



# A POLICY BRIEF ON GENDER DIMENSIONS OF INTERNET RIGHTS IN GHANA



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# **Policy Brief on Gender Dimensions of Internet Rights in Ghana**

## **Executive Summary**

The rights of Ghanaian women online are linked to the rights they have offline. Misogynistic and patriarchal norms that function to exclude women's voices and curtail women's rights in offline spaces are largely reproduced in online spaces. In Ghana, women do not have equal access to power and to leadership roles. The traditional role of women as caregivers is prioritised over other roles that women play in society. Women, at all levels of society, do not enjoy access to wealth or economic freedom as compared to men. Although girls' access to quality education is increasing, poor and marginalised girls still face significant barriers to accessing quality education. This is largely due to lack of parental resources, early childhood marriages and the prioritising of boys' education. The majority of Ghanaian women work in the informal sector, such as in small-scale farming and commerce. This further limits their access to tools and services often found only in the formal sector, such as technology and the internet that can empower women in all their endeavours (Gender and Human Rights Documentation Centre, Ghana, 1998).

The internet is one of the best tools to achieve women's empowerment, gender equality and equity. However, significant barriers, especially within the Ghanaian context, severely curtail the ability of Ghanaian women to access the internet and use it effectively and safely. The barriers, which are delineated in this brief, include language, cultural and literacy barriers, and a dearth of accessible infrastructure and resources. The internet is not always a safe place for women; the silencing techniques and violence directed at women online pose a significant threat to the safety of women as well as to their ability to effectively use the internet.

This brief, in arriving at policy recommendations and actions to improve women's access to the internet and the realisation of their rights online, presents an overview of the following: (1) Internet rights issues in Ghana with a particular focus on women's rights; (2) the policy/regulatory framework for internet rights issues in Ghana; (3) women's rights online and the factors that curtail those rights; and (4) threats that Ghanaian women face in accessing the internet.

## **Overview of Internet Rights in Ghana**

The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms elaborates principles which are necessary to “uphold human and people’s rights on the internet, and cultivate an internet environment that can best meet Africa’s social and economic development needs and goals.” However, like other African countries, some of these rights are not fully realised by Ghanaian netizens. There exist barriers and challenges that severely limit the rights of women to fully access, engage, and effectively use the internet.

Access to the internet in Ghana, is gendered and privileged – more men and relatively fewer elite women access the internet at much higher rates than poorer men and the vast majority of Ghanaian women. As the UN emphasized, “the gender divide is one of the most significant inequalities to be amplified by the digital revolution, and cuts across all social and income groups. Throughout the world, women face serious challenges that are not only economic but social as well as cultural – obstacles that limit or prevent their access to, use of, and benefits from ICTs” ([http://portal.unesco.org/gender\\_issues.pdf](http://portal.unesco.org/gender_issues.pdf)).

Using the African Declaration of Internet Rights as a guide, the following critical issues curtail full internet access and use in Ghana, particularly among women:

- Limited infrastructure and access to high-speed bandwidth
- High cost of accessing the internet and associated technologies
- Threats to free speech and privacy online
- Limited access to local content online
- Barriers to the use of Ghanaian languages – where the literacy of marginalised women is limited to the reading and writing of local languages which obviously is not the language used online
- Limited ICT skills
- Few women occupying leadership roles in the internet and technology space

## **Policy and Regulatory Frameworks governing Women’s Internet rights**

Ghana’s internet space is regulated by several laws and policies. These include:

- Act 21 of The 1992 Constitution which grants freedom of press and other media; and freedom of speech, expression, thought and information.
- The National Communications Authorities Acts and Legislative Instruments
- The Ghana National Telecom Policy
- The National Gender Policy
- Internet and Communications Technology for Accelerated Development polices (ICT4AD)
- The Electronic Communications Act and its Amendments
- The Electronic Transactions Acts
- Associated policies and Acts including the SIM Card Registration policy.

## **Women’s rights online**

Women’s rights online are particularly linked to the rights to access a free, safe and open internet, the right to reducing discrimination and combating digitally-enabled violence and other pertinent factors that limit women’s ability to fully realise their rights online. The norms and practices that inform the articulation and promotion of women’s rights online

reflect those that are used offline. Specifically, gendered social structures and norms which define the Ghanaian social relationships in various communities have a direct bearing on social relationships online. Particularly, women's rights online - right to free expression, right to economic opportunity, right to bodily freedom and safety, right to holding office, right to education, etc. - are critically linked to the structural and gendered inequalities faced by women in everyday life.

A myriad of factors limit women from effective access and use of the internet. These include:

- **Lack of internet infrastructure and low bandwidth** – According to the National Communications Authority (NCA), Ghana's mobile internet penetration in 2015 was 59.7%. Like most African countries, many Ghanaian internet users access the internet on mobile devices at a much higher rate than users in developed countries. In fact many Ghanaians are adapting to the use of mobile platforms, which is recognised as the future of internet communications. However, in many rural areas in Ghana where many women live and earn a living, low bandwidth greatly hampers access to the internet. The Government of Ghana is building the Eastern Corridor Fibre Optic network in which an estimated 120 rural communities are to be given access to high speed broadband. This will hopefully improve internet access for citizens, including women, in the Eastern parts of the country.
- **Affordability** – Internet costs are high in Ghana, even for the average middle class. Internet cost, coupled with the lack of high speed infrastructure results in only 17% of Ghanaians being able to access and use the internet effectively. According to the Alliance for Affordable Internet (2012), only 2.1% of rural dwellers accessed the internet as compared to 17% of urban dwellers. Most users (over 60%) cited cost as a limiting factor. Given that Ghanaian women are disproportionately poorer than Ghanaian men (*World Bank Country Economic Memorandum (CEM) report on Ghana 2007*), the high internet charges create a barrier to internet access for many women. The cost of devices to access the internet is also a limiting factor. Since majority of women in Ghana live in rural and urban-poor areas, it is almost impossible for many of such women to afford a computer or a smart phone in addition to the already exorbitant costs of data.
- **Literacy, Education and Training** – According to a report by the Gender, Equity and rural employment division of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO 2012), although the official literacy rate in Ghana is around 65%, actual functional literacy is estimated to be much lower (around 28%). The report posits that in rural areas, where the benefit of internet access will accrue the most, only 29% of women are literate as compared to 59% of men. The country's informal sector comprises of many women who are not literate to the English language and any other proficiency apart from their local languages. Ghanaian languages are predominantly spoken in the informal sector while English is used in the formal sector. Ordinarily therefore, illiteracy is a barrier to the effective and efficient use of the internet by many women and therefore functions to disempower them. This is compounded in online spaces where English tends to be the dominant language.

According to Shrum *et al* in their book, *Past, Present & Future in Research in The Information Society* (2006), women and girls are less likely to possess the requisite skills needed to draw benefit from the internet and "are therefore likely to be excluded

from local initiatives.” The relatively low number of Ghanaian women in Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is another apparent evidence of the fact that very few women in the country are on top of technology-related issues, including the internet.

- **Socialisation of girls away from the use of science and technology** – In urban Ghanaian elite environments where the internet is available, girls still face barriers to access the internet due to the continued repression and penchant not to expose girls fully to technology. This is manifest in the toys and games that girls are socialised to use; in how girls are socialised to not fully own how comfortable they are with science and technology, and in how parents are unwilling to bear the cost of exposing girls to technology.
- **Content** – According to a 2012 Research ICT Africa *‘What is happening in ICT in Ghana’* study, internet users in Ghana cited “lack of content in Ghanaian languages” (30%) and ‘no interesting content’ (20%) as barriers to internet use. There is not much locally-relevant content on the internet particularly for Ghanaian women. This is a result of several issues including fewer Ghanaian women using and producing content; the de-prioritisation of Ghanaian women’s life experiences when narratives are told and history is written; and the exclusion of women’s voices and women’s stories in the Ghanaian narrative. Misogynistic, patriarchal norms that function to exclude women’s voices in the offline spaces are generously reproduced in online spaces.
- **Time** – Due to societal demands on women to fulfil their role as predominant care-givers, women often have fewer hours to spend on the internet compared to men. Even if they have full access to the web (in the case of elite, urban women), women typically spend that time online doing a bit of social media, email (if work functions demand it) and on electronic banking, if available. Additionally women may use the web to get updated on recipes, first aid, home care and other things related to care giving. In contrast, men usually have more hours on the internet which they often use to further their work and social lives (Pew Research Centre, 2005). Time constraints on women’s use of the internet is further restricted if they are only able to access the internet from their workplace due to limited resources (devices, budget for data etc.) at home.
- **Gender segregation in employment** – Generally, more Ghanaian women occupy workplace positions that do not require extensive use of the internet. According to the Ghana Statistical Service, an estimated 80% of Ghanaians work in the informal sector. And women make up the majority of the workers in the informal sector. This is a huge problem and a barrier to women making meaningful use of the internet. Due to limited resources at home, more workers in the formal sector are exposed to technology at work. But limiting women’s roles in the formal workplaces prevents Ghanaian women from benefitting fully from the availability of the internet in their workplace.

### **Threats Ghanaian women face in the use of the internet**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), at least 30% of all women will experience physical, emotional, sexual, or social violence in their lifetime and that most of

the threat will be perpetuated by an intimate partner. However, women face digitally-enabled violence not only from their partners but also from their friends, social media acquaintances and from perfect strangers who hide under the cloak of anonymity. The nature of the internet means that these online strangers could be Ghanaians or people living halfway across the world. The violence women face online include, but are not limited to, cyberbullying and harassment; the publication of private information for malicious intent; sexually explicit emails and SMS messages; unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances on social media sites.

In the Ghanaian social media scene, the following specific forms of violence have been expressed:

1. Intimidation, bullying and harassment, often by groups of young men, that are directed specifically at young women feminists.
2. Targeting and harassment (mostly sexual images and innuendoes) directed at female public figures and celebrities.
3. Cyber stalking
4. Death threats and rape threats directed at women and teenage girls.
5. Revenge pornography where men release nudes of their former partners. Most of these cases go unreported. A notable exception is the legal case against a man who committed revenge porn against his ex-girlfriend in Ghana ([more on the case here](#)).
6. Body shaming and slut-shaming where Ghanaian women are subjected to relentless rounds of cruel shaming based on their looks or based on their sexual lives.
7. The use of all manner of verbally violent tactics meant to effectively silence women and their stories especially the visible fight for women's rights.
8. The efforts to denigrate, silence and exclude spaces that promote and support all aspects of Ghanaian women's lives.
9. The dearth of positive support directed at women who are the subjects of digitally-enhanced violence.
10. Placing limitations on Ghanaian women's expression of their individuality and desires.

The threat women face online is particularly acute for teenage girls, who, like empowered young people everywhere, have fully taken to social media. To be a woman online is to be keenly aware of threats to one's safety and security.

### **Recommendations: Policies and Measures**

It is extremely important for all stakeholders (government, men, traditional leaders, general public, etc.) to recognise the critical role the internet and its associated technologies play and their ability to promote access to pertinent developmental services and knowledge for all, especially women. A number of recommendations have therefore been made below to help create an enabling environment that will help women to assert their rights and optimise the opportunities that the internet offers for their development.

## **Internet Infrastructure, Connectivity, Access and Costs**

- Ghana needs to improve its internet infrastructure. There is an urgent need for the deployment of mobile technology across the country especially in rural and geographically-excluded areas where many Ghanaian women are based. The National Telecommunications Policy clearly states the government's intentions of providing universal access to the internet for all communities in Ghana. However, implementation and enforcement of this vision has lagged. The government must double its efforts to meet this objective. Several measures have been announced by government to gradually improve access to higher bandwidths in a number of communities. This includes the use of the Ghana Investment Fund for Electronic Communications (GIFEC) to extend mobile telephony to eighty rural communities. Government must prioritise and fast-track such interventions to improve internet accessibility and affordability.
- Ghana needs more facilities that provide women with affordable and easy access to the internet. This could include the provision of well-resourced multimedia centres throughout the country, especially in rural communities where women live and work. A public-private- partnership involving telecom companies, public sector institutions, and civil society organisations can be a useful approach to accomplish this recommendation.
- Several groups including the Alliance for Affordable Internet have been campaigning for the reduction of internet costs in Ghana. It is recommended that the government adopts recommendations by these groups to make accessibility to the internet affordable for all, especially women. Alternatively, the government can also adopt a pricing framework that charges significantly less for internet use in rural areas to benefit the many Ghanaian women who are based in those areas.
- Interventions that provide affordable internet-enabled devices to rural female farmers should be prioritised. Such programmes can be facilitated by technology institutions and civil society organisations that work in the agriculture sector.
- ICT facilities in schools, including vocational and tertiary institutions, must be improved and upgraded. In addition, a study on the internet and related technologies should be incorporated into educational curricula at all levels.

## **Content**

There is an urgent need to develop online content that is relevant to the needs and concerns of Ghanaian women and children. Recommendations include:

- Making a conscious effort to use content platforms (e.g. Wikipedia) already available on the internet to add locally-relevant content to such platforms. Stakeholders such as Blogging Ghana, Google Ghana, tertiary institutions and the Institute of Ghanaian Languages can lead this process.
- Utilising the myriad social media platforms available to create and promote local content that further women's rights and issues online. Stakeholders include women groups and organisations working in the social media space.

- Continuous training of women's groups and organisations that work with women on how to use the internet for advocacy and effective movement building. Stakeholders include the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, NETRIGHT, ABANTU, and other women's groups.
- Increasing the use of popular Ghanaian culture and religious content to promote the use of internet by women and girls. The use of both high and low technology platforms in developing content for women such as radios, SMS platforms, pictures, videos and print materials would be useful channels for achieving this. The media, women's groups and organisations, National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) and technology institutions are key stakeholders in this process.
- Allocating more resources towards the creation of content and effective use of the internet for the differently abled. Stakeholders include: Ghana Federation of the Disabled, national and local governments, the Administrator of the District Common Fund, technology organisations and educational institutions.

### **Literacy, Training and Awareness**

- There must be well-planned and sustained awareness creation of the benefit of technology and the internet to women's advancement, women's rights and social development. Stakeholders to help push such an agenda will include the National Commission for Civic Education, organisations working in the area of technology, women's rights advocates, educational institutions and the general public.
- There is also an urgent need to improve literacy rates in the country with particular emphasis on adult literacy programmes targeted at enhancing women's knowledge on internet and computer use. This can be achieved with the support of the Ghana Education Service, Ministry of Education, educational institutions, religious institutions, Ghana Library Board and the general public.
- Girls and women should be encouraged to enter science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programmes. Several initiatives, such as robotic workshops and competitions initiated by the Ghana Robotics Academy Foundation (GRAF) throughout Ghana for Junior Secondary Schools, Senior Secondary Schools and Colleges, already expose girls to STEM. More of such programmes should be introduced particularly in rural areas to encourage more people, especially females, to acquaint themselves with technology. Stakeholders to lead in the implementation of this recommendation include CSOs advocating for more female presence in ICTs such as Women In Tech; technology organisations; Ghana Education Service; Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, parents and guardians, and the general public.

### **Combating digitally-enabled violence against women**

It is crucial that we incorporate Violence Against Women (VAW) in online spaces into policies and measures designed to combat violence against women. Specific recommendations include the following:



- The introduction of specific language and provisions in Domestic Violence Bills that recognise digitally-enabled intimate partner violence. This can be led by the Parliament of Ghana; Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection; women's rights organisations such as NETRIGHT, ABANTU, etc.
- There should be specific policies and laws designed to fight VAW in online spaces such as cyberstalking, sexual harassments, and revenge porn. Stakeholders include: The Parliament; Ministry of Children, Gender and Social Protection; women's rights organisations such as NETRIGHT, ABANTU, etc.
- Raising awareness of digitally-enabled VAW and strategies to aggressively combat them is also necessary. There should be sustained support for women's rights organisations and individual feminists working against such practices.
- The Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) of the Ghana Police Service will need to be equipped to fight all forms of digitally-enabled VAW. The Unit must be trained periodically on new and emerging forms of VAW online and how best to assist victims to get redress and deal with psychological traumas.

### **Socio-Cultural Practices**

- Cultural values and norms are to be respected, but the culture that subject women to servitude so that they have limited opportunities in accessing and using the internet and other technologies to improve their lives should not be encouraged. There is therefore a need for a paradigm shift from the status quo to a culture where women are supported in their day-to-day duties and responsibilities. This will give them the leverage to tap into the potential of the internet and other available technologies to upgrade themselves and become economically independent.