

Introduction

The pivotal role women play in the socio-cultural, economic and political development of nations have long been recognised. However, women are often disadvantaged in accessing and using national resources due to unfair and inequitable distribution practices. Sometimes, even interventions and policies that are intended to empower women are done with little or no input from women themselves. However, “Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.”¹

The internet has long been recognised as a powerful tool to achieve gender parity and break down barriers. It is a great tool that can be used by both males and females to assert their rights and to claim social, economic and political opportunities for empowerment. It is, therefore, one of the best tools to achieve women’s empowerment, gender equality and equity – whether in the fields of business, education, healthcare, banking and finance or politics.

Unfortunately, practically all the factors that work to exclude women and perpetuate gender inequality offline are also being experienced online, and this is facilitating digital gender gap in the access and use of the internet in many countries; and Ghana is not an exception.

This paper, thus, seeks to briefly look at women’s access and use of the internet in Ghana. Specifically, it looks at how policy, practices and inhibiting factors are impacting women’s rights in the country. It concludes by making recommendations to government, industry players and civil society on ways to deal with challenging issues in accessing and using the internet so more women can take advantage of its potential to assert their rights online – right to free expression, right to economic opportunity, right to bodily freedom and safety, right to holding office, right to education, etc.

The Ghana Context

Ghana has made some strides in women’s empowerment. More women are increasingly participating in public discourse and governance processes; although at a gradual pace. However, gender equality and equity continue to be a major drawback as the masses of women in the country still face significant barriers to accessing empowering tools and resources compared to their male counterparts.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/GenderDigital/DueDiligenceProject.pdf>

The internet remains one of the great tools to achieve gender equality and equity. It offers limitless opportunities to all (both males and females) in all fields. Access and use of the internet could, therefore, afford women the opportunity to do business, access education and healthcare, contribute to national discourse and governance processes, among others, to improve their livelihoods. However, a number of factors curtail the ability of women to access and use the internet effectively and safely.

Research shows that globally men are 21% more likely to be online than women; and in least developed countries, it could rise to 52% likelihood of men being online than women. Data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) indicate that the proportion of women using the Internet globally is 48%, compared to 58% of men; with a relative internet user gender gap of 17%.

A 2019 Afrobarometer report² indicates that women are less likely than men to “own a mobile phone, to use it every day, to have a mobile phone with access to the Internet, to own a computer, to access the Internet regularly, and to get their news from the Internet or social media.” Thus, females do not have as much access and use of the internet compared to males.

Internet penetration in Ghana keeps rising – from 48% in January 2020 to 50% in January 2021. There has been a notable progress in closing the gender gap as well. According to a 2020 Web Foundation report,³– the gender gap in internet access was 5.8% in January 2021 with 29% of women being online compared to 20% in 2016. Despite the progress made, more needs to be done to sustain the gains and further close the gap by mitigating all restraining factors.

Regulatory environment

Ghana’s internet environment is generally free with relatively no restrictions to accessing and using the internet. Frameworks such as the Data Protection Act 2012 and the Cybersecurity Act 2020, for example, have provisions that are intended to safeguard the security of all users, including women, in cyber spaces.

To help create an enabling environment for women to participate in the digital space, the country has put in place some policies and strategies to promote and empower women to use ICTs, including the internet. The policies include the National Gender Policy, the ICT in Education Policy, National Communications Policy and the Gender and Agricultural Development Strategy. Some of the policies outline interventions that are intended to help enroll more women to use ICTs to improve

²https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_policypaperno61_gains_and_gaps_gender_perceptions_in_africa.pdf

³ <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/10/Womens-Rights-Online-Report-1.pdf>

all aspects of their lives. Some women have benefited from some of these policy interventions, but majority of women have not.

Unfortunately, most of the policies do not have gender-disaggregated data to facilitate monitoring and evaluation to inform future planning and interventions. Also, a number of the policies do not have sources of funding for their effective implementation – which could partly explain why more women have not benefited from the interventions from government.

Factors limiting Women’s Access and Use of the Internet

Despite the rise in internet penetration in Ghana, the relatively free regulatory environment and policy interventions, the digital gender gap remains. This is largely due to a number of factors, including unreliable internet service, high cost of data, lack of digital skills, online safety and security challenges, among others.

Unreliable internet service: Unreliable internet service remains one of the key issues cited by women, as a challenge for being online. In research findings by both the Media Foundation for West Africa⁴, and the Web Foundation⁵, unreliable internet access was highlighted by female respondents as one of the factors keeping them offline. A female respondent from the Media Foundation’s study for instance reported, “... sometimes you try to load pages and they keep bouncing, it doesn’t load and this makes it frustrating for getting information or whatever you want to use the internet for.” The situation is worse in rural areas where infrastructure is not well developed and the service is so unreliable or completely unavailable.

High cost of data: Cost is another hurdle preventing women from being online. Cost is cited as either preventing women from accessing or using the internet and the frequency with which they go online. For females who can afford, the cost of data limits the frequency with which they go online and the length of time they spend online to get the information they want. But for those who cannot afford, the cost is the first barrier to accessing the internet. With many women living in rural areas and falling below the poverty line, striving to fend for themselves and their families will always be prioritised over accessing the internet even if they appreciate that the internet is a gateway to endless opportunities.

Lack of digital skills: Digital know-how is another challenge pushing a lot of women in the country away from using the internet. A lot of women lack the skill and know-how to navigate or browse the internet to get the information they need. Some of the respondents in the Media Foundation Study, for instance, indicated that although they had internet access, they did not know how to use the internet-based

⁴ <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Baseline-Report-WRO-Issues-in-Ghana.pdf>

⁵ <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/10/Womens-Rights-Online-Report-1.pdf>

applications on their own phones. The situation is even worse for females living in rural areas. Unfortunately, lack of digital skills sometimes forces some women to give their devices to unsuspecting fraudsters to visit a page or transact some business for them only to be defrauded at the end of the process. Elderly Ghanaian women, in particular, are fond of giving their mobile phones and PINs to mobile money agents or young men to check their balances or to confirm for them if some money promised to be sent to them via mobile money has come through.

In one unfortunate incident, an elderly woman received a call from her daughter that she had sent her an amount of money. She then gave her phone and PIN to a young man in her neighbourhood who often checks on her SMS messages for her. The young man took the phone and the PIN and went to a mobile money vendor. He returned in some few minutes to inform the woman there was no money on her account. Because the woman could not use her own PIN to check her phone and the balance on it herself, she believed the report of the young man only to find out later from her daughter that her (daughter) checks with the telecom operator showed that the money had indeed been transferred and cashed out.

Such bad experiences reinforce skepticisms some women have about going online which keep them offline and dissuade others from going online.

Online safety and security challenges: Activities of criminals in the online space remain one of the major challenges pushing some females away from accessing and using the internet. Research shows that women are often more concerned about their privacy than men (Web Foundation report⁶). The apprehension about personal data misuse, online harassment, abuse and issues of non-consensual distribution of videos and pictures, thus, keep a number of women offline. Unfortunately, many of the people who perpetrate such crimes are sometimes people close to the victim, such as partners or ex-partners; colleagues and schoolmates. They could also be political opponents, and sometimes, anonymous individuals.

The impact of these barriers and others on women's participation in online spaces is enormous. Beyond the fact that they have implications for women's access and use of the internet, it also affects how well they are able to use the internet and online platforms, the frequency and the duration of their online activities.

In the case of online fraud, harassment and abuse, those who experience or witness such unfortunate incidents are often left with emotional and psychological distress and health problems related to anxiety, depression, anger, post-traumatic stress, hypervigilance and concerns about physical safety. This sometimes makes them resolve not to get into online spaces again, and even go a step further to dissuade others from doing so. For those who stay on, they most often self-censor – for

⁶ <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/10/Womens-Rights-Online-Report-1.pdf>

example, a trainee at a women's rights online training shared her experience that even though she often wants to do advocacy about a number of issues on her social media pages, she has not been able to do so because of the fear of attacks and trolls her posts might elicit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The internet offers opportunities for both men and women. Unfortunately, more women are not connected, and thus, not benefiting from the potential of the internet because of some policy shortfalls, unreliable service, expensive data, limited digital knowledge and online safety challenges among others.

A number of interventions are, thus, needed to address the barriers that limit women's full access and use of the internet and other ICTs to assert their rights, advance themselves and contribute to public discourse and governance processes. This calls for concerted efforts by all relevant stakeholders ensure that women are empowered to access and use the internet when and how they want to. In this regard, the following recommendations are made to government, industry players, civil society and the media.

Government

It is commendable that the Government of Ghana (GoG) has some policies with provisions on empowering women for the uptake of ICTs, including the internet. These provisions will, however, not be effective if adequate funding is not made available for the implementation of the strategies outlined in the policy documents. Again, gender-disaggregated data is crucial to help harvest successes, challenges and lessons from the implementation of those policies. It is, therefore, recommended that GoG commits dedicated funds to effectively implement the strategies in the policy so that more women can benefit from those interventions. Also, GoG, through the relevant policy-making ministries should update the policies with gender-disaggregated data to facilitate monitoring and evaluation. Government should also liaise with industry players to implement pro-poor policies and expand infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that rural people, majority of whom are women, can get reliable connectivity. Funding should also be made available for education and sensitisation.

Industry Players

Telecommunications operators and internet service providers are encouraged to invest more in reliable infrastructure to help expand reliable connectivity to all, including women in rural settings. They are also encouraged to bring down the cost of data to enable more people to get connected. More people getting connected invariably will improve their bottom line anyway.

Civil Society Organisations

There is need for increased advocacy on women's rights online issues to ensure that there is equitable access and use of the internet and ICT tools. The crucial role of civil society organisations (CSOs) cannot be overemphasized. Unfortunately, there are only a few CSOs that are engaging on women online issues in the country. Even though there are a lot of women's groups and organisations, their focus has generally been on offline women's rights issues. It is, thus, recommended that women's groups and organisations should equally focus on online rights issues of women. Women's rights online should be mainstreamed in their activities to help in sensitising women about online-related issues that equally impact their rights and overall wellbeing.

Media

The media are very critical in advocacy and sensitisation. The media are, therefore, encouraged to help in educating more women about the opportunities online as well as the nefarious activities that could make them vulnerable. This will help in empowering women to confidently engage online while taking their safety and security seriously. The media are also encouraged to discuss the barriers that hinder women from accessing and using the internet and engage relevant stakeholders in public discourse to exert some pressure on them to introduce and implement interventions that can address the challenges identified.



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