BRIDGING THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE IN AFRICA
A POLICY BRIEF FOR THE SUMMIT OF THE AFRICAN UNION
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA
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Summary

African Heads of States and Governments gather in Addis Ababa for the 14th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union at a time when the continent faces a huge digital divide. African women are disproportionately affected by this divide.

The Summit's theme *"Information and Communication Technologies in Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Development"* is therefore quite pertinent. However, deliberations on the theme without explicit focus on women's access to these technologies will overlook a critical aspect of Africa's development.

The Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition (SOAWR)[1] urges national delegations to ensure that decisions taken in this Summit do not ignore women's specific experiences to-date, and adopt specific measures to advance women's access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) going forward.

This policy brief examines the gender-differentiated impact of ICTs in Africa, and makes seventeen key recommendations to national delegations, and private and civil society organizations. SOAWR particularly calls on African governments to:

1. Enact and implement Freedom of Information laws and urgently repeal restrictive media and other laws on freedom of expression
2. Promote use of ICTs to increase awareness among women on their rights and facilitate informed decision-making. This could include initiatives that enable citizens to use SMS helplines to report human rights violations
3. Promote the use of ICTs to increase understanding, knowledge sharing and action on HIV/AIDS, and preventable diseases that cause maternal and child morbidity and mortality as a gender and human rights issue
4. Invest in research on the emerging uses of ICTs by perpetrators of violence against women and generate gender-disaggregated data to this effect
5. Support the use of ICTs in education (formal and informal) and literacy programmes so as to build ICT skills among young and adult women, and increase awareness about the opportunities for development using ICTs
6. Support girls and women to take courses at higher education levels that are relevant for employment in the ICTs sector
7. Formulate policies that encourage women to use ICTs within the household, in their businesses and also make ICTs affordable for women, for instance through reduction or removal of taxes and tariffs on ICT equipment.
8. Invest in the use of ICTs for storage and easy retrieval of data and information in institutions that are responsible for processing land titles, trading licenses, birth and death and other legal documents that affect women's rights to own, control and have access to development resources

A Global Digital Revolution Grips Africa

Over the last 20 years, a revolution has occurred in Africa in how information is generated, stored, retrieved and transmitted. Today, we can communicate, share information, and collaborate within countries and across countries in ways that were not possible a short two decades ago. The proliferation of media houses, access to mobile phones and the internet across Africa is fuelling the process of democratisation of ICTs[2].

Most countries in Africa are particularly experiencing rapid increases in the use of and access to mobile phones and the Internet. By 2008, accessibility to mobile phones and Internet had grown to 60-70 per cent and 12-15 per cent of Africa's population respectively.[3] These trends are radically changing the way that citizens communicate with each other and the way that Governments interact with their citizens.

In recognition of the significance of these developments, world leaders committed in the 2007 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), to **turn the digital divide into a digital opportunity for all**. The leaders, which included a large number of African leaders, also agreed on a set of targets for improving access to ICTs by 2015 at the latest.

As African Heads of States meet in Addis to reflect on the significance of ICTs for Africa, it is clear that ICTs offer enormous potential for transforming the lives African women and men. However, ICTs alone cannot bring about lasting change. Without responsive legislative and policy frameworks and changes in people's attitudes about their potential, ICTs will not transform Africans' lives.

Policies and Practices Constraining Women from Accessing Digital Technology

"We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors, in the information society. But, to date, women still lag behind in access and participation in the ICT sector." **–** Geneva Declaration of Principles, 2003

Seven years after world leaders made this commitment, the majority of African women continue to be excluded from access to digital technology. Forced to choose between spending resources on buying computers, subscribing to broadband or even a mobile phone on the one hand, and buying food for their families and meeting other very basic needs of survival on the other, it is clear what their choices will be.

Unequal power relations within African societies, communities and households contribute to the unequal access, participation and treatment of men and women in the global digital village. [4] High levels of poverty and illiteracy, lack of training and skills, unequal sharing of care-giving responsibilities between women and men, and irregular or non-existent power supplies act as significant barriers to access and use of ICTs. Further, Non-African languages dominate the Internet making it challenging for the majority of Africans. There is need to consistently collect gender-disaggregated data in order to assess and ascertain the actual coverage of women and girls' access to ICTs.

These challenges do not only affect women and girls today. The lack of formal training and opportunities for girls to participate in accessing and generating knowledge will

tragically ensure that the next generation of women in Africa, particularly in rural areas, is denied critical opportunities to benefit from technological innovations. [5] In so doing, the power of ICTs as great mechanisms for expanding women's knowledge and ability to negotiate for an equitable share of resources, and to facilitate their participation in democratic and governance processes, is completely undermined. [6]

The potential power of ICTs is further diluted by the popular view in the region that ICTs are commodities to be controlled, sold and bought rather than tools for development. Many countries still do not have policies, laws and regulations that support the right to information. In the countries where laws do exist, insufficient public investment has gone into increasing public access to ICTs that support broad-based sharing of technologies and knowledge, and promote respect for human rights and freedoms. Africa could take a huge leap forward by securing an affordable broadband that allows for more media-rich uses of mobile phones and internet, such as voice and video applications.

As Governments meet in Addis for regional deliberations, focus must also be brought on the lack of specific attention in public policies and legislation to protect the rights of women and girls. Attention must be directed to women and girls' increasing exposure to and exploitation in pornography on the internet, which has led many parents to limit access to computers and Internet for their children. The growing trend of using mobile phones and Short Message Service (SMS) technology to engage in sexual harassment, stalking and violence against women, must also be curbed.

These concerns must however not be used to suppress the work of human rights defenders including those promoting the rights of women. In many countries, measures taken to protect internet users from privacy violations and crime have led to violations of the fundamental freedom of expression. This freedom is guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also in the WSIS Declaration of Principles. African citizens have a responsibility to ensure that infringements on this critical and cross-cutting human right do not happen.

Opportunities for Women's Empowerment through ICTs

Information and Communication Technologies can be instruments that empower different categories of women with information and skills for political, economic and social participation, sustainable food security and livelihoods. ICTs can provide access to training and market information for women entrepreneurs, and an inexpensive and quick means of collecting communication for women's organizations. [7] Women living in democratic states cannot fully exercise their rights, including voting, without access to information. ICTs can provide a platform for engagement and deliberation in electoral processes by all citizens, and this is particularly critical in contexts where access to independent media and freedom of expression is limited. [8]

One of the most important forms of ICTs is the Short Message Service (SMS) technology on mobile phones. Here Governments can learn from initiatives by Google and Fahamu, who have provided Internet and mobile phones to communities in remote areas of Africa. The UmNyango Project managed by Fahamu distributes mobile phones to many rural communities in Africa. Women and men have used the phones to report human rights violations on a regular basis.

In Uganda, the Uganda's Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) uses the Internet to communicate critical issues by women parliamentarians to their constituents, and for constituents to input into parliamentary legal reform. In South Africa, Women's Net provides training and capacity building for policy-makers and civil society leaders to influence policy-making processes to redress gender-based inequalities in that country. For example, information is provided on how to draft proposals for parliamentary committees. Elsewhere, many women's rights organizations are using ICTs to contribute to the reduction of all forms of violence against women and girls through their prevention, urgent response and treatment initiatives.

Using ICTs to Advocate for the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa

The Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition (SOAWR) is a coalition of 36 civil society organizations across Africa campaigning for the popularization, ratification and domestication of the African Union Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. As far back as 2004, SOAWR members have widely employed an ICT-based approach in their work on the Protocol. For example, in 2004 the Coalition encouraged many African citizens to SMS their support for a petition that demanded African Governments ratify the Protocol. The SMS initiative 'Text Now 4 Women's Rights' proved quite impactful.

The Coalition also worked closely with the mass media, to broaden knowledge on the Protocol in the region, and to change attitudes towards women's human rights at the community level and among policy makers. They combined the use of radio drama programmes such as *Crossroads[9]*, which recently won the 2009 Radio for Peacebuilding Africa Awards, radio current affairs programmes, and cartoon strips, to reach a diverse audience, cutting across age, gender and socio-economic status.

Fahamu, a member of SOAWR, also publishes special issues of the Pambazuka News, an e-newsletter, during Summits of the African Union. This example of "e-advocacy" serves to highlight key issues and recommendations relevant to African women in the context of the Protocol, oftentimes around the theme of the summits

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Key Recommendations

As Africans mark the 15th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2010, as well as 10 years since States committed to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and 5 years since the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa entered into force, member states should not overlook the potential of Information and Communication Technologies to advance human rights in general, and women's rights in particular. In view of this, the following are some key recommendations to address the issues surrounding women and ICTs in Africa, many of which are consistent with the provisions of the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa:

African Governments should;

1. Enact and implement Freedom of Information laws and urgently repeal restrictive media and other laws on freedom of expression
2. Promote use of ICTs to increase awareness among women on their rights and facilitate informed decision-making. This could include initiatives that enable citizens to use SMS helplines to report human rights violations
3. Promote the use of ICTs to increase understanding, knowledge sharing and action on HIV/AIDS, and preventable diseases that cause maternal and child morbidity and mortality as a gender and human rights issue.
4. Invest in research on the emerging uses of ICTs by perpetrators of violence against women and generate gender-disaggregated data to this effect.
5. Support the use of ICTs in education (formal and informal) and literacy programmes so as to build ICT skills among young and adult learners and increase awareness about the opportunities for development using ICTs.
6. Support girls and women to take courses at higher education levels that are relevant for employment in the ICTs sector.
7. Formulate policies that encourage women to use ICTs within the household, in their businesses and also make ICTs affordable for women, for instance through reduction or removal of taxes and tariffs on ICT equipment.
8. Invest in the use of ICTs for storage and easy retrieval of data and information in institutions that are responsible for processing land titles, trading licenses, birth and death and other legal documents that affect women's rights to own, control and have access to development resources.

The African Union should;

9. Develop a comprehensive Pan African ICT policy that promotes regional integration, networking among African countries and comprehensive multi-stakeholder efforts to support poor and marginalized citizens to use ICTs effectively
10. Take more concrete steps towards the creation of an enabling ICT environment for women in Africa.
11. Regularly review ICTs indicators to assess use and contribution to the goals of poverty eradication at national, sub-regional and regional level.

The Civil Society and Private Sector should;

12. Document best practice stories on how women's participation in development processes at various levels has been enhanced by use of ICTs and how usage has improved their lives.
13. Strengthen parliamentary capacity for oversight of ICT policy and legislation
14. Partner more with the ICT industries (public and private) to support women's access to vital information, knowledge, skills, and opportunities for development.
15. Strengthen the practical and technical skills of women entrepreneurs through basic training on the Internet, e-commerce, international trade, business management and gender issues.
16. Support women's rights organizations and activists to use social networking sites, SMS interfaces and blogging for advocacy campaigns
17. Diversify the dominance of European languages by encouraging African languages on the internet

For more information:
- World Summit on Information Society Geneva Declarations http://www.itu.int/wsis/index.html
- WSIS Tunis Commitment: http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html
- Freedom of Information and Women Rights in Africa, FEMNET, 2009. www.femnet.or.ke
- Advocating for Women's Rights: Experiences from Solidarity for African Women's Rights Coalition, by Roselyn Musa and Bassey Edeme, 2008. www.soawr.org

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[1] www.soawr.org

[2] The Economic Commission for Africa 1999 report "An Overview of ICT Trends and Policy in Africa" defines ICTs as a diverse set of technological tools and resources used to communicate, and to create, disseminate, store, and manage information. ICTs include internet service provision, telecommunications equipment and services, information technology (IT) equipment and services, media and broadcasting, commercial information providers, network-based information services, and other related information and communication activities

[3] Southwood, R. Bandwidth, the Petrol of the New Global Economy in APC, Global Information Society Watch, 2008.

[4] http://www.ncc.gov.ng/ITUWorkshop/itu-arpm/women.html

[5] Dibussi Tande. "Digital Citizen Indaba 4.0": Using Digital Media to Promote Social Justice in Africa. 2009. Pambazuka News. http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/blog/58788

[6] UNIFEM's Work in ICTs; http://www.unifem.org/campaigns/wsis/unifems_work.html

[7] Harnessing ICTs for Advancement of Rural Women: FAO Perspectives and Strategic Actions By Revathi Balakrishnan. 2002

[8] Habermas, J. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1989

[9] *Crossroads* is a six episode serial radio drama exploring issues related to the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa