

Bridging the Gender Digital Divide in the digital transformation of Africa held at the International Conference Center Durban 17th of October 2016

The Internet remains one of the historical developments that is transforming human behavior; greatly impacting on the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of life at an incredible speed.

The potential for the internet in accelerating the achievement of the gender equality agenda cannot be underscored; The 4th world conference on women in Beijing (1995) including the subsequent reviews and other global forums such as the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) of 2003 re-affirmed the significant role of ICTs and recognized the differentiated ICT development impact on women and men in as far as influence and development is concerned.

ICTs have been recognized by researchers and policy makers as being central to promoting the empowerment of women and marginalized communities. With the infiltration of the mobile phones in Africa many women today are operating their businesses through mobile phones, accessing information on their sexual and reproductive health and advancing their careers through e-learning.

Important to note and from yesterday's discussions, ICTs are cross-cutting and interweaved in the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of society and as such it is very difficult for us to embrace an inclusive digital Africa without addressing the social, economic and cultural issues.

While the Internet has created enormous opportunities for human development it remains a double edged sword for many women and girls in Africa. This is based on the very fact that it has been built, anchored and largely governed by the patriarchal systems of domination right from its birth as the stories of internet fathers are loudly echoed amidst the whispers of internet mothers.

Patriarchy a system where men control the political economic, military, religious and social power remains very difficult for women to thrive and the ICTs is no exception. Women are constantly dealing with power which subjugates their being.

For me advancing the ICT agenda without addressing the social economic and cultural barriers to women's advancement is like powering new wine in old wineskins; the transformation of Africa requires us to pour new wine in new wineskins. If girls are going to be married off at an early age without acquiring a good education; if women are denied access to resources/inheritance, if women continue to suffer domestic violence, a gendered digital Africa will remain elusive

While there have been efforts to create an equitable and inclusive Internet by various African governments and beyond, the reality for women, let alone the African women is still blurry. The engagement of women in the leadership and decision making processes of internet governance remains minimal, both at the national and the regional level this coupled with the very nature of the structural and deep seated cultural barriers to women's advancement has meant that many women have not fully and meaningful engaged in internet governance nor gained from the opportunities it presents.

The Internet does not operate in a vacuum as perceived by many, whatever challenges women are grappling with offline have often been mirrored on line. For instance in Uganda the Score Card by the Web Foundation indicates that only 10% of Ugandan women have access to the internet.

Increasingly reports of online violence against women (cyber bullying, revenge porn, stalking, sexual harassment, manipulation of personal information images and videos) have been registered. These online threats to women's human rights and freedoms of women on line do not only bar them from freely enjoying and using the internet but also hinders access those who would like to be online are scared of being victims of violence women

The costs of the internet remain on a high end for many women who make up the largest population of the poor in Africa. For instance in Uganda the cost of 1 GB is at 3.9 USD which remains a luxury for many women who are pre-occupied with providing the basics for their families.

Recommendations

- All stakeholders are urged to deliberately undertake efforts to raise awareness on the need dismantle social cultural norms and practices that undermine women's agency and perpetuate the subordination of women. This can be done at church, in workshops, training programs etc.
- It is important that women are involved in the processes the technical, policy formulation and the ICT development discourse and internet governance forums at all levels
- Governments need to take measures to ensure that women are able to fully exercise their human rights online as well as offline for instance the cybercrime hubs in South Africa as mentioned by the Minister mentioned yesterday
- We have to take appropriate measures that bridge the gender divide as well as the rural-urban di- vide by making the internet accessible to all, including women and the rural population; providing adult education programs that enable women and men to learn

- Implement the Maputo Protocol particularly article 12 by facilitating women to acquire skills and abilities, including ICTs, that meet their specific development needs. For example provide scholarships for girls, setting up special times in internet access centres to allow women to become familiar with the internet, increasing the number of female teachers, promote advanced training opportunities for women, and taking steps to encourage their entry into the fields of scientific re- search, technology and engineering.
- Establish an enabling environment where technology-related violence against women is treat seriously the offline violence by reviewing existing legislation, engage law enforcement agents / judiciary to deal with cases of tech-related VAW
- Women are also encouraged to create sisterhood online platforms that give women the opportunity to share their stories because violence thrives in silence
- Women are urged to produce more content on our realities and document our contribution to development in various ways to ensure that we are not just consuming online content from others but also building our own continent that is relevant to our needs and realities.

Collectively, we can create an internet that meets our needs and works to empower all of us in our diversities

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