Association for Progressive Communications Written Submission on the General Recommendation on girls'/women's right to education
July 2014

Introduction

At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, information and communication technologies (ICTs) were recognised as critical for achieving women's empowerment and gender equality (Section J, Beijing Platform for Action). In 2003, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), reinforced that the development of ICTs will provide opportunities for women's full and equal participation in all spheres of society. Despite this recognition however, and even as the ICTs are seen as important in supporting development as a whole, the indispensable role that ICTs have in addressing discrimination against women has not been sufficiently explored.

The internet is a critical resource that enables individuals, and women and girls in particular, to exercise their right to speak, impart opinions, share ideas, build knowledge, gain skills and access information. Access to the internet enables women and girls to participate in the information economy, exercise human rights, get access to health information and services, form communities, engage in formal and informal processes to determine our social, cultural and political life, and more. For disadvantaged groups of women and girls, who experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression such as those living in rural areas, migrants, women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, women living with HIV/AIDS and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women and others, the internet has become an important space in the struggle for fundamental rights and freedoms.

ICTs and girls/women's right to education

The internet and other ICTs have transformed the way people live, work, play, learn and understand the world. While there is still a pronounced gender gap in internet use and access, data

collected by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) shows that women's online presence is significant – and growing. According to the ITU, globally 37% of all women are online compared with 41% of all men. The developing world is home to approximately 826 million female and 980 million male internet users while in the developed world the estimate is 475 million female and 483 million male internet users (International Telecommunications Union 2013 ICT Facts and Figures[1]). There are ample examples of effective projects that encourage teachers to incorporate technology into their teaching methods, technology tools to build literacy, 'virtual teachers' and many innovative applications that support both teachers and learners' needs in challenging educational settings, including long distance learning and education for remotely situated populations[2]. While these developments are significant and should be encouraged, they do not always necessarily challenge the fundamental discrimination that girls and women face in relation to accessing education, their experiences within the education system and life thereafter.

Issues for the Committee to consider

a) Discrimination in access to ICTs impacts on the extent to which women and girls receive equal opportunity with men and boys to the same quality and type of education and have the same potential benefit to such education

As in other areas of life, discriminatory cultural norms and practices act as barriers to women and girls' ability to access ICTs. In the educational context, one way this is manifested is through the notion that boys should have priority in learning technology because they will enter the labour market and require the skills. APCs work in the global south shows how in many countries even when access is available through local telecentres or access points, women and girls will not use them due to a range of factors including safe and accessible location and opening hours for girls and women, the high presence of men and boys in such sites, viewing of online porn and sexual solicitation near some access points, limited free time due to other gendered duties or cultural norms where girls may cede technology control and access to boys over their own needs.

The consequence of this for women is worsened as they are left further behind not only in terms of education, but in work opportunities and being able to be active citizens. Current workforce skills requirements already demand basic technolgical competency. Increasingly governments move to e-models for community consultation, information sharing, even to register for school and pay

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1   See www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/facts/material/ICTFactsFigures2013.pdf

2   See http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/sis/newslog/CategoryView,category,ICT%2Bin%2BEducation.aspx for more examples)

taxes.

"Women may also miss out on new opportunities of earning more income, starting a new business, accessing or selling products to new markets, participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives, finding or changing jobs, or forging new contacts and accessing information – in short, women may miss out on the new digital opportunities offered by access to the Internet and broadband"[3].

b) Discrimination in girls access to science and technology education impacts on the extent to which education can be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to women and girls in urban and rural areas and disadvantaged groups

The Final Agreed Conclusions of the 55th Session of the Commission on the Status of women stresses that education is a human right and that ...'equal access to education, training and science and technology empowers women and girls in the context of global and technological changes and promotes development , all human rights, human rights education and learning at all levels, as well as gender equality, the elimination of al forms of discrimination against women and the eradication of poverty" (Agreed Conclusions, CSW 55, 2011, E/2011/27-E/CN.6/2011/12).

However, the disproportionately low participation of women and girls in education, employment and decision-making in technology, policy and legislation in the field of science, technology and mathematics (STEM) – which is compounded by discrimination and violence against women, including sexual harassment and bullying (Agreed Conclusions, CSW 55, 2011, E/2011/27-E/CN.6/2011/12) - affects how the internet and ICT are shaped, according to whose realities and priorities. A knock-on effect of this is that technology solutions adopted by states and other actors precisely to support girls' education seldom reflect the lived experiences of girls and women themselves because women are absent as developers, creators and innovators.

Initiatives to increase the number of girls in science, technology, education and mathematics streams in education and in career options are limited but growing. This includes ITU's Girls in ICT initiative which raises awareness on empowering and encouraging girls and young women to consider studies and careers in ICTs (see http://girlsinict.org/).

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3   See "Doubling digital opportunities: enhancing the inclusion of women and girls in the information society: a report by the Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender" available at http://www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/working-groups/bb-doubling-digital-2013.pdf

c) Violence against women online is a barrier to accessing education, information and other opportunities and prevents women and girls from enjoying rights in their personal, family, political and public life

Even as recognition of the role of ICTs in the delivery of key services such as education, health care and financial services grows and girls and women are encouraged to take up STEM education and careers, violence against women that is mediated by technology is increasingly becoming part of their online interactions. Violence against women that is committed, abetted or aggravated through the use of ICT and in online spaces is a significant barrier to women and girl's ability to take advantage of the opportunities that ICT provide for the full realisation of women's human rights[4].

APC's work in Africa, Asia and Latin America reveals that when faced with violence online, either because of cyberstalking, harassment, threats and other violations, frequent strategies employed by girls and women are to self-censor, reduce participation or to withdraw from platforms and technology they are using all together.[5] In addition, as a way to keep girls "safe", parents often respond by forbid access to technology when girls report aggression online, resulting in further silence regarding violence.

Recognising how technology related forms of violence against women are limiting women's access to the opportunities provided by ICTs, including to education and information, the Commission on the Status of Women 57th session urged states to:

"Support the development and use of information and communications technology and social media as a resource for the empowerment of women and girls, including access to information on the prevention of and response to violence against women and girls; and develop mechanisms to combat the use of information and communications technology and social media to perpetrate violence against women and girls, including the criminal misuse of information and communications technology for sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, child pornography and

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4   Significantly the UN Working Group on Discrimination in Law and Public Life has made a specific recommendation to states to support women's equal participation in political and public life through ICTs, including by Increasing women's digital literacy, particularly among marginalized women. See
  A/HRC/23/50 available at http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WG/A.HRC.23.50_English.pdf
5   After learning of how girls in technology project were withdrawing from using their mobile phones because   of harassment our partner in South Africa developed a series of fact sheets to support learners, teachers and schools on how to respond. See http://girlsnet.org.za/fact-sheets.html for more information. There are many initiatives of this nature.

trafficking in women and girls, and emerging forms of violence, such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying and privacy violations that compromise the safety of women and girls[6]".

d) Censorship of online content prevents women and girls' access to information on sexual and reproductive health and rights

The internet has become a significant, albeit, controversial site for sex education on a range of topics including HIV / AIDS, contraception, menopause and sexual pleasure. It meets an important information gap faced by young people in schools where sex education is regarded with alarm and moral anxiety. For example, in India 12 states banned sex education and the United states have emphasised "abstinence only" sex education. In the US, young people under the age of 17 are unable to access unfiltered content in publicly funded libraries. Added to the lack of comprehensive sex education in schools, this has an impact of significantly limiting their right and evolving capacity to exercise agency and decision-making about a critical component of their development.[7]

Conclusion and Recommendations

APC commends the CEDAW Committee's recommendations to the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland to: "take coordinated measures to encourage increased participation by girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and in apprenticeships "(**CEDAW/C/GBR/CO/7)** and to Austria to "take coordinated measures to encourage further diversification of educational and vocational choices of boys and girls and girls' increased participation in apprenticeships, crafts, science and technology" (**CEDAW/C/AUT/CO/7).**

In relation to the general recommendation on on girls'/women's right to education we recommend that states:

– Ensure women and girls are able to fully harness the potential of information and communications technologies for education, empowerment and the exercise of their full range of human rights through meaningful access to the internet.
– Recognise and address violence against women that is committed, abetted or aggravated

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6   See E/2013/27 E/CN.6/2013/11 available at
    https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/CSW57_Agreed_Conclusions_%28CSW_report_excerpt%29.pdf
7   For more about the regulation of online content see erotics.apc.org, specifically the 'Exploratory research on sexuality
    and the internet - summary report' available at http://www.genderit.org/resources/erotics-exploratory-research-
    sexuality-and-internet-summary-report

through the use of ICT and in online spaces, which acts as a significant barrier to women and girl's ability to take advantage of the opportunities that ICT provide for the full realisation of women's human rights

– Invest adequately in ICTs for education for women and girls and take measures to increase girl's participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics

– Ensure the availability information related to sexual and reproductive health rights through sex education including information that is available online ,and that this content is not subject to censorship

Who we are

The Association for Progressive Communication's mission is to empower and support organizations, social movements and individuals through the use of information and communication technologies for human rights and development and believes gender equality and women's empowerment are relevant in all aspects of this mission. APC counters discrimination, sexism, exclusion and violence against women in technology design, policy and use.

*Contact: **Jac sm Kee:** Women's Rights Programme Manager (jac@apcwomen.org) and **Jan Moolman:** Women's Rights Projects Coordinator (jan@apcwomen.org)*

Executive Director's office, P.O. Box 29755, Melville, 2109, Johannesburg, SOUTH AFRICA