CSW67

Policy Recommendations & Position Statement by African Women & Girls

Priority Theme

> *“Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”..*

Review Theme

> *"Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls"*

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge with appreciation the over 300 women’s rights advocates, feminists, civi-tech leaders, girls and young women-led activists from 39 countries who registered and joined the Africa CSOs Consultation on the 22nd November 2022; members of the NGO CSW/Africa, Pollicy, UN Women and AU Women Gender Directorate for their support in co-developing this Position Statement.

Background

The UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) in collaboration with the African Union Commission's Women, Gender and Development Directorate (AUC-WGDD), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) jointly invited civil society and women's rights organizations to the Africa wide Virtual Technical Consultation in preparation of the UN 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67). This consultation took place from Tuesday 29th to Wednesday 30th November 2022.

In November 2022 **FEMNET and NGO CSW/Africa** members in partnership with UN Women and other partners, convened a virtual Regional Strategy Meeting of Civil Society. The convening mapped out key strategies for comprehensive and substantive participation of women and girls in "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".

The above processes culminated in a common advocacy position and policy recommendations with key messages to be used to lobby governments prior to and during the CSW67; the common position and the regional strategy meeting are key tools in sustaining advocacy momentum and the exchange of ideas, information and strategies beyond CSW67. The Pre-CSW67 Strategy Meeting brought together national, sub-regional and regional representatives of women's rights organizations, girls and young women-led organisations, INGOs,UN agencies and partners working and supporting the work of women and girls rights organizations in Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern and Central Africa.

This position statement provides an overview of some of the main issues pertaining to **"Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".** It identifies significant gaps, and it also highlights recommendations across African countries.

PREAMBLE

AWARE that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are central to economic and social development that are part of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable development Goals (SDGs) 5, 9 and 17 for "decent work and economic growth" and "industry, innovation and infrastructure". Goal 5b specifically identifies the enhanced 'use of enabling technology, in particular ICTs, to promote the empowerment of women, while SDG 9C is concerned with promoting universal ICT access, and SDG 17.6 with promoting global collaboration on and access to science, technology and innovation (UNGA, 2015).ICT is also entrenched in the African Union's Agenda 2063 which calls for a highly connected continent to drive business, social and governance development [1]. It is also a key enabler for reducing global inequality and achieving the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development(UNGA, 2015).

Acknowledging that, that information, communication, technology, and innovation are key drivers which enables women and girls to play an active role in development, support and dissemination networks. They also provides women and girls with access to new jobs and professions, to participation in interactive learning and online information initiatives and to knowledge and information for empowerment and for improving their lives [2]. These technologies are fundamental in ensuring women take their place in the public space of the information society, creating resources, contributing ideas and opinions and capitalizing on their own inventiveness and creativity.

Recognizing that technology mirrors the societies that create it, and access to (and effective use of) technologies is affected by intersecting spectrums of exclusion including gender, ethnicity, age, social class, geography, and disability. 'Existing power relations in society determine the enjoyment of benefits from ICTs; hence these technologies are not gender neutral' (Gurumurthy 2004) [3]. There is considerable disparity in access to the Internet amongst women within and across African countries.

[1]Corrigan, Terence. Africa's ICT infrastructure: Its present and prospects. SAIIA. [Online] June 26, 2020. https://saiia.org.za/research/africas-ict-infrastructure-its-present-and-prospects/.
[2] Ibid
[3] https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018_After-Access_Understanding-the-gender-gap-in-the-Global-South.pdf

Whether living in rural areas or city slums, women located at the intersection of other factors of exclusion, such as class, race (and associated marginalisation from education and employment), will experience even greater digital inequality than women generally.

Aware that Africa continues to experience ICT infrastructure deficit because of various reasons [4].Poor roads and electricity infrastructure (or a lack of it) in certain areas raises investment costs and lowers returns. The energy crisis characterised by electricity shortages and erratic supply. This shortage has had adverse effects on the development and use of ICTs. These limitations have created barriers to ICTs especially in rural and remote areas thereby depriving women and girls' access.

Concerned that only an estimated 30% of the population in Africa has access to internet. At the heart of the problem is insufficient investment in infrastructure both in communications networks (fibre, broadband data) as well as the hardware and devices that enable participation in these networks. High speed broadband coverage is still patchy with most rural and remote areas remaining uncovered due to a non-holistic approach to universal service. This is widening the urban-rural digital divide against the principle of equitable access. The African Development Bank (AfDB) estimates that of the annual US$170bn investment required to close Africa's infrastructure gap, US$7bn is needed every year for the development of the ICT sector [5].

Aware there is heightened uptake of ICTs in Africa by both men and women (Research ICT Africa,2018). This includes access to and use of mobile phones and the internet among women and women entrepreneurs in the informal sector who make use of ICTs – mobile phones and the internet – to conduct daily business activities. Access to the internet enables women to participate in the information economy, exercise citizenship rights, get access to health information and other services, form communities, engage in formal and informal processes to determine their social, cultural, and political life and more.

[4] https://www.ntu.edu.sg/cas/news-events/news/details/the-challenges-and-opportunities-of-bridging-the-africa-s-digital-divide
[5] Corrigan, Terence. Africa's ICT infrastructure: Its present and prospects. SAIIA. [Online] June 26, 2020. https://saiia.org.za/research/africas-ict-infrastructure-its-present-and-prospects/.

Concerned that women and men are not equally able to access and use ICTs and innovations. This gap increases as the technologies and services become more sophisticated and expensive, requiring greater levels of income and education to access and to operate. Facilitated access to ICTs for women who live in underprivileged communities especially those living in Indigenous, rural, and urban informal settlement is oriented to data mining and as a market tool for goods and services and rarely for transformational empowerment of women and girls.

Concerned that at its highest levels, the ICTs arena is characterised by strategic control and extraction exercised by powerful corporations and nations, reliant on monopolies built upon the intellectual property, increasing surveillance of the internet, and exploitation by capitalist imperialism, sexism, and racism.

Concerned that there is a shortage of ICT skilled personnel to roll out ICT programmes. This shortage has a knock-on digital literacy which drives uptake and usage of ICT services. The pervasive and persisting inequalities; lack of diversity, imbalance, stereotypes(technophobic) and exclusion of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) have created the digital divide in digital skills and women's participation in digital spaces, diminishing their opportunities to pursue a career in STEM fields.

Recognising that gender gaps affect social use of ICTs. A woman and a girl with a triple workload (between her job or occupation, her life at home and her role as a community leader, for example) is a woman and a girl who is less likely to learn how to use or appropriate ICTs. The traditional gendered roles of mothering and housework have become social barriers that keep women and girls in many marginal areas from going to cybercafés and computer centres. Adult women are not often seen in such places. The digital divide thus becomes a communication, information, and knowledge gap.

Concerned that existing power relations in society also determine the enjoyment of benefits from ICTs. It is here where collective and well-entrenched cultural, gender, class and race biases determine who benefits and who controls cyberspace, regardless of which formal policies are in place. Entry into the information society is coloured by symbolic and cultural issues that feed the childhood imaginary and cement dissimilar attitudes and appropriations. For boys, there are games and applications requiring skill,

creativity, cunning and concentration. Girls are left with the feeling that technology is just another adornment.

Recognizing that lack of legally binding regulations, lack of funds, insufficient awareness of the ICTs accessible services that do exist and the need to develop more and better ones remain the principal challenges further excluding disadvantaged groups of society such as – persons with disabilities, persons with specific needs, including indigenous peoples, people affected by conflict and displacement, and people living in rural areas, young women and girls. This exclusion hinders their ability to participate actively in social, economic and cultural life on equal footing.

Aware that similarly, young women and girls constitute a high proportion of ICTs users and opportunities should be created to ensure their full participation. Studies indicate that the elderly respond slowly to change and shun the use of modern technologies, and therefore the need for responsive and customized digital tools that leave no one behind.

Concerned that Online spaces perpetuate new forms of violence (online gender-based violence), curbing freedom of expression in a very gendered way [6]. ICTs have exacerbated many kinds of aggression against women and girls, such as human trafficking, identity theft; the marketing of images depicting women- and girls as sexual objects, pornography and a host of other harmful practices.

Recognizing that African women and girls are the most vulnerable to the threats posed by e-waste on the environment due to their dependence on land, forest, and water resource-based livelihood activities. E- waste has identified electrical and electronic equipment waste as an area of increasing concern in the region. The rapid acquisition of mobile devices experienced across the region; and added to this phenomenon, the relentless advances in upgrades have resulted in the generation of e-waste. E-waste poses a threat to the environment if not properly collected, segregated and treated. The safe management of e-waste is seldom practised and has detrimental effects to the land and biodiversity which is essential for women and girls livelihoods.

[6] Amy O'Donnell & Caroline Sweetman (2018) Introduction: Gender, development and ICTs, Gender & Development, 26:2, 217-229, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2018.1489952

Aware that African women and girls in their different diversities have been and continue to be disproportionately affected despite having contributed the least in creating this crisis. Natural disasters are identified as a major threat to socio-economic development and therefore the Continent adopted emergency telecommunications as one of the regional initiatives for almost all regions [7]. ICTs can play a significant role supporting women and girls in Disaster Management and Climate Change Africa needs to implement the Sendai Declaration and Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and mitigate the effects of climate change in line with the Paris Agreement, adopted by the climate change conference in December 2015.

Acknowledging that securing land tenure and natural resources for both women and men is key to achieving overall gender equality and sustainable development. Yet, many African governments are in the process of transitioning land and natural resources administrative data including private, community and public owned land into digital platforms. Currently, very few countries have more than 10% of women and girls with evidence of land ownership and control despite the 30% target by 2025 set by in 2016 by African Union. It is therefore imperative that digitisation of land information systems provides the much needed opportunity to fast-track secure women land rights for women and girls in Africa.

Concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic has, from its outset, raised issues at the crossroads of public health, trade, intellectual property (IP) policy, and the framework for and management of innovation and access, including issues related to technology transfer. ***The*** intellectual property (IP) regimes of African countries are a function of their colonial past, which imposed strong protections, and which have been entrenched through the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement) [8]. The discussion on access to technologies is incomplete without a mention of the TRIPS-plus regime – a characteristic of North-South FTAs – which has strengthened patent protection, while attenuating the already meagre space for policy manoeuvre that developing countries have under TRIPS.

[7] The World Telecommunications Development Conference which was held in Hyderabad, India in 2010 (WTDC-2010),
[8] The TRIPS COVID-19 Waiver, Challenges for Africa and Decolonizing Intellectual Property. WTO, Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (1995) https://www.wto.org/english/ docs_e/legal_e/27-trips.pdf

Medicine prices have been on an upward spiral since the coming into force of TRIPS-plus obligations like data exclusivity, patent term extension, and patent linkage, among others [9]. The plight of women is differentially exaggerated by developments of this nature, on account of their deplorable access to healthcare and medicine. This has had a devastating effect on their ability to access necessary health products both before and during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledging that, in many parts of Africa, policy making has been constrained by the disproportionally low representation and participation of women in policy making spaces. This means that the views of women, which could be critical in understanding key issues and challenges that women face and how these can best be addressed at policy levels, will be lacking.

Recognising that African women stand to be disproportionately affected by the Artificial Intelligence (AI) bias. Firstly, African women are underrepresented in AI and Data Science fields. Globally, only 22% of AI professionals are women (World Economic Forum, 2018). Even when women are employed in these roles, very few of them are in top decision-making roles. This gap in representation means that the lived experiences of African women and girls are omitted from the product development cycle, and that AI technologies are not designed with their needs and desires in mind. One cause of this bias lies in the issue of datasets. Historically, traditional data sets left out women and other marginalised groups (Ahmed, 2020). Data deficits can also contribute to this intersectional exclusion of African women and girls.

[9] https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/de/gender-inclusive-trade-and-the-limits-of-liberal-feminism/

Our Key Demands

The consensus: Key Recommendations the Africa CSO's Pre-CSW67 Consultation for African Feminists, CSO's, Girls, Young Women and Women's Rights Advocates:

a) Digital technology infrastructure: - Member States must prioritize substantial investments make their digital ICTs infrastructure more resilient and accessible; improve electricity accessibility and road networks especially in rural areas and informal settlements. This would substantially improve the ease of doing business and encourage greater private sector and foreign investor participation as well as access to ICTs by women and girls.

b) Internet Connectivity: The complementary role of the fiscal and ICT authorities is important is ensuring service affordability for all. We recommend Member States to continuously review the impact of their fiscal policies to ensure that ICTs equipment and services are affordable and accessible especially to women and girls. Measures such as lowering import tax on telecom equipment and abolishing VAT and import duties on smartphones would be one path leading to service affordability and accessibility.

c) ICTs skills and Knowledge: Member states are to integrate and scale-up digital ICTs in the education curricula commencing from early childhood education level as well as promote ICTs uptake within communities. Digital technologies have proven to be practical and tangible tools for women and girls to improve their living conditions. ICTs can facilitate women to gain employment (for example through telework or newly created information jobs), obtain cost-effective health services and education (such as through online courses or software-based literacy programs) and to increase their income (such as through e-business channels and online transactions). This would imply a virtuous circle, whereas women and girls could fight their current disadvantages in society by exploiting new digital opportunities.

d) Social and gender norms: Member States institute gender transformative sensitization programmes to curb gender stereotypes and discrimination ; recognize, reduce and redistribute women's and girls' disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work through access to adequate parental leave, affordable and accessible quality child care, flexible work hours and social security mechanisms. Member states must support programmes and interventions on reversing individual and collective attitudes that restrict women's and girls full participation in the benefits of ICTs , innovation, ; technology and the internet and that perpetuate patriarchal control and abuse. One aspect of changing patriarchal norms and standards is to strive for greater gender balance amongst experts and decision makers in particular fields. This remains an important strategy in relation to the internet. Positive images of women and girls who are leaders and technological wizards in the tech field are the exception, but exist nevertheless.

e) Inclusion that leaves no one behind : ICTs should be developed in such a way as to accommodate the diversity of users with emphasis on quality, accessibility and affordability. The interest of young women, women and girls with disabilities, elderly women, and LGBTQI communities must be integrated into the design and implementation of ICTs programmes so that all benefit equally and participate in all the sectors of the economy and the social and political life. Bearing in mind that the United Nations identifies access to information, including digital information and the Internet, as a basic human right that should be extended to all citizens of the world, a prime goal of digital inclusion must be full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) [10].The Convention designates ICTs as an integral component of accessibility rights, on par with transportation and the physical environment. Implementation of CRPD also reflects and impacts on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the global commitment "that no one will be left behind" [11]. However, leaving no one behind will be possible only if quality ICTs are available, accessible and affordable to all, and in particular to the disadvantaged groups of society – persons with disabilities, persons with specific needs, including indigenous peoples and people living in rural areas, women and girls, youth and children, as well as older persons [12].

[10] 1 ITU strategic plan for 2020-2023. Resolution 71 (Rev. Dubai, 2018) of the Plenipotentiary Conference. vii
[11] United Nations. A/RES/70/1.Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
[12]

f) Curb Online gender based violence: Member States must develop frameworks; design and support interventions where ICTs can be used to prevent and report GBV. For example through awareness campaigns; network building, disseminate research and generate opinion on the many risks that women face when we use ICTs and are often not aware of.Member states must encourage women and girls, including marginalised groups, to lead, advise on and influence content and provision on gender-transformative and positive digital sexuality education. This includes improving capacity and technical competence of duty bearers on substantive investigation, collection and presentation of evidence and prosecution of perpetrators of technology assisted violence against women and girls.

g) Privacy laws will be critical: Member states must strengthen and enforce legislation to protect privacy rights of women and girls violations of women and girls. Privacy rights have resounding effects on individuals and societies. The complexities arise with the need to balance one person's right to privacy with another person's right to know – two basic human rights.

h) Sustainable e-Waste Management: Member States are encouraged to strengthen the legislative and policy framework, monitoring and enforcement; to ensure safe management of e-waste is practiced. This includes holding to account technology companies and private sector firms on their waste management practices; establish recycling facilities; and awareness campaign on safe and timely disposal of obsolete electrical and electronic equipment.

i) Use of ICTs for Disaster and Climate Change Management : Member States and private sector in the ICT sector are to endeavour to provide disaster-affected communities, especially women and girls in all their diversities; first responders and entities involved in disaster management with appropriate, timely and reliable telecommunications/ICTs . This can be achieved by allocating appropriate resources on trends and emerging technological innovations, financing mechanisms, case studies, climate change issues and the role of the private sector and other non-state stakeholders to address challenges in deploying telecommunications/ICT resources for disaster response.

j) Using ICT to accelerate gender equality in ownership and control of land and natural resources in Africa: Land data digitisation systems must support generation of gender statistical data, enable easy access to land information particularly for women and girls and promote land transaction transparency. Furthermore, African governments need to harness and invest in the power of community driven data by women and girls. This will in return accelerate availability of land & natural resources information towards better programming and close the gap between great laws , policies , past commitments and their implementation.

k) Decolonising Intellectual Property in Access to Technologies: There is need to reform repressive and oppressive treaties .Account must also be taken of the complex nature of vaccines, biologics, diagnostic tests, medical devices, respirators, which are not only covered by multiple patents [13] but also covered by additional IP protections in the form of copyrights, industrial designs, trade secrets, clinical trial data, manufacturing know how and other information.

l) Women's participation in digital governance and policy making: Member States are to properly resource, affordable, quality education systems including in STEM related fields and public participation mechanisms that support meaningful engagement for policy influencing of women from community levels to national, regional and international levels. This will ensure the inclusion of women and girls living in rural areas in shaping macroeconomic and scientific processes and decisions and promote empowering women to use ICTs. Member States must also implement affirmative action measures to facilitate more women and girls to enter the ICTs field by providing training and empowerment, generating the requisite knowledge and seeking opportunities for job, legal and professional betterment. The objective is for women to increasingly participate in technology, in increasingly relevant roles including decision making in the ICTs sector.

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m) Access to digital technology and Innovation for women and girls empowerment: Member states must develop; review and reform policy in areas that would allow women and girls to enjoy the benefits of ICTs equally. This would include policies and programmes that incentivise the education of girls and young women, which in turn will increase the income that women and girls have to spend on ICTs services. Partnerships could be created to provide vocational and ICTs skills training for women and girls entrepreneurs to address the educational gap and increase their earning potential.

Key Strategies and Policies to Enact and/or Review

- Adopt human rights centered regulatory frameworks for artificial intelligence (AI) governance
- Invest adequately in strategies that prioritize innovations and technological solutions that are in line with the realization of national digital agendas and contribute to nurturing safe, equal and inclusive societies.
- Commit to disagregate data by gender on ICTs use and access at national level
- Facilitate meaningful participation of women and girls in the governance of emerging technologies and management of digital transformation plans.
- Introduce subsidies that make emerging technologies affordable for rural communities and, particularly, for women and girls who have restricted access.

The African Women's Development and Communications Network

NGO CSW Africa Afrique

For more information on CSW get in touch with the co-chairs of NGO CSW/AFRICA

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NGO CSW/Africa is one of the regional forums of Non-Governmental Organization Commission on the Status of Women established in 2013 as a substantive committee under the auspices Conference of NGOs (CoNGO). NGOCSW/Africa was created to increase the effectiveness of African Civil Society participation in the Commission on the Status of women. Since its establishment NGO CSW/Africa has provided leadership to African women in mobilizing women to participate in CSW and ensuring that women effectively engage and contribute to processes leading up to, during and after the Commission.

Members of NGO CSW/Africa include Zamara Foundation, FEMNET (African Women's Development and Communication Network), Egyptian Feminist Union, Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMwA), Servitas Cameroon, Kadirat Tunisia, Women in Law Southern Cameroon (WLSA) Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) and Women for Change Cameroon.

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