

# Annual State of Women's Rights Online in Liberia



November 2022

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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Improving women's involvement in development is indispensable, not only for accomplishing social justice but also for exterminating poverty. Global best practices show that promoting women's robust role enhances economic growth, advances children's development and family health.

Additionally, investing in women is fundamental to sustainable growth and development. Research shows that economies that promote women's participation in the workforce tend to grow better than those that do not. According to the World Bank, for every 1% surge in the populace of girls educated, a nation's GDP surges by 0.3%.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, when economies develop, employment prospects improve along with better social services, which then translate into general development and better opportunities for all.

Nations that have given priority to women's education invariably tend to have improved economies, healthy citizens, and reduced violence compared to those that do not. There are studies that show that when women are educated, economies expand, due to the refined skills that they bring to the labor front. Often, educated women also tend to raise educated children.

The internet, is indispensable for modern day life and is potentially a platform that can foster gender equality and facilitate life for women and girls. Nevertheless, access to and usage of the internet is not proportionate among men and women. Out of an estimated 2.7 billion people that are not connected to the internet, women and girls constitute the majority.

Recent statistics from the International Communication Union (ITU) show that the percentage of women using the internet globally is 57% compared to 62% of men.<sup>2</sup> In comparative terms, this means the gender gap, in terms of the usage of internet remains at 8%.

Majority of nations with high gender gap in terms of ownership of mobile technological devices tend to also have high gender gaps in terms of usage of the internet. Given that mobile phones are the commonest devices for accessing the internet, addressing the mobile phone gender gap could help to reduce the internet usage gender gap.

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<sup>1</sup> Not Educating Girls Costs Countries Trillions of Dollars, Says New World Bank Report, World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/07/11/not-educating-girls-costs-countries-trillions-of-dollars-says-new-world-bank-report>

<sup>2</sup> Bridging the gender divide, ITU, <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>

Meanwhile, poor application skills can hamper even women who own mobile phones from making the best use of their handsets for online application, or even using the internet at all.

This report gauges women’s access to and the use of the internet in Liberia and focuses on the policies, experiences and causes hampering the online rights of women in the country. This report also proposes to the Liberian government and other stakeholders, actions and policies that can promote and protect women’s rights online in the country.



## 2.0 THE LIBERIA ENVIRONMENT

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Liberia has made a significant headway in advancing the rights of women and girls over the last 20 years using legislative reforms and tailored programmes that confront discriminatory obstructions and detrimental practices.

Women empowerment is an integral part of the Liberian economic policy and it has been demonstrated through the government's ongoing efforts. As part of this, the government is implementing the Liberia Women Empowerment programme which recently received over USD 44 million from the World Bank.<sup>3</sup> The agreement that was signed in respect of the facility is part of the agenda to advance and support one of the crucial goals in the Liberian Government's Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD).

Furthermore, the Women Education and Development Organization of Liberia or WEDOL, in collaboration with Action Aid Liberia, has introduced a young women's empowerment programme designed to empower and reinforce young women's role in peace-building and sustainable development in Liberia. The programme is purposed to stimulate young women's interest and commitment to peace building for sustainable development. These interventions however, do not include specific activities aimed at promoting women's rights online.

Globally, the gender disparity in access to and usage of the internet is to the disfavor of women. As of 2022, only 57% of global internet users were women compared to 62% who were men. In Liberia, men are 49 times more likely to use the internet than women.

With a population of 5.24 million, Liberia's internet usage surged in 2022 to 1.15 million at a penetration rate of 22% representing a 2.4% increase over the 2021 internet usage of 1.12 million. The cost of using the internet in Liberia is expensive and disproportionately affects women's usage of the internet. Consequently, there is a glaring internet usage gap between men and women. Liberia stands 95th among 100 nations in gender gap in internet access.

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<sup>3</sup> World Bank provides over \$44m to support Liberian women, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202207/07/WS62c64d62a310fd2b29e6af6a.html>, "Women Empowerment Sits at the middle of the Economy" says Minister Tweah; As GoL, World Bank signs over US\$44.6M Agreements, <https://www.mfdp.gov.lr/index.php/media-center/press-release/women-empowerment-sits-at-the-middle-of-the-economy-says-minister-tweah-as-gol-world-bank-signs-over-us-44-6m-agreements>, A New Project to Empower and Improve the Livelihoods of Women and Girls in Liberia, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/22/afw-new-project-to-empower-and-improve-the-livelihoods-of-women-and-girls-in-liberia>

## 3.0 THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

### 3.1 Laws and Policies on the use of the internet and digital space

The cyberspace in Liberia is regulated by the country's Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, and the Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA). The Ministry is responsible for the development of policies that govern the sector. The Ministry regulates the telecommunications sector in Liberia in accordance with the provisions of Telecommunications Act of 2007. The Telecommunications Act of 2007<sup>4</sup> establishes an accessible, transparent and equitable regulatory framework with regards to network and service access and interconnection in the area of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and offers a coordinated framework for ICT policy and regulation. The ICT Act of 2007, however, fails to incorporate one of the major aspects of modern ICT regulations being a Cybersecurity Law.

The Liberia National Information and Communications Technology Policy<sup>5</sup> seeks to aid economic development with fully integrated Information Communication Technology that guarantees overall social inclusion for Liberians.

Many people are of the view that very little has been done by the Legislature and policymakers to ensure the enactment of a Cybersecurity Act. Nonetheless, a Cybercrimes draft Bill was prepared and put forward by the Ministry of Post and Communications in the period of 2017 and 2019 but the Bill failed to address issues such as cybercrime. The Bill also did not provide adequate safeguards to protect the privacy rights of individuals particularly women.

### 3.2 Gender policies

In order to boost women's participation in the digital space, the Liberian government is implementing some policies and programmes aimed at addressing some of the issues that hamper the participation of women in the digital space. The National Gender Policy is to combat and eradicate gender-associated problems. The UN Women, Orange Foundation's Digital Inclusion for Women's Economic Empowerment (D4WEE)<sup>6</sup> project in Liberia is touted to become a transformational game-changer for women. A vital role of the project is to provide digital teaching and learning resources including laptops, servers, and tablets to school going girls and women to promote access to educational materials in math, science and tech and also bridge the gaps between men and women in the use and access of internet and digital tools.

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<sup>4</sup> Telecommunications Act 2007, <https://ictpolicyafrica.org/en/document/ct5njgi2?page=1>

<sup>5</sup> National ICT Policy, <https://mfdp.gov.lr/index.php/documents-admin/ict-policies/national-ict-policy>

<sup>6</sup> UN Women & Orange Foundation Reaffirm Commitment To Gender Equality & Innovation, <https://womensvoicesnewspaper.org/un-women-orange-foundation-reaffirm-commitment-to-gender-equality-innovation/>

Some of these interventions however, lack the appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanism to process assess progress made with these interventions and how to ensure that the policies live up to their expectation. Again, inadequate funding continues to impede the proper implementation of the policies to help address the challenge.

## 4.0 FACTORS HAMPERING WOMEN'S ACCESS AND USE OF THE INTERNET

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Many reasons account for the gender gaps in the participation in the cyberspace in Liberia, including but not limited to unstable internet service, online safety concerns, high cost of data, inadequate digital skills, among others.

*(A) Affordability of Data:* One of the biggest issues inhibiting access and use of the internet among women in Liberia is the high cost of internet data. Studies by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4A1) have shown that Liberia does not meet the standards of the UN broadband commission's affordability benchmark. In Liberia, the men are 49 percent more likely to have access and use the internet than women according to an A4A1 report.<sup>7</sup> The major barriers leading to the cause of the inequality are digital skills and the cost of internet use and access between men and women. In most cases, the internet is accessed once a week for research purposes, to send emails and download data. Notwithstanding the surge in the amount of internet supported devices in Liberia, costs of data remain somewhat unreasonable at 40% of monthly income on the average. As the A4A1 report reveals, a Liberian on the average must work for thirteen days to be able to come up with the money for the cheapest smart phone. It is highly probable for women living in remote and rural areas not be able to pay for internet, thus effectively barring these women from accessing the internet.

*(B) Deficiency of Digital Skills:* Some women tend to be inadequately skilled in the usage of digital applications and communication technologies on cyber and digital platforms such as social media. In the modern digital age, digital literacy is imperative for business and socialization. Digital skills help women to be more resourceful and thus, ultimately helps improve their quality of life. As contemporary life increasingly shifts online, it is imperative for women to have the skills that are needed to survive and live in the digital age.

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<sup>7</sup> The The Internet is unaffordable in Liberia: action is needed to 'SET' the agenda for positive change, Alliance for Affordable Internet, <https://a4ai.org/news/the-internet-is-unaffordable-in-liberia-action-is-needed-to-set-the-agenda-for-positive-change/>

There is no denial that when women are equipped with digital skills and given access to education, the benefits are enormous. They turn out to be more productive, career-oriented, and economically independent. They also turn out to be more sensitive to their rights, and inclined to contribute to the nation's economy in general.

Through digital knowledge and access to social media and research platforms, women receive enlightenment which they can then use to bring up their children. The wealth of information online means that when women can access the internet, they can access knowledge.

*(C) Concerns Over Online Privacy:* Due to nefarious data harvesting schemes and practices online, women tend to be more worried about their privacy than men. More women have openly spoken about the concerns of having their personal data such as healthcare information, home addresses and other personal information harvested and used by unknown third parties. Other personal experiences, such as online harassment and online abuse have caused many women to either fold in or abandon internet platforms or avoid some internet or digital applications. For instance, the media and other stakeholders in Liberia are disturbed about the privacy for personal data of women and other personalities in the wake of cyber-attacks on personal information aiming at women, politicians and other reputable people in society.

There have been calls by the media asking for legislation in Liberia to protect data of women, media workers, politicians and other high-profile personalities. Women arguably, are the most susceptible demographics online after children because of the comparatively higher likelihood of they experiencing abuse or privacy breach online. Despite the fact that women have bigger worries than men concerning digital privacy, some studies have revealed that women also tend to be less sensitive to the dangers of the interface designs of applications (apps). Meanwhile, it remains a notorious fact that the technology sector is still pitched toward, composed of, and managed by men.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The internet remains an indispensable and powerful tool for life in all facets of modern society. In the current dispensation, it has turned out to be the most important pillar of information and knowledge for all, including the ordinary people. With its enormous potential and benefits, it is such a deprivation for anybody to lose access to it. Regrettably, most women have not fully benefited from the internet due

to high costs of data, lack of digital skills and privacy issues. Women and girls experience disproportionate dangers to their data rights online, mainly in the form of online abuse, persecution and fear of violence. And the abuse of women's right can have knock-on effect their human rights, physical safety, right to freedom of expression and psychological well-being. Governments, civil society, the media, businesses and other stakeholders have a responsibility to keep and ensure women's safety by protecting the right to privacy and also pass and implement policies that will enhance the promotion of digital rights of women in Liberia. Below are some recommendations to the stakeholders in the ecosystem on how they can help advance the goal for a lot more Liberian women to have access to and use the internet.

#### *(A) Government*

The implementation of an Information and Communications Technology guidelines which seeks to address the developments that supports social and economic development of the Liberian society, by the Liberia government and scheduled for a five-year rollout, ending 2024, has delayed. The key provisions of the ICT guidelines cover the functions and responsibilities of the ministry, the Liberia Telecommunications Authority, licensed service providers, universal access, competition policy, interconnections, relations between service providers and customers, disputes, offences and enforcements. One significant objective of the ICT policy is to use the policy to drive inclusion of women and other marginalized groups. The delay in its implementation will likely not promote the knowledge-based and all-inclusive information society and also break the barriers of access and use of internet among women, the policy seeks to achieve. It is therefore recommended that the government prioritizes the implementation of the Policy which will greatly help empower women's skills, use and access of modern ICT tools to better their lives.

It is also recommended that government implements practical actions and policies that addresses the present inequalities in income, education, and employment prospects, political, economic, legal, cultural, technological and social barriers that creates the segregation of women from accessing and using the internet and ICT. These actions should include developing affirmative action that ensures that more women have access to reasonably priced internet, meaningful connectivity and digital skills. Also, closing the digital gender gap will necessitate that Liberian government collects and shares gender and age disaggregated data on access and use of ICT in order to monitor and assess growth and streamline policies tailored towards promoting the digital rights by women.

Finally, the government should not relent on funding the implementation of the five-year Information and Communications Technology policy. Shortfalls in funding support will make the policy which is geared towards the promotion of the rights of women online remain on the shelves and become fruitless. Additionally, funding should be made available for advocacy and education of women in digital skills, especially, to enable them become independent and enlightened.



### *(B) Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)*

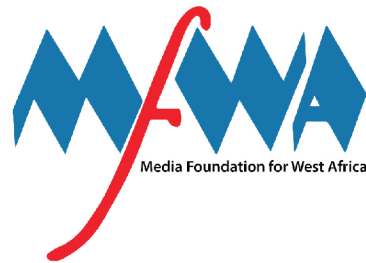
There is the need for CSOs to intensify advocacy on women's rights online. Sadly, even though much advocacy is needed in this area in Liberia, CSOs are hardly seen pushing such advocacy.

It is highly recommended that CSO's actively engage in more sensitization programs that promotes origination, education and technological change in the digital regime for attaining gender equality and empowerment for all women. By this, CSOs should champion the agenda of acknowledging and celebrating the women and girls who are supporting the development of transformative technology and digital education.

CSOs are also encouraged to advocate the significance of defending the rights of women in digital spaces and addressing online and ICT related gender-based violence. This will bring a lot more women into technology which has a greater potential for innovation that meet the needs of women and promote gender equality.

### *(C) Other Stakeholders*

Other players including the media should live up to the vital role of sensitizing the public on women's digital rights. They are encouraged to create awareness through educational campaigns on women's digital and online rights. The sensitization should consist of the use of television and radio programs, other prominent national and local voices like esteemed politicians, social advocates, and sports and entertainment celebrities to champion the cause of women's rights to access and use the internet for information.



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