

Contextual Background

Liberia is a relatively small country with a population of 5.058 million people and a female population of approximately 2.52 million. This translates to women making up 49.8% of the country's population. Despite this, the reality of women in the country has been one of inequality, violence, and subjugation.

Gender-specific issues including female literacy rate, employment levels, proportion of women in leadership positions and online spaces, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevalence are all exhibitors of the gender inequality faced in the country.

Data from the World Bank (2021) indicate that amongst the Liberian female youth (ages between 15-24), only 45.639% are literate compared to 64.957% of their male counterparts. Additional data from UN Women show that women and girls aged 15+ spend 6.7% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 2.6% spent by men. Also, 47.3% of employed women live below the poverty line, compared to 43.1% of men (UN Women, n.d.). External research from the International Labour Office, Geneva, points out that young females have a harder time finding employment in Liberia than young males. There is a gap of 13 percentage points between the unemployment rates of young women (41.3%) and young men (28.3%). Secondly, young men who have completed their transition to the labour market have a significantly higher likelihood to attain stable employment than young women (81.2% and 18.8%, respectively) (de Mel et al., 2013).

All of the above data serve to prove that women and girls have faced these gender issues in offline spaces for as long as the Liberian society has existed. The question now is, have these issues translated into online spaces considering the spread of Information and Communications Technology (ICT)? This paper attempts to answer this question.

Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, desktop research was conducted. The desktop research was complemented with a short online survey to gather on-the-ground information data to provide insight into factors (positive or negative) that impact women's access and use of the internet in Liberia. A total of 78 persons, 42 females, and 36 males responded to the online survey.

Gendered Access and Use of the Internet in Liberia

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) states that despite the benefits and empowering potential of the Internet and ICT, women and girls across the world have increasingly voiced their concern about harmful, sexist, misogynistic, and violent content and behaviour online. The Internet is being used in a broader environment of widespread and systemic structural discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls, which frame their access to and use of the Internet and other ICTs.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted the resolution "Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts" (Šimonović, 2018). The resolution enumerates harassment, bullying, threats of

sexual and gender-based violence, the hacking of digital accounts, mobile telephones and other electronic devices, etc., as forms of discrimination and violence faced by women online. The resolution also calls on businesses to implement the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, protect the private data of women and girls, create transparent and effective processes for reporting violence, and develop policies that meaningfully protect women and girls from violence in digital contexts (Mahmutović, 2022).

In Europe, it has been estimated that 23% of women have reported having experienced online harassment at least once in their life (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015). The situation appears worse in Liberia. Findings from the online survey conducted among some Liberians for purposes of this paper show that indeed females in Liberia experience sexual and gender-based violence online. More than half (66.7%) of the female respondents stated that they had experienced some form of online harassment before with some specifying that they had been threatened to have their nudes posted on the internet. Some also reported that their social media accounts had been hacked before.

The Liberian National ICT Policy penned in 2019 indicates that women are 50% less likely to be online than men, and this digital gender divide looks to be getting worse with time. This divide is impacting how women use and appropriate digital technologies (Government of Liberia, 2019). The factors accounting for the divide extend beyond access (affordability of data cost and requisite devices) to other barriers to women's access and use of the web including online harassment as detailed above, lack of digital literacy, as well as norms and attitudes that serve as cultural barriers to the uptake of the internet by women and girls in communities. The disparity between males and females in the areas of literacy and employment (as presented by the World Bank and the external research of the International Labour Office respectively) show that indeed more Liberian women are disadvantaged financially in accessing (affording the cost of devices and data) and using the internet and its services compared to their male counterparts.

Indeed, results from the online survey conducted showed that almost all the respondents had not had any form of digital literacy training, with the exception of a few others (5%) who reported that they had received digital literacy training from a non-profit organisation, Centre for Media and Peacebuilding (CEMESP), the country partner of Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA).

As a result of lack of digital literacy, almost all the victims of online harassment, for instance, indicated they did not report any of the incidents to anyone – police nor social media platforms. The reason cited was that they didn't know the procedure to do so and/or they thought the law would not help in such incidents. One respondent stated, "I realized that this is Liberia and using the right channel is always impossible."

The survey also found that the female respondents did not include professional development applications as part of the applications they use on the internet contrary to what the males reported. Also, whereas 97.1% of the male respondents stated that they had used the internet to search for jobs, only 73.8% of female respondents stated same – with a worrying 23% gap between them. This finding corroborates a 2015 research done by the Web Foundation which stated that women are 25% less likely to use the internet for job-seeking than men. Again, when asked how frequently they searched for professional development/education opportunities online, 100% of male respondents said either monthly or weekly but only 73.8% of females said same.

Another hurdle women and girls face in accessing online spaces in Liberia is societal norms and attitudes or cultural barriers. More than half (71.4%) of female respondents indicated that they have been/felt judged by members of society on how and how much they use the internet.

Existing Policies and Plans

The Liberian government has put in place some policies and plans intended to address some of the issues raised. The National Gender Policy was developed to fight and eliminate all gender-related challenges. The main goal is to form a fair society where girls and boys along with women and men enjoy their human rights equally on a basis of non-discrimination (Let Girls Lead, 2012).

In response to rising use of ICTs in Liberia, the development of an ICT policy began in 2016 and was finalised for an implementation period of 2019-2024. Some of the policy's goals, especially those related to women's use of ICTs are cited below with a brief discussion of their current status:

- **Mainstreaming Gender and Women in ICT**

Policy objective: Consider allocating a percentage of the resources available to support women-centered activities, including resources to promote and support women ICT entrepreneurs, digital literacy training for women and girls, and targeted public access and other projects to support access and use for women and girls. A target of this policy was for the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection to create a National Plan to improve gender equity in access and use by year 2, which is 2021.

The lack of digital literacy training amongst Liberians is hindering the population's ability (especially that of women) to fully utilize ICTs for their personal and professional growth. As a result, there are very few women ICT entrepreneurs in the country. Fortunately, some non-profit organizations are trying to fill the void by providing digital literacy training in different communities, with some specifically geared towards empowering females in digital literacy. The Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP), in collaboration with Media Foundation for West Africa, recently conducted training for female bloggers and journalists on 'Women's Rights Online Issues' in Liberia (FrontPage Africa, September 2021). The aim was to address what is seen as a wide gender gap in terms of access, affordability, and utilization of digital platforms in Liberia as more people continue to move to online spaces in Liberia.

With regard to steps taken by government to implement this policy objective, it appears not much has been done. At Liberia's 2021 celebration of the International Day of the Girl Child, the Minister of Gender, Madam Williametta Saydee-Tarr, simply said that "in order to bridge the digital gap, governments should begin to provide opportunities for girls to acquire education in the digital sector by supporting programs in schools...the conversations being held will be elevated to the level of Cabinet, so as to ensure that the government increases the level of support to the digital sector. She also used the occasion to call on partners to make the digital revolution possible (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2021).

Unfortunately, even though year 2 (2021) of the Liberian ICT policy has passed, there is practically no information about the existence of the National Plan which is also intended to improve gender equity in access and use of ICTs. The Minister of Gender's statements at

Liberia's 2021 celebration of the International Day of the Girl Child, however, did not in any way make mention of the status of the aforementioned National Plan.

- **Information Safety and Cyber-Security**

Policy objective: *Secure the rights and privacy of consumers online. A target of this policy is for the Ministries of Posts and Telecommunications, National Defense, and the Liberia Telecommunications Authority to draft a Cyber-Security Policy and adopt Cyber-Security Legislation by year 2 and year 3, respectively, i.e. 2021 and 2022.*

References have been made to the existence of a Cyber Security Act in Liberia. The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, for instance, published in 2021 that the draft of Liberia's Cyber-Security policy was initiated in 2020. In 2021, the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications indicated that their "administration was able to successfully conclude its Cyber security Act of 2021 and it is ready for onward presentation to the Executive Mansion who is to later submit it to the legislators for enactment into law" (FrontPage Africa, April 2021). However, the Cyber-Security Policy itself has not been sighted to know how well issues of privacy and consumer rights are catered for.

However, the Liberia Cyber Crime Prevention and Mitigation Agency (LCCPMA) which was established in 2019 provides cyber security and digital forensics education to the government and the people of Liberia. Its mission is to enhance the ability of public and private institutions within Liberia to prevent and mitigate cybercrime through policy formulation, training, and awareness creation (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2021). The impact of the work of the Agency in improving the cyberspace for all, especially women, is however, yet to be known.

- **Universal Access and Service**

Policy Objective: *Secure Affordable and Universal Access to both voice and broadband services for all citizens, with special attention to vulnerable and disadvantaged populations such as women, rural dwellers, those with disabilities, and the poor. A target of this policy is to achieve a "1 for 2" target for mobile broadband affordability (i.e. 1 GB of a standard mobile data package should not cost more than 2% of average monthly income. Currently, 1GB costs \$2 USD in Liberia).*

According to research done by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), of the income earning population in Liberia, the people who earn higher on the spectrum spend 8% of their monthly earnings to buy 1 GB of data while those on the lower end of the earning spectrum spend 47.56% of their monthly income to buy 1 GB of data – far above the 2% target (Sarpong & Olutola, 2020).

In direct regression to this policy goal, the last two years have seen an increase in the cost of data (current price is \$2 USD for 1GB), which according to the Telecommunication companies, is a result of the increase in surcharges from government. Furthermore, Telecommunication companies have threatened to pull out of the market due to challenging investment policies. Should this happen, it would lead to Liberia having a monopoly where consumers have little choice and increased costs to connect (Sarpong & Olutola, 2020). The high data cost is seriously affecting Liberian women's access and use of the internet because they are financially disadvantaged.

Aside from the above policy objectives from the Liberian ICT Policy, another action taken to promote online safety in Liberia was the launch of an Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) Reporting Portal in 2019. The portal allows for any person in Liberia who stumbles across suspected images of child sexual abuse online to send the URL (web address) anonymously to the IWF in Cambridge where the images will be assessed and removal work triggered. The portal is the result of a partnership between the Internet Watch Foundation, the Liberian government, Liberia's Defence for Children International, and GSM service provider, Orange Liberia (Aroca, 2019).

Conclusion

The results from the desktop research and online survey conducted have shown that the issues faced by women in offline spaces have translated online. The types of online violence that women and girls are experiencing are not new, they have simply taken on digital connotations. Women and girls in Liberia experience sexual and gender-based violence online as it is offline and this impacts their use of the internet. Also, they are unable to afford access to online spaces as their male counterparts because they do not have financial independence. Some of them have also had their accounts hacked while others feel they are judged by society for their online activities. Unfortunately, among the few female respondents who are able to access and use the internet, none reported taking advantage of the internet platform to explore professional and educational opportunities as their male counterparts.

While some policies by government and interventions by other stakeholders have contributed to improving the online space for women, the gaps in the implementation of some of the government's policies in particular have not made the gains significant, and therefore, Liberian females are still unable to afford and use the internet safely.

Recommendations

To improve the prevailing internet environment for more Liberian females to benefit from the online space, more needs to be done by the various stakeholders in the ecosystem – government, private sector, civil society and the general public. Below are some recommendations on how the different stakeholders can help improve the situation for more Liberian women to access and use the internet to assert their rights to free speech, education, health, economic empowerment and overall development.

Government of Liberia and Private Sector Non-profits

- Analysis of the Liberian ICT policy meant to be implemented between 2019 – 2024 show that the implementation of the policy is far behind its stipulated timeline. Government should, therefore, prioritize the proposed interventions in the policy to create a more favourable online environment for women.

The ICT policy will receive a mid-term review at year 3, i.e. 2022, and a long-term review at year 5 in order to provide opportunities for adjustment and refining based on new challenges, opportunities, and resources (Government of Liberia, 2019). Government should take advantage of the review to have a multistakeholder engagement which will feed into the update

of the policy and rope more stakeholders into its implementation. This will help in fast-tracking the achievement of the policy targets which will positively impact the internet ecosystem of the country to the benefit of all, especially women.

- The government and state security agencies should come up with a reporting portal for online violence/harassment. This portal should allow for people to anonymously report various forms of harassment for relevant institutions to take up the reports and act on them and bring redress. Such a portal will provide women the agency to resort to remedial action when they are violated online.
- The government, through the judiciary, should create clear legal recourse and aid in pursuing action(s) against online violence. Law enforcement agencies and the judiciary must also be trained on how to handle online abuses; they should be taught to prioritize it just as they would offline abuse.
- Digital literacy is key in addressing and managing a number of the challenges raised in this paper. Once people become knowledgeable about the online space, acceptable behaviours online, what constitutes online abuse or violation and the procedures for reporting and getting justice, the factors mitigating women's access and use of the internet will go down drastically. Government, industry players, civil society and the media must collaborate on this to create more awareness and sensitisation about the issues.
- Government, industry players, civil society should also work together to offer training workshops for women to educate them on the availability of professional and educational opportunities online as well as how to access and benefit from them. The online survey results show that women are 23% less likely to use the internet for job-seeking than men and 27% less likely than men to search for professional/educational development opportunities periodically.
- Telecommunication companies must collaborate with government and invest more in the sector to improve connectivity, reduce data charges and improve service delivery generally.

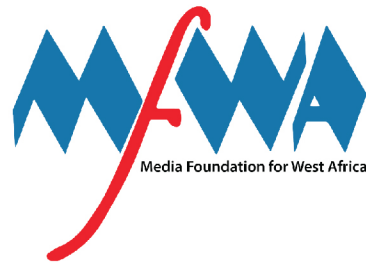
Academia

- Widespread research on internet usage in Liberia disaggregated by gender needs to be conducted by people in academia. Such research should cover the entire country and provide valuable comprehensive data on the challenges surrounding how women access the internet and the impact it has on them and their rights.

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