Annual State of Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone 2022

Women in especially the rural communities of Sierra Leone face many obstacles from economic, social, and political empowerment and participation in governance processes. These obstacles are compounded by limited access to resources, restrictions in access to decision-making, high illiteracy, poverty, and insecure economic and property rights. It therefore goes without saying, that women's ability and economic potentials are not always fully realized across the country because women are often prevented from participating in social, public live issues, digital space, and other spheres of life to the same extent as men do.

Though women make up more than half of the country's population, their power to influence decisions, even those decisions that affect them directly, is very marginal. Meanwhile, after many years of work, advocacy, and lobbying, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Bill has finally been enacted by the House of Parliament for further discussions and possible passage into Law. It is a milestone

achievement, though there are still challenges ahead, especially with the growing trend in the use of the internet.

The advent of the internet and by extension the new media was regarded by many as a breakthrough for long-standing barriers that have held marginalised segments of societies including women aback from utilising their potential as rightful members of society. Without censorship or owners' control and restrictions and fear, everyone with access can freely make public his or her concerns on national issues and also use the available spaces to market their ideas, goods, and services at a minimal cost and time. However, its accompanying challenges have further made especially women and girls vulnerable once again.

According to [data by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)](i), the proportion of women using the internet globally is 48%, compared to 58% of men. In relative terms, the global internet user gender gap is 17%. The global gap in access to the Internet by the sexes has increased due to the rapid growth in the number of male internet users in developing countries. In all regions of the world, more men than women are using the internet.

In Sierra Leone, data presented by the Ministry of Information and Communications shows there are **2.39 million (29.7%)** internet users in 2021 compared to 370,000K **(6.0%)** in 2017 **(growth rate +20%).** The year 2021 recorded 850,000 **(10.3%)** active social media users as compared to 370,000 **(6.0%)** in 2017 **(growth rate +21%).**

The Context of Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, barriers such as coverage, access, poverty, and high illiteracy rate have impeded women's rights to explore the opportunities that the use of the internet has to offer. Many do not understand how to use and engage safely online, the situation compounded by lack of confidence and trust in online platforms over privacy and data protection; sexual harassment, cyberbullying, surveillance and privacy breaches, and the unauthorized use and manipulation of personal information, including images and videos, which gravely affect the well-being of women and their ability to fulfil their digital potentials both offline and online.

Cyberbullying is a form of harassment or intimidation using electronic means through digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullying can occur through SMS, text, apps, or online social media forums where people can view, and participate in creating and sharing content.[ii]

Cyberbullying and other cybercrime-related issues have become predominant in Sierra Leone recently. Both men and women fall victims, however, women in both public and private life having fallen victim to such abuse online.

There have been some incidents of non-consensual sharing of intimate photos and videos on all major social media sites. The women on the videos are shamed, mocked, verbally abused, and degraded on social media. Some women are body-shamed because of their body size and facial features.

Policy and Regulatory Environment

The Africa Regulatory Watch Index (ARWI) (World Bank 2019) ranks Sierra Leone as the lowest of the 15 ECOWAS countries in terms of broadband usage. The major factors contributing to this low score according to the report are outdated licensing regime and restrictive license regime, which, imposes lengthy processes on telecommunication companies seeking to enter the market), non-compliance with a regional framework (license requirement for the extensive design of telecom operator activity), and absence of transparency and to a large extent,

In addition to those challenges, the report also notes that there is inconsistent power supply, among others.

The Universal Access Development Fund (UADF) is operational but has very limited financial and human resources and is unlikely to be able to close the access gap without some external technical and financial assistance.

The 2019 Affordability Index developed by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), ranked Sierra Leone 57 out of a total of 61 countries.

The affordability of broadband internet is often measured and compared by broadband service price as a percentage of gross national income (GNI) per capita. Two types of prices were compared: handset device-based usage (500MB) as well as a computer-based 1GB plan.

The report noted that the prices for a handset-based 500MB package as compared with a computer-based 1GB package, do not meet the A4AI's '1 for 2' policy which, is, 1GB for no more than 2 percent of monthly average income, affordability threshold.

Out of the 94 countries surveyed by the A4AI, the broadband price in Sierra Leone was in the lowest 20th percentile in the ranking. Sierra Leone ranked 77 (with a score of 4.9 percent) for the handset-based internet package and 83 (with a score of 9.9 percent) for the computer-based internet package.

Sierra Leone Cable Limited (SALCAB)'s monopoly and inefficient operations are said to be a major bottleneck for reliable and affordable broadband internet access in Sierra Leone.

Also, there is no cohesive approach toward data policy and no coordination among Ministries Departments and Agencies. Secure exchange of data for example requires a robust Public Key Infrastructure (PKI), or equivalent, using block chain, that[iii] allows online transactions to be conducted in a secured manner. Sierra Leone currently has no PKI in place. The Government of Sierra Leone has expressed interest in immediate assistance to promote internet safety and trust in online transactions.

One of the key challenges to stimulating demand for the internet is the relatively high taxes on mobile phone services. The combined impact of increasing high surtax on incoming international traffic, and import duties on network equipment and phone devices increase the cost of service to customers and decrease investments in underserved areas.

Article 22 of the Constitution grants individuals a right to privacy, including with respect to a person's electronic communications. This has been difficult to achieve over the years but for the enactment of the 2021 Cyber Security and Crime Act which regulates the cyberspace altogether. However, the Act does not make any specific provision in relation to the protection of women's rights online. The penalties in the Act are heavy serving as a deterrent against cybercrime. The fines range from NLE 30,000 (about US$ 2,120) or an imprisonment of two years to NLE 50 (about US$ 2,600). The document does not survive the three-part test under Article 19 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

According to the GSMA Mobile Economy 2019 report, half of the African population will subscribe to mobile services by 2025. Sierra Leone has a mobile penetration of approximately 50% with a 24% mobile internet subscription rate (GSMA 2019). More than half of Sierra Leone's population live in rural areas and a similar proportion actively participate in the informal economy.

The Data Protection Bill has also been tabled before parliament for enactment. The Bill is part of safe guard measures promised in the Cyber Security and Crime Act meant to protect certain information. When passed, the Bill will ensure the protection of personal data in Sierra Leone among others.

Factors Limiting Women's access to the internet

A survey report published in June of 2021 by the Institute for Governance Reform in Sierra Leone titled Civic (Digital rights) in COVID-19, revealed the gender gap in

access to mobile phones and social media use to be 54% male and 46% for women. The factors highlighted below cannot ben unconnected to the ever-growing gap between male and female internet users in Sierra Leone.

a) **Online Safety/Security Concerns**

Many elite women have found it very challenging to enjoy the privileges that social media and the internet offer because they have doubts that their privacy would be guaranteed and protected on online platforms. This is mainly due to the many acts of abuse perpetrated against women online such as cyber-stalking, surveillance and privacy breaches, sexual harassment, and the unauthorized use and manipulation of personal information, including images and videos.

b) **Limited Digital Skills/ Know-how**

Limited knowledge and skills in Information Communication Technology (ICT) remain a serious concern for even those with access to smartphones. Operating a smartphone requires a basic understanding of its functions which is lacking in many due to the level of illiteracy. Many women are therefore unable to fully utilise the internet and social media platforms and benefit from its potential.

 c) **High cost of ICT access:**

Limited purchasing power and financial dependence of women relative to men remains a challenge in Sierra Leone. Many women cannot afford the cost of computers and smartphones that can allow them access to the internet. Even women who have smartphones, especially women in rural areas of Sierra Leone, have been challenged by the high cost of buying data to access social media and the internet at large[iv]. There are others who are able to access the internet but due to the cost of data, the frequency with which the use the internet is limited. Thus, there is no meaningful connectivity.

d) **Cyberbullying:**

Cyberbullying is very common in Sierra Leone. Many women continue to face harassment on online platforms. Women in public office are sometimes bullied online. This issue continues to be of serious concern preventing many women from participating in online platforms such as Facebook.

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.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The internet and by extension social media offer an opportunity for women to assert and enjoy their rights. It is also a barrier breaker for women and other marginalised groups of society. The challenges women face in accessing and using the internet coSntinues to prevent many from fully benefitting from the internet's potential.

It is therefore important to put some interventions in place to address the challenges women face in accessing and using the internet.

A number of recommendations are thus, made to some stakeholders in this regard:

The Government

The enactment of the Cyber Security and Crime Act after many calls is a huge gain by the government in ensuring that there is a law governing digital media use in relation to the Independent Media Commission Act which regulates the mainstream media (Print and Electronic).

However, Data Policy, that is, data protection, data privacy, and data ownership is a key area that requires immediate attention. Now that the Gender Equality and Women Empowerment Bill has been enacted, the government should ensure that the Act is highly publicized and implemented for the benefit of all. It should also ensure that the Cyber Security and Crime Act is publicized and enforced by the necessary authorities accordingly.

The government and other state authorities should ensure that women and girls are protected against online abuses.

The government should also ensure that there is available infrastructure and business-friendly environment to allow for investment in telecommunications to increase access to the internet in Sierra Leone.

The government should also put in place measures aimed at making the internet affordable in Sierra Leone.

Telecommunication Companies

Telecommunications companies 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 reduce the cost of data to enable more people to have access to the internet and social media platforms.

Civil Society Organisations

Civil society organisations should continue to advocate for the protection of rights and freedom of women in the digital space. They should also engage in mass sensitization and awareness raising about digital media use in Sierra Leone.

Women Rights Organisations which do work on offline issues are encouraged to as much as possible also include women's rights online issues. 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 in Sierra Leone are, therefore, encouraged to sensitise 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 take their safety and security more 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.

References

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MEDIA FOUNDATION FOR WEST AFRICA

32 Otele Avenue, East Legon,

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 555 327

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

info@mfwa.org

www.mfwa.org

@themfwa   www.mfwa.org   themfwa