C technology has a purpose and has meaning. Address what, how, the costs, provide examples, and follow up with more action or support or information (have a client contact person for specific target groups)
- Provide information packages on the above
7.114 Attitude
- Generally, women are the driving force in using I&C technology on farms. They are willing to take on the responsibility of learning and using the technology. Provide rural women examples of, benefits, uses, and case studies
- Generally, women take up technology faster than men (in rural areas)
- Some rural women intend to have access to technology such as e-mail, but don't have it yet
- Ensure that I&C technology training is presented in a social, friendly and useful manner

7.115 Support
- Provide mentors to develop rural women's confidence with using I&C technology for decision-making
- Once people have accessed information and new opportunities, provide support for their next steps
- Make the technology bomb proof as repairs in rural areas are a headache

7.12 Hardware and Infrastructure Opportunities

7.121 Mobile Service
- Provide mobile services for small rural communities, for example Laverton. Particularly in towns where there is a lack of leadership or awareness affecting the demand of I&C services.
- Mobile telecentres on farmer's 'turf' – provide a modem so farmers (women and men) can experience and be shown the benefits of using the internet.
- Use laptops so they can fit into rural people's lifestyle. For example, teachers can take home and use lap tops, whereas they will not use computers at school as they are so busy during the day

7.122 Interactive Communication
- New innovations will provide greater opportunities
- Use voice recognition technology instead of typing for people who can't type or are slow typers. Also if you are shy you could talk from home.
- Communicate from home via video
- I&C technology needs to be bomb proof and not break down
- Have a group of women together and use Westlink to have your say on issues eg. Juvenile justice.

7.123 Greater Opportunities to Use I&C Technology
- In the future it is anticipated that there will be better, cheaper, faster access, better infrastructure, mobile phone use, and more access to computers
- Access telecentres to allow for video conferencing

7.13 Service Provision Opportunities

7.131 Meetings
- Have interactive meetings where people can see each other on the screen, and see each other writing
• Greater access to meetings - as participants, observers, and different types of meeting forums
• Fit in meetings in your own time - out of busy hours
• Need a good chairperson if using technology for the meeting to be effective
• Need experienced people or need to train people if you are using Netmeeting or ‘whiteboard’

7.132 Seek Information
• Rural women would use I&C technology to access women’s information, the weather, wool classes, cattle classes, and web sites
• Greater overall access to information. It’s speedy and anonymous

7.133 Greater Access
• Provide better services through I&C technology – such as shopping so that there is no waiting in cues or driving hundreds of kilometres.
• Don’t need to be in the city to access services – such as shopping or buying goods, register businesses on line
• Build bridges instead of barriers with rural communities.
• Link up with children in the city who go away to school, and also contact relatives, and friends
• Access to training and education – adult and school age
• If councils amalgamate can have telecentres perform a council service function
• Apply online for state and federal services eg social services

7.134 Tele Health
• Telehealth accelerates telecommunication’s infrastructure, and provides access to more communications and diagnosis services.

7.135 Communicate To Politicians And Ministers In State And Local Government
• via e-mail, internet, surveys, web pages (with answers and questions)
• send out agendas and minutes instead of using a courier for large areas in the country
• also use as a record of minutes

7.136 Community & Organisation’s Opportunities
• Enables and facilitates people contact
• Electronic communities have a hub of information in a critical place like the Post office. Have meetings and events posted on it. Can be accessed by residents and tourists. Need acceptance by the community otherwise a white elephant
• Virtual communities and work – can exchange information and ideas. Eg. Organise with the University – like a chat or news group
• Ways of bringing people together – particularly who have the same vision – cooperation
• Keep networks up to date with a chat line such as the 2nd World Conference for Agricultural Women
• Connect people with common interests (in doing this focus on the business of government)
• Opportunities to link community, government and industry – ie, marketing industries like the cottage one.
• If Shires go away then can see have a central hub of services and information.
7.2 **Recommended Actions:**

Consider the following ideas as projects:

- Coordinate state government Ministers and local government Councillors to develop communication with the people. Particularly focusing on rural politicians. Provide:
  - a case study;
  - the outcomes and advantages;
  - the required investment;
  - ongoing management requirements; and
  - a network of people to contact.

- This will ensure that they use and see the value in information and communication technology. Specific ideas included having web pages with answers and questions, sending agendas and minutes to councillors, and using the technology as a record of minutes.

- Instigate action to develop greater access of education and training online for school children of all ages and adult education of all levels.

- Tailor technology training and awareness to specifically include rural women. In rural communities it is the women who take on board the first steps of using I&C technology. This will ensure that family’s and rural businesses invest in I&C technology. As previously mentioned the promotion of technology is to be useful, friendly and social. Promote case studies of how this technology has been used and instigate further ideas that the rural women would pursue, such as purchasing goods and services that are not available in their rural community.