Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone: National Policy Gaps & Recommendations

Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone: Policy Gaps and Recommendations for Promoting Gender Equality and Empowerment

Appreciation

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Introduction

Sierra Leone has a diverse population and a rich cultural heritage, yet it continues to face significant challenges related to gender inequality and discrimination. Women and girls in Sierra Leone encounter obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, and economic opportunities and are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and exploitation. Traditional cultural norms and patriarchal structures restrict women's participation in public life and decision-making. Although access to technology has increased rapidly in Sierra Leone in recent years, there are still considerable gaps in digital literacy and access to online resources, especially for women and girls. This has created a digital gender divide that exacerbates existing inequalities and hinders women's empowerment.

Across the globe, the internet has become an influential tool for individuals to claim their rights and secure social, economic, and political opportunities for empowerment. The increase in internet accessibility and usage has played an essential role in changing attitudes within Sierra Leonean society towards women's rights. However, women still face significant challenges in accessing and using digital technologies in Sierra Leone, despite progress in gender equality and women's rights in areas such as education and political representation.

This Advocacy Paper examines the role of technology in promoting women's rights online in Sierra Leone, the unique challenges women and girls in Sierra Leone face online, policy gaps and identify strategies to leverage technology to advance gender equality and empowerment. The Advocacy Paper also highlights how partnerships between civil society organisations, the government, and the private sector can be leveraged to promote women's rights online in Sierra Leone.

Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone

Internet access and digital technologies remain limited in Sierra Leone, particularly for women and girls. A study by the Alliance for Affordable Internet in 2020 revealed that, only 5.7% of women in Sierra Leone are internet users, compared to 11.4% of men. This digital gender divide is influenced by various factors, such as poverty, limited digital literacy, and social and cultural norms that restrict women's access to and use of technology. Women and girls in Sierra Leone also experience online harassment and abuse, including cyberbullying, revenge porn and stalking, which can have severe consequences for their safety, well-being, and participation in public life. Furthermore, online spaces can reproduce and reinforce gender stereotypes and discrimination, limiting women's civic engagement and political participation opportunities.

Sierra Leone is a party to various regional and international frameworks that address the intersection of Internet, ICTs, and women's rights. These frameworks provide guidance and set standards for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the digital sphere.

At the regional level, Sierra Leone has ratified the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, which aims to enhance cybersecurity and safeguard personal data in Africa. Additionally, Sierra Leone is a party to the African Union Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls, which recognises the need to protect women from violence, including online violence.

Internationally, Sierra Leone has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which obligates states to eliminate gender-based discrimination. While CEDAW does not explicitly address Internet and ICTs, it can be interpreted to include women's rights in the online space. Sierra Leone has also endorsed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which emphasises equal access and participation for women in the information society.

Furthermore, Sierra Leone has committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment. SDG 5 recognises the importance of leveraging technology and ensuring women's access to ICTs for their socio-economic advancement. By being a party to these regional and international frameworks, Sierra Leone demonstrates its commitment to promoting women's rights online and gender equality in the digital space. These frameworks provide a foundation for policy development and implementation, guiding efforts to bridge the gender gap and empower women in Sierra Leone's digital landscape.

Challenges Faced by Women and Girls in Online Spaces in Sierra Leone

Women and girls face several challenges online, including limited access to digital technologies, online harassment, abuse, gender stereotypes and discrimination, limited representation, and limited digital literacy. These challenges can limit their participation in public life, expose them to online risks and challenges, and restrict their professional and personal advancement opportunities. Targeted interventions are needed to promote women's rights online, increase their access to and use of digital technologies, and reduce the risks and challenges women and girls face in online spaces. Women and girls face several challenges in online spaces that can limit their access to digital technologies, impede their participation in public life, and expose them to online harassment and abuse. Here are some of the challenges faced by women and girls in online spaces:

1) **Limited Access to Digital Technologies:** Women and girls in many parts of the world, including Sierra Leone, often have limited access to digital technologies, including the internet, smartphones, and computers. This digital divide can be influenced by factors such as poverty, lack of digital literacy, and social and cultural norms that restrict women's access to and use of technology.

2) **Online Harassment and Abuse:** Women and girls are disproportionately targeted by online harassment and abuse, including cyberbullying, revenge porn, and stalking. This can severely affect their safety, well-being, and participation in public life and limit their opportunities for civic engagement and political participation.

3) **Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination:** Online spaces can reproduce and reinforce gender stereotypes and discrimination, limiting women's professional and personal advancement opportunities. This can include sexism, misogyny, and other forms of gender-based discrimination.

4) **Limited Representation:** Women are often underrepresented in online spaces, including social media, news media, and online forums. This can limit their ability to participate in public discourse and shape public opinion on important issues.

5) **Limited Digital Literacy:** Women and girls often have limited digital literacy, including skills related to online safety, privacy, and security. This can limit their ability to navigate online spaces safely and effectively, and expose them to various online risks and challenges.

These challenges demonstrate the need for targeted interventions to promote women's rights online, increase women's access to and use of digital technologies, and reduce the risks and challenges women and girls face in online spaces.

Policies, Regulatory Documents, and Frameworks on ICTs and Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone

While there are no specific policy documents and frameworks directly addressing women's rights online, it is important to note the broader efforts in Sierra Leone to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Sierra Leone has made commitments to various international frameworks related to gender equality, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These commitments reflect the government's efforts to advance women's rights and gender equality within the overall policy landscape, which indirectly impacts the online

sphere as well. Sierra Leone has several policies, regulatory documents, and frameworks in place to govern the Internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs) within the country.

It is important to note that, efforts are being made to address gender equality and women's empowerment in Sierra Leone's broader policy landscape, including the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone; Cyber Security and Cyber Crime Act (2021); National Cyber Security and Data Protection Strategy (2022); National ICT Policy (2011); National Telecommunications Act (2006); National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy (2018); Child Rights Act (2007); Data Protection Act (2019); and ICT Sector Performance Review (2017).

National Internet and ICT Related Legislations and Policies

In Sierra Leone, policy documents related to the Internet and ICTs, as well as the promotion of women's rights, are developed and implemented by various public institutions. Here's a categorisation of policy documents based on the relevant institutions:

1) The Cyber Security and Cyber Crime Act 2021
   - The Cyber Security and Cyber Crime Act is a legislative framework that aims to address cyber threats, protect critical information infrastructure, and combat cybercrime. It typically includes provisions related to the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of cybercrimes such as hacking, identity theft, online fraud, and unauthorised access to computer systems. The act further outlines measures for cybersecurity awareness, incident response, and cooperation between relevant authorities and stakeholders.

2) National Cyber Security and Data Protection Strategy 2022
   - The National Cyber Security and Data Protection Strategy provides a comprehensive plan to safeguard the country's cyberspace and protect sensitive data. It typically outlines strategies and actions to enhance cybersecurity, protect critical information infrastructure, and mitigate cyber threats. The strategy may also cover aspects such as capacity building, international cooperation, public awareness campaigns, and the establishment of regulatory frameworks for data protection and privacy.

3) Ministry of Information and Communication:
   - National ICT Policy (2011): Provides a strategic framework for ICT development and regulation in Sierra Leone.

4) Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology:
   - ICT in Education Policy (2018): Sets guidelines for integrating ICTs into the education system, which indirectly impacts women's access to digital education.

5) Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs:
   - National Gender Policy (2000): Promotes gender equality and women's empowerment across all sectors, including ICTs.
   - National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (2015-2020): Addresses issues of violence against women and girls, which can include online violence and harassment.

6) National Telecommunications Commission (NATCOM):
   - National Telecommunications Act (2006): Establishes the regulatory framework for telecommunications services, ensuring fair and equitable access to ICTs.

7) National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA):
   - National Youth Policy (2014): Includes provisions to promote ICT skills and employment opportunities for young people, including women.

8) Sierra Leone Information Technology Association (SLITA):
   - ICT Code of Ethics: Sets standards and guidelines for ethical conduct in the ICT sector, including considerations of gender equality and women's rights.

Additionally, while not specific to a single institution, the following policy documents indirectly contribute to the promotion of women's rights online:

- Child Rights Act (2007): While the Act does not explicitly mention child online exploitation, but provisions such as Section 12(1)(b) (protection from violence and exploitation), Section 12(1)(c) (protection from sexual exploitation), and Section 12(1)(n) (protection from economic exploitation) can be interpreted to encompass protection from online harm and exploitation.

- Data Protection Act (2019): Establishes guidelines for the protection of personal data, which includes safeguarding privacy rights, including those of women. It is important to note that the categorisation above is based on available information up to September 2021, and there may be additional or updated policy documents relevant to the Internet, ICTs, and women's rights in Sierra Leone.

Women's Rights Online Policies of Internet Service Providers, ICT Corporate Organisations, and Social Media Corporations in Sierra Leone

Women's rights online policies and regulations within internet service providers (ISPs), ICT corporate organisations, and social media corporations in Sierra Leone can be categorised into privacy and data protection, online harassment and abuse, content moderation and safety, digital literacy and skills development, and gender equality and inclusion. These policies aim to protect women's personal information, address online harassment and abuse, regulate harmful content, promote digital literacy for women, and ensure gender equality within the organisations.

The specific policies and regulations vary among different entities in Sierra Leone, so it is important to refer to the official documents and policies of individual companies for detailed information. These categorisations provide a general overview of the areas where policies and regulations can be implemented to safeguard women's rights online, foster a safe digital environment, bridge the gender digital divide, and promote gender equality and inclusion in Sierra Leone's digital landscape. For example, the National Telecommunications Act (2006) establishes the regulatory framework for telecommunications services, ensuring fair and equitable access to ICTs.

An Analysis of Women's Rights Policies and Documents

This section examines the existing women's rights online policies and documents within Sierra Leone, focusing on the gender gaps, internet and ICT-related gender issues, policy quality, level of implementation by public institutions, ISPs, and ICT corporate organisations. It also assesses whether these policies meet international standards on Internet Rights and Women's Protection Online. The advantages and disadvantages of the existing policies are discussed, along with identifying any gaps or missing elements within the policies.

Sierra Leone faces gender gaps and challenges related to the Internet and ICTs, including limited access for women, lower digital literacy, online violence, and a gender-based digital divide. While specific policies targeting women's rights online are not identified, there are broader policies and frameworks in place to address gender equality. These include the National ICT Policy (2011), National Gender Policy (2020), and the Child Rights Act (2007). The quality of these policies depends on their inclusivity, comprehensiveness, and consideration of intersectionality.

The implementation of these policies by public institutions, ISPs, and ICT corporate organisations is key. Adequate resources, coordination, collaboration, and monitoring are essential for effective implementation. Efforts are needed to bridge

the gender divide by improving access, promoting digital skills, and ensuring a safe online environment.

Sierra Leone recognises gender disparities in internet and ICT access and is dedicated to advancing gender equality. Although there are no specific policies exclusively targeting women's rights online, broader policies and frameworks address gender concerns. However, implementation and enhancement of these measures are crucial to bridging the digital gender gap and empowering women in the digital realm.

Based on general considerations, while some aspects of the policies align with international standards, there are areas where improvements are needed.

Below is a discussion on the quality of the policies, gaps identified and recommendations for improving the policies:

Quality of Policies:

- Recognition of Gender Equality: The existing policies in Sierra Leone, such as the National Gender Policy, demonstrate a commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, which aligns with international standards.

- Inclusivity: The policies such as the National ICT Policy, Women's Rights Online and Women in Tech, address gender disparity and promote women's rights in the context of internet and ICT. Inclusivity is a crucial aspect of international standards on women's protection online.

- Privacy and Data Protection: International standards emphasise the need for strong privacy and data protection measures to safeguard women's rights online. Sierra Leone's Data Protection Act of 2020 provides privacy and data protection measures that safeguard personal information, including women's data, in accordance with international standards. Implementation and enforcement of the act are crucial for effective protection of women online.

Gaps:

- Lack of Specificity: Most of the existing policies lack specific provisions directly addressing women's protection online or tackling gender-specific challenges related to the Internet. International standards often emphasise the need for targeted measures to address gender-based violence and harassment online.

- Implementation Gaps: Though the policies exist, there are challenges in their effective implementation. For instance, inadequate resources by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs threatens the effective implementation of the National ICT Policy. Also, limited coordination among government ministries, departments, and agencies, and gender-responsive budgeting further results in insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms which often hinder the translation of policies into tangible outcomes.

Recommendations for improvement

- Comprehensive Approach: International standards highlight the importance of comprehensive approaches that address multiple dimensions of women's protection online, including access, digital literacy, online safety, and empowerment. The existing policies, therefore, need further development to adopt a comprehensive approach to address issues such as gender-based violence, the digital gender divide, online exploitation, privacy, discrimination, and promote women's empowerment online.

- Online Violence and Harassment: Specific provisions to address online violence and harassment against women are crucial. These provisions can include legal frameworks, support services, and mechanisms for reporting and redress. There is, therefore, the need to improve existing policies with adequate provisions on online violence against women.

- Compliance with International Standards/ Intersectionality: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), emphasise the importance of considering intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those based on race, ethnicity, or disability, when addressing women's rights online. Compliance with CEDAW requires recognising and addressing the specific challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds in the digital sphere, promoting inclusivity, combating online harassment and violence, and ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all women. Taking an intersectional approach helps create a safe and inclusive online environment for marginalised women.

<u>**Online Safety and Support Services for Women and Girls in Sierra Leone**</u>

In Sierra Leone, there are both government initiatives and private sector organisations that provide online safety and support services for women and girls.

Here are examples of each:

<u>**Government Initiatives:**</u> The Directorate of Science, Technology, and Innovation (DSTI) in Sierra Leone has taken the lead in implementing government initiatives to promote online safety and digital literacy for women and girls. They organise training programmes and workshops to educate women about online safety, cybersecurity, and responsible internet use. By equipping them with knowledge and skills, the DSTI aims to empower women and girls to navigate the digital space safely. Additionally, the Sierra Leone Police has established specialised units, including the Family Support Unit and the Cybercrime Unit, to address online harassment and violence against women. These units provide crucial support, investigation, and legal assistance to victims of online abuse, working towards creating a safer online environment for women in Sierra Leone.

<u>**Private Sector Organisations:**</u> Private sector organisations in Sierra Leone are actively involved in promoting online safety and support services for women and girls. The Campaign for Human Rights and Development International (CHRDI), for example, offers emotional support, counselling, legal advice, and referral services to women and girls who have experienced online harassment and abuse. Telecom company, Orange Sierra Leone raises awareness about online risks and provides educational materials, workshops, and tools to promote online safety for women and girls.

Through the combined efforts of government initiatives and private sector organisations, Sierra Leone has created and is striving to create a safer and more supportive digital environment for women and girls to harness the benefits of the online world while mitigating online risks, as well as help to reduce the prevalence of online violence and promote women's rights online in Sierra Leone.

Here are some examples of support services:

1) **Helplines:** Helplines such as the 116 Child Helpline and the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs toll-free helpline provide support and advice to women and girls who have experienced online harassment and abuse. These helplines offer a confidential and safe space for women and girls to seek help and report incidents of online violence.

2) **Online Counselling:** Online counselling services such as Counselling and Psychosocial Support Services (CPSS) provide confidential and anonymous support to women and girls who have experienced online violence. These

services offer emotional support, counselling, and referral services to women and girls.

3) **Online Reporting Platforms:** The Government of Sierra Leone, through the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs, and the Family Support Unit (FSU), has collaborated with Rainbo Initiative, a local NGO committed to safeguarding women and girls from rape and sexual violence. Together, they have developed reporting platforms, including the Mobile App for Reporting Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), which offer a secure and anonymous means for women and girls to report incidents of online violence. These platforms provide a safe space where individuals can report cases of online harassment and abuse without fearing reprisal or social stigma.

4) **Online Safety Training:** Online safety training programmes by organisations such as CHRDI provide women and girls with the knowledge and skills to stay safe online. These programmes offer online safety, privacy, and security training and provide women and girls with the tools they need to protect themselves from online violence.

5) **Legal Support:** Legal support services such as the Legal Aid Board provide legal advice and support to women and girls who have experienced or committed online violence including cyber bullying and cyber stocking.

In general, these online safety and support services are crucial for addressing the risks and challenges women and girls face in online spaces in Sierra Leone. By providing a safe and confidential space for women and girls to seek help and support, these services can help to reduce the prevalence of online violence and promote women's rights online.

Conclusion

Promoting women's rights online in Sierra Leone requires a multi-sectoral approach involving civil society organisations, government agencies, and other stakeholders. By increasing women's access to and use of digital technologies, promoting online safety and support services, and advocating for policy and legal reforms, Sierra Leone can work towards a future where women and girls have equal opportunities to participate in digital spaces and shape their futures. Furthermore, promoting women's rights online in Sierra Leone is crucial for achieving gender equality and promoting women's empowerment. By addressing the challenges women and girls

face in accessing and using digital technologies, Sierra Leone can create an enabling environment that promotes women's participation in public life and supports their economic and social development. By working together, civil society organisations, government agencies, and other stakeholders can build a more inclusive and equitable digital future for all.

Recommendations for Promoting Women's Rights Online in Sierra Leone

The following policy recommendations aim to enhance online safety and support services for women and girls in Sierra Leone, addressing the challenges of online harassment and violence. They encompass both government and private sector actions to create a comprehensive and collaborative approach. The recommendations include developing comprehensive legislation to combat cybercrimes, strengthening law enforcement and judicial systems, promoting digital literacy programmes, collaborating with NGOs and civil society organisations, implementing safe reporting mechanisms, providing resources and support, and fostering a positive online culture.

Government

- Develop a comprehensive legislation specifically addressing online harassment and violence against women, including strict penalties for offenders. The government should also strengthen existing laws and policies to address online harassment and abuse, including cyberbullying, revenge porn, and stalking. This will provide a legal framework to effectively combat cybercrimes and protect women's rights online.

- Enhance the capacity of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to effectively investigate, prosecute, and punish perpetrators of online harassment and violence. This includes specialised training for law enforcement officers and establishing dedicated units to handle cybercrimes against women.

- Invest in digital literacy programmes targeted at women and girls, providing them with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the digital space safely. These programmes should cover online safety, responsible internet use, and awareness of potential risks and threats.

- Government should improve Internet access and affordability, particularly in rural areas. This can involve investing in internet infrastructure and working with

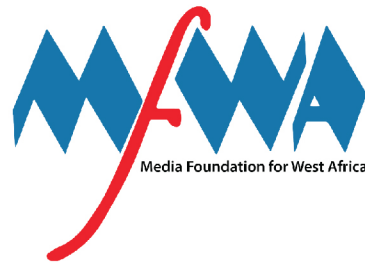internet service providers to offer affordable packages, especially for women and girls.

- Allocate resources to create online safety resources, including guides, tutorials, and helplines, specifically tailored to the needs of women and girls. These resources should be easily accessible and available in multiple languages, ensuring inclusivity and reaching a wider audience.

- Ensure women's participation in decision-making processes related to technology, such as developing internet policies and regulations. This can involve creating opportunities for women to participate in these processes and ensuring their voices are heard.

- Support women-led technology initiatives, such as women's tech incubators and accelerators. This can involve providing funding and other resources to help these initiatives grow and succeed.

Private Sector

- Civil society organisations should establish user-friendly and confidential reporting mechanisms on digital platforms and social media platforms to allow women and girls to report instances of online harassment easily. These mechanisms should be responsive and provide timely support and assistance to victims.

- Collaborate with government to create online safety resources, including guides, tutorials, and helplines, specifically tailored to the needs of women and girls. These resources should be easily accessible and available in multiple languages, ensuring inclusivity and reaching a wider audience.

- Civil society and the private sector can develop and promote technology solutions that address the specific needs of women, such as digital financial services, health apps, and e-learning platforms. This can involve conducting research to understand the unique challenges faced by women and developing technology solutions that address these challenges.

- The private sector and civil society should provide more mentorship and networking opportunities for women in the technology industry. This can involve creating mentorship programmes, sponsoring events and conferences for women in technology, and providing networking opportunities through online platforms.

- Develop programmes and initiatives aimed at encouraging responsible online behaviour and promote positive digital culture by actively addressing and challenging harmful gender stereotypes, fostering respectful communication, and promoting gender equality in all online spaces.

- Civil society, ISPs and academia can support women-led technology initiatives, such as women's tech incubators and accelerators. This can involve providing funding and other resources to help these initiatives grow and succeed.

By implementing these policy recommendations, the government and private sector in Sierra Leone can work together to ensure online safety and support services for women and girls. These measures will contribute to creating a safer digital environment, empowering women and girls to fully participate in the digital world while protecting their rights and well-being.

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