



The Gender Tool Box gathers knowledge material and method support on gender equality in the form of Tools, Briefs and Thematic Overviews.

Gender equality is achieved when women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society.

[BRIEF] Gender and ICT

The human rights based, technical and social implications brought by new information and communication technologies (ICT) are not gender neutral. Existing power relations in society determine who benefits from and shapes the content, development and use of ICT. Human rights, including women's rights, are as important online as they are offline. If gender dimensions of ICT are identified and addressed, ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and a tool to promote gender equality. This brief gives a short introduction to gender and ICT, provides examples of interventions and gives a quick guide to how gender can be integrated into ICT programmes for development and a tool for change.

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON ICT

ICT contribute broadly to readjusting social rules for interaction, offering new channels for establishing and accessing connections and relationships. Globally ICT transforms the way production is organized and information shared. ICT offers flexibility of time and space, a way out of isolation, and a potentially increased access to knowledge and productive resources even in remote locations. But ICT may also contribute to discrimination and reinforce existing inequalities.

As all aspects of human interaction ICT are gendered. Today the gap, the "digital divide", between women and men regarding access to ICT, and challenges when using the same is obvious. The access to, content and use of

ICT are connected to gender norms and inequalities, as well as to efforts questioning and changing these.

ICT has the potential to alleviate some of the barriers faced by women. This includes illiteracy, poverty, time scarcity, hindrances of mobility and cultural and religious taboos. ICT also have the potential of providing tools that may break constraints on voice, particularly public voice, and social control including surveillance of women's physical and social mobility.

Closing the Gender Gap

The World Wide Web Foundation works for an open web as a public good and on ICT for empowerment of women and girls. This work involves integrating and improving gender indicators within the World Wide Web Foundation's Web Index, which measures the effectiveness of the web and its utility in 86 countries.¹ The project delivers evidence-based research on women's empowerment through the web and facilitates capacity building and policy dialogue on gender and ICT policy issues in 10 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. One aim is to promote action plans on women's rights in ICT decision and policy-making, and to improve data on the online gender divide.²

¹ <http://thewebindex.org/>.

² See e.g. <http://www.genderit.org/node/4222>.

Access to ICT can increase women and girls' access to the public space, and strengthen their public as well as private agency. It can be a particularly effective tool to reach groups of women and girls who for different reasons are not participating in public or social life.

Women all over the world are increasingly turning to the internet exercise their political and social rights. Access to ICT is crucial for women and girls to be able to participate in society on equal terms with men and boys. There is a growing recognition of the need to talk about human rights in general and women's rights in particular as being relevant not only offline, but also online. The first UN-report to mention human rights' relevance on the internet is from 2000, and thereafter the UN has increasingly highlighted the connections between internet and human rights.³ Sweden has taken the lead in the work on the two resolutions that confirm human rights to be applied online as they are offline. These resolutions, 20/8 and 26/13, both adopted with consensus, form an important base for further work and dialogue on human rights and ICT. In such processes, a gender perspective is key.

Advocating for women's rights online

Sida's partner Association of Progressive Communications (APC) has successfully worked to influence UN bodies to further emphasize women's rights online and offline. A collaborative effort of APC and the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition resulted in a UN Resolution, which highlights safety concerns for women human rights defenders online and offline.⁴ Expert input from the APC Women's Rights Programme resulted in the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women in Law and Public Life's first thematic report including reference to the role ICT play for political participation. This report also emphasizes violence against women online as a threat and call on states to take specific action to include more women in internet governance processes.⁵ Furthermore, as a result of APCs lobbying, for the first time a paragraph in the UN Commission on the Status of Women 57th Session outcomes document was dedicated to the role of ICT in ending violence against women.⁶

Online gender-based violence such as stalking, harassment and hate speech is becoming an increasingly chal-

lenging risk and a limitation to women's use of the internet for the purposes of participation and accessing services and information. Women and women's organisations that use the internet for political purposes meet these threats, as well as less public women who use the internet in their daily personal, community and working lives.

In many contexts, ICT represent new ways of doing things and as such, it may provide new opportunities in areas with less firmly fixed gender biases. One example showing how ICT may be used for women's economic empowerment is the following:

Creating New Opportunities in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, where phone access was limited in rural areas, women took advantage of Grameen Bank micro-loans to purchase cell phones and rent air time to other villagers for a modest profit. The women were able to further leverage this increased access to ICT by opening tea shops, where people who wanted to use the rent cell phones could sit to await their turn. These ventures gave rural Bangladeshi women increased and greater control of their income, also resulting in increased status within the family and community.

GENDER SPECIFIC ICT ISSUES IN DEVELOPMENT

Poverty has a multi-dimensional impact on women. Women globally earn less than men for equal work and have less access to financial assets such as land, or to credit. This limits their possibility to use all forms of technology, including ICT.

Women and girls make up nearly 2/3's of the world illiterates. This limits their use of ICT. It puts the onus on users of ICT for development approaches to include information and training suitable for those with low literacy rates.

Language is a barrier to internet and mobile use. In rural areas and among ethnic minorities, where women and girls often have lower education and less exposure to the surrounding society and international arena, they may only speak a local language or dialect. Thus they face hindrances when accessing the Internet and using mobiles, as the predominant language is English or the national language, and the Roman alphabet.

Science and technology are viewed as more suitable for boys and men. This may lead girls to shy away from

³ <http://www.apc.org/en/blog/united-nations-resolutions-recognising-human-rights>.

⁴ UN General Assembly, 2013: A/C.3/68/L.64/Rev.

⁵ A/HRC/23/50.

⁶ 2013 Commission on the Status of Women Final Conclusions.

studying computer science or adopting new technology. However this is not clear cut: in some countries of South and West Asia computer science is viewed as a women's field.

Cyberlaws are often gender blind. When new laws concerning the internet are introduced, this is often done through protectionist frameworks and without consulting women's organisations. In many countries, legal regulations also serve to censor the internet broadly, which also affects women. Social media platforms are often reluctant to deal with misogynist expressions, and government as well as the private sector have been slow or hesitant in responding to online violence.

Women's rights defenders face gender specific risks. Misogynist hate speech, online harassment and threats are increasingly affecting individual and groups of women who use internet for political participation, freedom of speech and for access to information. Online vulnerability often leads to threats, harassments and violence offline.

Women and women's activists need digital safety. ICT are on one hand new arenas on which women experience violence, and on the other it may also change the ways in which women respond to violence. Online gender-based violence must be tackled and women need access to tools for digital security to protect themselves.

#28SAabortoLegal

Immediately following the launch of several campaigns in 2013, including the #28SAabortoLegal social media campaign, Latin America and Caribbean Women's Health Network's website was hacked and disabled. Through solidarity networks they got advice and practical support and are now in a better position to secure their website and practice safe communication.

ICT, GENDER AND DECISION MAKING

Historically, local governance systems have excluded women. We are now in a position to leverage changes set in motion by digital technologies, which can open the possibility for more vibrant and viable democracies where women can find voice and visibility in public institutional participation. It is important to support the conditions under which digital technologies enable marginalized women to actively participate in decision-making bodies. This requires an understanding of the conditions that support access and use of various platforms, and reflect on replicating those conditions in various social contexts. Policies should be formulated within national

contexts, adjusted to country concerns and the issues and perspectives that policy makers are committed to.

ICT have played a key role in creating or enhancing access to information on government and non-governmental services that allow women to claim rights, such as information on health services for women and victims of gender-based violence. It is key that online services and information are connected to offline remedy mechanisms, as this example from Egypt shows:

Mapping harassment in Egypt

In the Harassmap project in Egypt, women anonymously report incidents of sexual harassment by using text messaging from their mobile. By mapping SMS reports on a public website, displaying location and details provided by the victim, the extent of the problem is documented. Furthermore the project's Assistance Information and Referral System provides victims with a list of services to turn to. Another part of the project, Police Response, pinpoints hotspots aiming to increase police presence in high harassment areas. Also community outreach activities, social media awareness and blogging campaigns are included. Harassmap acts as an advocacy, prevention, and response tool, highlighting the severity of the problem and offering proactive responses.

ICT, GENDER AND STATISTICS

ICT can help collect sex-disaggregated statistics useful for gender analysis and planning/monitoring purposes. To measure internet use by country and region as well as the relative cost of ICT usage by sex may serve as core indicators and establish regular and standardized data collection. For example in Indonesia, out of four million internet users only 20% are women.⁷ A survey of 17 countries in Africa found that although men spend more on mobile phones in absolute terms, women spend a greater share of their monthly income on mobile usage.⁸

The International Telecommunication Union reports that in most countries, the participation of women in higher-skilled, higher-ranking, and higher-paid positions remains very low.⁹ These patterns are significant for gender in development: where there are few female programmers,

⁷ Indonesian Association of Internet Service Providers (APJII).

⁸ <http://www.ictworks.org/2011/07/20/gender-assessment-ict-access-and-usage-africa/>.

⁹ World Bank. ICT Toolkit, Indicators for monitoring gender and ICT, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/EXTICTTOOLKIT/0,,contentMDK:20272986~menuPK:562601~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:542820.00.html>.

women's perspectives and needs are less likely to be integrated.

Accessing life-saving knowledge in Kenya

The use of ICT amongst rural women plays a leading role in distance education. In Kenya, programs for distance education particularly help disadvantaged communities in rural areas, and those who are looking for a second chance in education. They have had a significant impact on women, and disseminate information on diseases such as malaria, or research findings on agriculture from the University of Nairobi. A large number of women (70%) adopted techniques and methods learnt in these programs.¹⁰

KEY QUESTIONS FOR INTEGRATING GENDER EQUALITY IN ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT

When integrating gender equality in ICT programs for development, it may be useful to raise questions such as:

- Who (women, men, boys and/or girls) benefit from integrating ICT in the program?
- Which are the gender differences in how, where, when and why men and women use ICT relevant to the program?
- Which are the connections between online and offline power structures and inequalities?
- Are women and girls' rights, and how to realize these rights, made visible?
- Which are the gender disparities in ICT employment and entrepreneurship?
- Do women and girls want and need a different content than men and boys? If so, how do you make it accessible?
- How can women and girls' access to ICT as a means of learning new skills and gaining new knowledge be increased?
- Does the program take into consideration online harassment, threats and violence, and its connection to offline vulnerability? How is the program responding to this?
- Are gender-specific issues of privacy, safety and security included?
- How can ICT be used to increase women and girls participation in decision-making?
- What are the gender and power dynamics of women using technology to access local gov-

ernment services and participate in local governance?

COUNTER STRATEGIES FOR GENDER INEQUALITY AND ICT

ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political and social empowerment of women, and a tool to promote gender equality. Strategies to counter gender inequality may include:

- Supporting networks of women's rights, including online rights, advocates in order to enable them to address gender and ICT policy at national, regional and global level.
- Sensitise policy makers to gender and information technology issues.
- Build awareness among users about the impact of online behaviour on gender-based violence.
- Support freedom of expression advocates to build awareness of online violence as an inhibitor of women's free speech.
- Consider state intervention, laws/rights and social norms vis-à-vis ICT and non-ICT domains/online and offline, and how they code-terminate.
- Consider implications of particular conditions and patterns of access and use, differences on account of demographics, age, level of education, etc.
- Support efforts that create content that reflects women's needs and voices through safe and secure online spaces for women and girls.

FURTHER READING

[Association of Progressive Communications \(APC\)](#)

World Bank: [ICT Toolkit](#)

World Wide Web Foundation: [Web Index](#)

Global Information Society Watch 2013: [Women's rights, gender and ICT](#)

[GenderIt](#)

[Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East](#)

[Empowering Women Entrepreneurs through ICT](#)

¹⁰ Kituyi-Kwake, A. and Adigun, M.O. 2008. Analyzing ICT use and access amongst rural women in Kenya. *International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology (IJEDICT)*, 2008, Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 127-147.