State of
Internet Freedom
in Liberia

2020

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Introduction

After long years of civil war, peace eventually returned to Liberia in the early 2000s with democratic elections conducted in the mid-2000s.[1] The country has since held successive, relatively peaceful elections[2] with what many believe to be prospects of gradual democratic consolidation. The presidential and legislative elections held in 2017, and legislative by-elections in 2018, were deemed generally free and fair by domestic and International observers.[3] The country has taken steps to strengthen its democratic systems with reviews of non-democratic laws through constitutional reforms.

This report looks at the State of Internet Freedom in Liberia and highlights and makes recommendations to duty bearers and other stakeholders to increase public awareness and respect for online rights, particularly women's rights online in Liberia. The report maps out the practices and measures adopted by state actors to restrict or enhance internet access and use, providing key examples of policy measures and actions that promote internet rights and violations. It also looks at the trends and developments around internet use in Liberia and examines the policy and regulatory landscape in the country in order to inform advocacy and policy reform on internet freedom in Liberia.

Methodology

The report is compiled with the use of desktop research to access documented incidents related to Internet Freedom in Liberia, relevant reports, international, regional, and national human rights Instruments, etc.

Country Context

Liberia is a West African country with an estimated population of about 5 million people as of 2020, according to World Bank figures.[4] Liberia is the first independent country in

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[1] Congressional Research Service Reports (28 October 2004) 'Liberia: Transition to Peace' (Online) Available https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32243.html (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[2] Congressional Research Service Reports - 2005 Post War Elections (25 May 2010) 'Liberia's Post-War Development: Key Issues and U.S. Assistance' (Online) Available https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32243.html (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[3] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour; '2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Liberia' https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/liberia/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[4] The Worldbank, (2020); 'Population, total- Liberia' https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LR (Accessed 26 October 2020)

Africa.[5] The country declared her independence in 1847. Unfortunately, Liberia has a recent past marred by two brutal civil wars which lasted for 7 years (1989-1997) and 4 years (1999-2003) respectively,[6] with attendant impact on the country's development indices.[7] The Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Liberia in the low human development category in 2019.[8] In 2011, Liberia only had 8 Internet service providers (ISPs).[9] The number has more than doubled in 2021[10]. However, Liberia had one of the lowest volumes of Internet traffic per capita in the world as at the year 2011(0.5%).[11] Despite improvement in numbers, the country still remains on the list of countries with lowest Internet penetration rate with 14.9% of Liberians having accessed the Internet as at January 2021.[12]

Policy and Regulatory Landscape

In Liberia, the government approved the Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy (2019-2024) as a successor to the Liberia ICT Policy of 2017-2021.[13] The ICT Policy recognises the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication as holding the broad mandate, having oversight on telecommunications, information technology, broadcasting infrastructure (masts and spectrum), and postal services; An independent broadcasting regulator under the Ministry of Information, Tourism and culture is responsible for Broadcasting content . The Liberia Telecommunication Authority among other things facilitates development of the telecommunications sector in order to promote social and economic development throughout Liberia, promotes affordable telecommunications access in all regions of Liberia. The ICT policy is intended to support economic development through a full integration of Information

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[5] A Boddy-Evans, (25 January 2020); 'Chronological List of African Independence' https://www.thoughtco.com/chronological-list-of-african-independence-4070467 (Accessed 26 October 2020)
[6] GK KiehJr (2010); 'International Organizations and Civil Wars in Africa: The Liberian Case'. In: Mangala J. (eds) New Security Threats and Crises in Africa. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230115538_10 (Accessed 26 October 2020)
[7] Peacebuildingdata.org; 'Impacts of War' (See para 3) http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/liberia/about-liberia/impacts-war#_ftn5 (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[9] Google (n 6 above) Fig 3, page 4.
[10] MAP > Internet Providers in Liberia 'https://isp.today/en/list-of-all-services/LIBERIA
[11] Google, (May 2011) 'Ideas for Liberia's Internet Ecosystem' https://www.google.org/docs/liberia-internet-ecosystem.pdf (Accessed 26 October 2020)
[12] Statista; 'Countries with the lowest internet penetration rate as of January 2021' https://www.statista.com/statistics/725778/countries-with-the-lowest-internet-penetration-rate/ (Accessed Janaury 30 2021)
[13] Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy (2019-2014; https://eliberia.gov.lr/wp-content/uploads/ApprovedNationalICTPolicy2019-2024Liberia-1.pdf (Accessed 26 October 2020)

Communication Technology to ensure total social inclusion for all Liberians and it covers the integration of ICT into education, health, government, agriculture among others.

In 2020, the Liberia Telecommunications Authority (LTA) invited[14] inputs from members of the public for the draft National Cybersecurity Strategy.[15] The draft document was premised on the national vision to achieve a secure and resilient cyber environment for the protection of Liberia's digital space and was developed in collaboration with diverse stakeholders. The National Cybersecurity Strategy, when passed, will see Liberia joining the group of countries with existing Cybersecurity strategies. Cybersecurity is an especially important issue in Liberia, as far back as 2016 during the Ebola crisis, internet access was crippled by DDOS attacks coordinated through a botnet.[16]

However, in 2020, the LTA under Section 11 (1) (r) of the Telecommunications Act of 2007 introduced the mandatory registration of SIM cards in the country. The policy was justified due to fears around the misuse of telecommunication services and the need to provide better security to protect citizens.[17] The exercise which has seen the National Identification Registry (NIR) Verification Platform working with Lonestar Cell MTN and Orange Liberia to verify and authenticate the identity of registered citizens began in November 2020 as a pilot phase and was billed to end on the 1st of February, 2021 for evaluation. The exercise would ensure that all citizens registered their SIM cards with their National Identity cards.[18] However, mandatory SIM card registration projects have been criticised for failing to improve security and introducing a host of legal and privacy concerns, in some cases, worsening crime.[19] Paragraph 8.5 of the regulation also provides that information contained in the SIM/RUIM card registration database of a Service

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[14] hiberia Telecommunications Authority (18 June 2020) ttps://www.lta.gov.lr/news/draft-cybersecurity-strategy-lta-for-online-inputs-2/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[15] hteria Telecommunications Authority; 'Draft Cybersecurity Strategy of the Republic of Liberia'r tps://www.lta.gov.lr/download/1937/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[16] Bloomberg (20 December 2019); 'The Hacker Who Took Down a Country' https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-12-20/spiderman-hacker-daniel-kaye-took-down-liberia-s-internet (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[17] M Malakata (05 November 2020); 'Liberia begins tough SIM card registration process' https://itweb.africa/content/JBwErvnBZ9av6Db2 (Accessed 10 November, 2020)

[18] H Karmo, Front Page International (02November 2020); 'Liberia: LTA, NIR, Lonestar MTN, Orange Liberia Launch New SIM/ RUIM Card Registration system' (Accessed 10 November, 2020) https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-lta-nir-lonestar-mtn-orange-liberia-launch-new-sim-ruim-card-registration-system/

[19] GSMA White Paper (November 2013); 'The Mandatory Registration of Prepaid SIM Card Users' https://www.gsma.com/publicpolicy/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/GSMA_White-Paper_Mandatory-Registration-of-Prepaid-SIM-Users_32pgWEBv3.pdf (Accessed 26 October 2020)

Provider may be released to the government, which is very troubling considering the fact that the country has no data protection provisions till date.[20]

Similarly, while 80% of the world has passed some form of Cybercrime legislation, and 5% have some draft Cybercrime legislation, Liberia is one of the 13% yet to do so.[21] Without a Cybercrime law, or even a draft of one, it would be incredibly difficult for the country to protect its citizens and criminalise online crimes. According to the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications however, efforts are underway to complete a review of a Cybercrime Act.[22] The Minister also announced that the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MOPT), the EU and ECOWAS have decided to set up a Cyber Crime Forensic Lab in Liberia. In the meantime, the country has set up the Liberia Cyber Crime Prevention and Mitigation Agency (LCCPMA)[23] which is situated in the Ministry of Justice. The LCCPMA was established in 2019 to provide cyber security and digital forensics education to the government and people of Liberia. It has as its mission the enhancement of the ability of public and private institutions within the Republic of Liberia to prevent and mitigate cybercrime through policies formulations, training, and awareness.

Indices of Internet Freedom in Liberia

In order to provide a snapshot of the current state of Internet Freedom in Liberia, the report looks at 5 indices for Internet Freedom in Liberia namely; access, affordability, freedom of expression online, the right to privacy online and women's rights online. The data and analysis in this section largely provide the basis for the recommendations offered at the latter part of the report.

Affordability

According to the 2020 Affordability Report[24] published by the Alliance for Affordable internet (A4AI), Liberia ranked 67th on the Affordability Drivers Index (ADI) which measures affordability primarily in telecommunications infrastructure and access to the

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[20]LTA, https://www.lta.gov.lr/download/2015/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[21] Unctad, 'Cybercrime Legislation Worldwide' https://unctad.org/page/cybercrime-legislation-worldwide Accessed (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[22] DA Yates, Daily Observer (16 July 2020); 'Gov't to Get First Cyber Crime Forensic Lab' https://www.liberianobserver.com/news/govt-to-get-first-cyber-crime-forensic-lab/

[23]LCCPMA; 'Untitled' https://lrccpma.org/about-lccpma/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[24] Alliance For Affordable Internet (2020); 'Affordability Report 2020' https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Affordability-Report-2020.pdf. (Accessed 15 December 2020)

internet, down from the 56th position in 2018[25]. The report compared a total of 72 countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Similarly, the A4AI Mobile Broadband Pricing which measures affordability as a percentage of income revealed that in Liberia, 1 gigabyte of data cost 8.7% of gni p.c. a far cry from the United Nations' 1 for 2 affordability metric[26] which defines affordable internet to cost 2% or less of monthly income for 1 gigabyte of data.

According to data provided by the World Bank, only approximately 8% of the 4,937,374 people living in Liberia[27] have used the Internet (from any location) in the last 3 months via a computer, mobile phone, personal digital assistant, games machine, digital TV etc.

Under the GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index,[28] Liberia scored 34.4 overall. For affordability, it scored 22.9, with 12% of its population being mobile internet subscribers.[29] Similarly, Internet Watch Stats reported there to be 760,994 Internet users in December 2020, accounting for 14.7% of the population in the country.[30]

Access

According to the ITU,[31] In 2019, only 0.17% of every 100 Liberians had access to fixed-telephone subscriptions. Mobile-cellular subscriptions, over all, the most common ways of accessing the internet, saw 56.57% of every 100 subscribed. The percentage of households with internet in Liberia amounted to just 2.96% of the population. However, only 0.19% of every 100 persons had access to fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions in Liberia.

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[25] Alliance for Affordable Internet (2018); '2018 Affordability Report' https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/A4AI-2018-Affordability-Report.pdf. (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[26] Alliance for Affordable Internet (23 January 2018); 'UN Broadband Commission Adopts A4AI "1 for 2" Affordability Target' https://a4ai.org/un-broadband-commission-adopts-a4ai-1-for-2-affordability-target/. Accessed 26 October 2020)

[27] The World Bank *2017); 'Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) in Liberia' https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?end=2019&locations=LR&start=1996&view=chart (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[28] GSMA (2019); 'GSMA Mobile Connectivity Index' https://www.mobileconnectivityindex.com/#year=2019&zoneIsocode=LBR (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[29] GSMA (2019); 'The Mobile Economy; West Africa' https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GSMA_MobileEconomy2020_West_Africa_ENG.pdf (Accessed 26 October 2020)

[30] Internet World Stats (2020); 'Internet Usage and Statistics' https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#lr. (Accessed 30 March 2021)

[31] ITU ICT-Eye 'ICT Infrastructure and Market Structure' https://www.itu.int/net4/itu-d/icteye#/compare (Accessed 26 October 2020)

One of the most significant barriers to internet access in Liberia is the cost of mobile phones. According to the Alliance for Affordable Internet, in a report covering 70 low and middle-income countries, the average smartphone in Liberia costs $20, a sum which is 40% of monthly GNI p.c.

Liberia took the last place at the 120th position in affordability in the 2020 Inclusive Internet Index.[32] The country was said to have the highest fixed broadband prices in the index and its mobile data prices were also among the highest with values measured as a percentage of per-capita national income.

Access, together with affordability are therefore big Issues in Liberia. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Liberia announced plans to enforce a new tariff that will further increase government revenue by implementing a mobile phone company surcharge.[33] The telecoms service provider reacted by increasing charges on voice calls and mobile data. A decision which outraged Liberians,[34] with accusing fingers pointing in different directions from government to service providers. Unfortunately, the Liberian Supreme Court upheld[35] the Telecoms surcharge in a suit filed against the regulator by one of the service providers leaving Liberians with no choice but to adjust to the new rates.

Freedom of Expression

Article 15 of the Constitution of the Republic of Liberia makes provision for freedom of expression. The Articles provide that the right to freedom of expression shall not be curtailed nor restricted by the government unless constitutionally provided for in response to emergency situations. The rights provided in this article include non-interference with the use of the mail, telephone, and telegraph. It likewise includes the right to remain silent.[36] Liberia is a state party to key international and regional human rights instruments with strong freedom expression protections e.g the International

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[32] The Inclusive Internet Index (2020); 'Affordability- Liberia'
https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/LR/?category=affordability&year=2020 (Accessed 30 December 2020)
[33] AB Ansu, R Gbatoe, Global Voices; "In Liberia, a new mobile phone tariff collides with digital rights" Available at https://globalvoices.org/2020/07/22/in-liberia-a-new-mobile-phone-tariff-collides-with-digital-rights/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)
[34] WQ Harmon: 'Liberians Outraged over Hike in Voice, Data Charges'
https://allafrica.com/stories/202010090098.html (Accessed 26 October, 2020)
[35] Abednego Davies, Daily Observer; 'Supreme Court Upholds Telecoms Price Floor Mandate'
https://www.liberianobserver.com/news/s-court-authorizes-orange-liberia-to-pay-on-net-voice-calls-data-services/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)
[36] https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Liberia_1986.pdf

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (2001),[37] African Charter (1996).[38] Notwithstanding, many violations have occurred relating to the right to freedom of expression in Liberia.

During the COVID-19 emergency, the solicitor general of Liberia, Sayma Syrenius Cephas threatened to shut down media outlets publishing or broadcasting "fake news." through social media.[39] In a move widely condemned by the human rights community, political activist, Mr. Manikpakei Dumoe, was arrested over a Facebook post. [40] [41]

In 2019, Liberia took an important step towards the freedom of expression by decriminalising speech through the enactment of the Kamara A. Kamara Act of Press Freedom.[42] The law amended the Penal law of 1978 repealing sections on criminal libel against the president, sedition and criminal malevolence. There was however a conflicting signal after the enactment of the Kamara Law, when, President of Liberia made a pronouncement to the effect of going after those who are "insulting" him on social media. [43] Also, after the Press Freedom Act was passed, critical radio station, Roots FM was forcibly shut down indefinitely,[44] casting doubts about the sincerity of the government in guaranteeing freedom of expression. It therefore probably came as no surprise when the government instituted internet shutdowns against protesters in June 2019, following the announcement of a planned protest against the George Weah-led government. The shutdown which lasted from 6am to 6pm was the first in the history of the country and cost the economy at least US$109,913.[45]

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[37] United Nations Human Rights Treaties Body; 'Ratification Status for Liberia' https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=98&Lang=EN (Accessed 25 October 2020)

[38] Ratification Table:- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; https://www.achpr.org/ratificationtable?id=49 (Accessed 25 November 2020)

[39] Reporters Without Borders (5 May 2020); 'Liberian official threatens to close media under state of emergency' https://rsf.org/en/news/liberian-official-threatens-close-media-under-state-emergency (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[40] G Senah (14 May 2020) 'Human Rights Lawyers Express Concern Over Arrest of Opposition Figure for Inflammatory Speech' https://bushchicken.com/human-rights-lawyers-express-concern-over-arrest-of-opposition-figure-for-inflammatory-speech/. (Accessed 24 October 2020

[41] Public Trust Media Group, 16 May 2020; 'Bar President, Cllr. Gongloe Criticizes Police & NSA For Arresting Liberian Political Activist' https://newspublictrust.com/bar-president-cllr-gongloe-criticizes-police-nsa-for-arresting-liberian-political-activist/ (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[42] MFWA (5 March 2019); 'MFWA Hails Repeal of Criminal Libel in Liberia, https://www.mfwa.org/mfwa-hails-repeal-of-criminal-libel-law-in-liberia/, (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[43] DA Yates. Daily Observer 06 June 2019; 'Insult the President and Be Dealt With' https://www.liberianobserver.com/news/pres-weah-insult-the-president-and-be-dealt-with/

[44] International Press Institute (16 October 2019); 'Liberia forcibly closes critical radio station' https://ipi.media/liberia-forcibly-closes-critical-radio-station/ (Accessed 20 October 2020)

[45] R Dopoe, The Observer (10 June 2019) 'Liberia: Internet Shutdown On June 7, Cost Liberia Over U.S.$100 Million' ; https://allafrica.com/stories/201906100351.html (Accessed 12 October 2020)

The Right to Privacy in Liberia

Article 16 of the Liberian Constitution of 1986[46] provides that no person shall be subjected to interference with his privacy of person, family, home or correspondence except by order of a court of competent jurisdiction. According to a 2017 draft Telecommunication regulation on Penalties,[47] unlawful interception and/or disclosure of private and confidential information and communications in contravention of the letter and intent of the Law can attract a fine between US$500 – US $1,000,000, as determined by the Liberia Telecoms Authority; including prosecution in accordance with the applicable provisions of the Penal Code and any other applicable Law of the Republic of Liberia. This however remains a draft which may not be enforced unless adopted by the LTA.

Similarly, the Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy (2019-2024)[48] has, as some of its thematic policy focus areas: Consumer Privacy, Data Protection and Child Protection, even though the country is yet to have a data protection regulation.

Indicators[49] point to the fact that for the most part, the Liberian government is not known to surveil its citizens online or breach online privacy, although it has been noted[50] that there are no data protection laws or guidelines preventing the demand of the personal data of citizens by the government from service providers. On a positive note, Liberia joined Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and launched a web-based reporting system through which Liberian citizens can report online images of a child as a means to crackdown on online child sexual abuse images and videos.[51] This is a commendable move towards the protection of the rights and safety of children online.

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[46] The Liberian Constitution and Election Laws Forum; http://www.liberianlegal.com/constitution1986.htm. (Accessed 10 October 2020)

[47] LTA, (2017); 'Draft Regulation on Penalties' https://www.lta.gov.lr/download/1556/ (Accessed 10 October 2020)

[48] Liberia ICT Policy; https://www.mfdp.gov.lr/index.php/documents-admin/ict-policies/national-ict-policy/download (Accessed 25 October 2020)

[49] United States Department of State • Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; 'Liberia 2019 Human Rights Report' https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/LIBERIA-2019-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf Accessed 25 October, 2020

[50] AFEX; Internet Freedom in Africa Report: Baseline Report of Eight Countries' https://www.africafex.org/afex/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Internet-Freedom-in-Africa-Report-2017.pdf (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[51] Internet Watch Foundation (5 February 2019); 'Liberia marks Safer Internet Day with crackdown on online child sexual abuse images and videos – supported by UK's IWF' https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/liberia-marks-safer-internet-day-crackdown-on-online-child-sexual-abuse-images-and-videos-%E2%80%93 (Accessed 20 October 2020)

Women's Rights Online

In a study which featured more than 45,800 face-to-face interviews in 34 African countries between late 2016 and late 2018, Afrobarometer reported[52] that "women were less likely than men to own mobile phones, to use them every day, to have phones with access to the Internet, to own computers, to access the Internet regularly, or to get news from the Internet or by social media."

The internet is a valuable resource for women as it opens doors to new opportunities and experiences and facilitates growth and development across many important areas. It is therefore important that women have access to internet platforms so they can actualise their dreams and purposes. However, economic realities work to ensure that women's internet needs are deprioritised to make way for other expenses and needs, disadvantaging the majority of women and cutting them off from important sources of livelihood.

The 2020 Inclusive Internet Index ranks Liberia 98th[53] among 100 countries in its gender gap in internet access index. Liberian men are 49% more likely to use the internet than women.

In periods of great danger and need such as the current COVID-19[54] pandemic and the resulting lockdown, internet access mitigates the effects of the ensuing hardships which could cut across all sectors. As past pandemics have shown, the needs of women and girls are often deprioritised to protect the health and safety of the public.[55] In this way, internet access restrictions against women could constitute human rights violations and prevent access to justice.

In addition to economic and technical dysfunctions militating against women's access online, it is important to emphasise the impact of online violence against women in the absence of women on the internet. Online violence against women which is often

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[52] AfroBarometer; 'African women have less access to the Internet than African men do. That's a problem' https://afrobarometer.org/blogs/african-women-have-less-access-internet-african-men-do-thats-problem (Accessed 30 October 2020)

[53] 'The Inclusive Internet Index' https://theinclusiveinternet.eiu.com/explore/countries/performance/availability/usage/gender-gap-in-internet-access?category=availability&highlighted=LR&year=2020 (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[54] O Johnson (26 April 2020); 'Liberia: Gender Ministry's Exempt During COVID-19 Lockdown, Increases Sex & Domestic Violence, Says Child Rights Activist' https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-gender-ministrys-exempt-during-covid-19-lockdown-increases-sex-domestic-violence-says-child-rights-activist/ (Accessed 30 October 2020)

[55] MA Onyango, The Conversation (10 May 2010) 'Sexual and gender-based violence during COVID-19: lessons from Ebola' (10 May 2020) https://theconversation.com/sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-covid-19-lessons-from-ebola-137541 (Accessed 20 October 2020)

trivialised and is also a reflection of existing offline violence, is strengthened by existing patriarchal norms and structures.[56] This violence, causes self-censorship, anxiety, shame and the departure of women from online spaces.[57]

In the same vein, internet shutdowns have been known to uniquely affect minorities such as women.[58] As the internet provides platforms for commerce, education, entertainment, health and many others that might be otherwise denied to women, internet shutdown incidents in Liberia is worrying for the wellbeing and empowerment of women due to the risk of disconnection they pose.

The sparse nature of available data is yet another roadblock to women's rights in Liberia. Data regarding sex-disaggregated mobile and internet usage gaps are incredibly hard to come about or non-existent. This lack of information makes it very difficult to determine what the right approaches to fighting online violence against women or closing the digital gender gap should be. Meanwhile, in a live documentary on Online Gender-based violence in Liberia, Sky Communications documented with video evidence the experience of women, highlighting key horrible experiences that women face while participating online.[59]

Conclusion

In comparative terms, Liberia may not be described as a hotspot for Internet Freedom violations in Africa and the rest of the world. While this is good, it appears to veiled real issues relating to Internet use and adoption in Liberia. It is unclear whether the Liberian government appreciates the need to promote access and digital inclusion in order to boost its digital economy. If we agree that access to the Internet is a right, then it will be clear to everyone that the Liberian government has failed to guarantee the right of access to the mass of its citizens including women and girls.

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[56] A Taderera. UAF-Africa; 'ICT and Violence against Women' https://www.uaf-africa.org/ict-and-violence-against-women/ (Accessed 30 December 2020)

[57] CM Maundu, UN Women (21 July 2020) ; 'Take five: Why we should take online violence against women and girls seriously during and beyond COVID-19' https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/7/take-five-cecilia-mwende-maundu-online-violence (Accessed 10 October 2020)

[58] N Hanghal (06 December 2018) 'How Internet Shutdowns Affect the Lives of Women in Manipur' https://www.genderit.org/articles/how-internet-shutdowns-affect-lives-women-manipur' (Accessed 24 October 2020)

[59] Sky Communications Liberia; COVID-19: Online Gender Based Violence https://www.facebook.com/SkyFMandTV/videos/covid-19-online-gender-based-violence/862159991283311/ (Accessed 27 December 2020)

National level advocacy developed with the nuanced realities of women and girls' participation online is therefore required to drive the messaging and campaigns towards prioritising Internet access and affordability in Liberia. This will be a multi-stakeholder duty for civil society and development partners. This report has put forward recommendations that may help to fix identified gaps and improve the state of Internet freedom in Liberia.

Recommendations

i. Like many other African countries, Liberia does not have sex disaggregated data on the access to and use of Internet services. It is pertinent for the Liberia Telecommunication Authority to partner with other relevant national and external stakeholders to commission independent research using primary data to evaluate the participation of women online in Liberia.

ii. Liberia's Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection reportedly received reports of more than 1,000 cases of sexual or gender-based violence, prompting the government to declare rape a national emergency with an outlined plan and budgetary provision towards addressing the problem in 2020.[60] It is important that such plans and responses recognise the peculiarity of online based gender violence and address alongside with the overall subject of violence against women. A plan International report[61] revealed that for girls, online harassment starts for girls from the shocking age of 8. With threats of bullying, revenge porn, stalking, body shaming and online trolling etc that are peculiar to women gaining increasing momentum since COVID-19, it is important to provide a comprehensive response that makes the online environment a safe space for women.

iii. In 2019, Liberia joined the list of African countries like Sudan and Algeria who have blocked the internet during anti-government protests. Internet Shutdowns, apart being an affront to the right to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly,
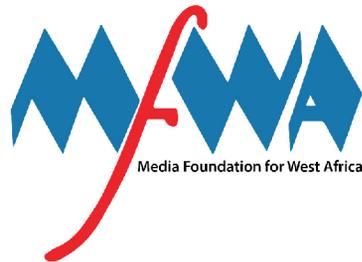
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[60] E Drachman, DAI (9 November 2020); 'Gender-Based Violence on the Rise in the COVID-19 Era' https://dai-global-developments.com/articles/gender-based-violence-on-rise-in-covid-19-era (Accessed 26 November April 2020)

[61] Plan International (2021); 'Free to be Online' https://www.plan.ie/free-to-be-online/ (Accessed 26 October 2020)

have other real life implications. The government of Liberia is urged to delete Internet Shutdown and all forms of Network disruptions from its playbook.

iv. Kamara Press Freedom Act, Liberia must walk the talk: The law decriminalising libel must be implemented and applied in a way that shows that the Liberia government no longer sanctions clampdown on freedom of expression. The government of Liberia is urged to create sensitisation towards attitudinal change for law enforcement and other state actors on the Act.

v. Launched in December 2010,[62] The Liberia National Gender Policy needs to be updated to accommodate issues of Women's Rights Online.

vi. State-sanctioned aggression towards dissents and online speech must stop. The government of Liberia must accommodate dissenting voices and opinions and must continue to promote plurality of opinions and the media.

vii. Liberia's ICT policy must identify and acknowledge gender issues, particularly the barriers that Liberian women and girls face in participating online. This needs to be built into the policy with clear actionable steps to address the issues spelt out. The ICT Policy needs to be revisited and actionable plans must be highlighted for women's rights online.

viii. Although the supreme court upheld the Telecoms Price Floor Mandate, Liberia needs to revisit the policy which obviously drove up the cost of access and by extension led to the exclusion of more Liberians in the digital space. Liberia must think of the long terms and allow for massive Internet adoption which will, in turn, yield massive returns to the government and the economy.

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[62] Women's International League For Peace and Freedom (9 December 2010); 'LIBERIA:Gender Ministry Launches National Policy' https://www.peacewomen.org/content/liberia-gender-ministry-launches-national-policy (Accessed 28 October 2020)

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