**Submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on:**

**General comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment.**

**Submitting organisation:**

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme is a nine-year (2015-2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation programme following the lives of adolescents (10 – 19) in diverse Global South contexts. In this way, GAGE’s methodology is unique in its ability to capture the pivotal life changes that occur as girls and boys transition from early adolescence through puberty and into early adulthood. GAGE aims to generate new evidence on ‘what works’ to transform the lives of poor adolescent girls to enable them to move out of poverty and fast-track social change. The programme is funded by UK Aid from the UK government.

GAGE aims to understand what programmes are most effective in transforming adolescent girls’ lives at specific junctures during the second decade of life. We are generating unique cross-country data following 18,000 adolescents (including approximately 12,000 girls and 6,000 boys), along with their families and peers, across the course of the critical transition from early adolescence through to adulthood in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Rwanda, Jordan and Lebanon.

We hope that these results will support policymakers and implementers to develop policies and programmes to effectively reach adolescent girls and boys to advance their well-being and what is needed to meet the ambitious targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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**Submission**

We respond to the Committee’s invitation to submit relevant research evidence, findings from consultations with children, as well as evidence of good practices to inform the drafting of the General Comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment.

In our submission we consider the following aspects:

* The purpose and scope of the General Comment;
* General measures of implementation by State parties needed to realise children’s rights in relation to the digital environment;
* Views on the issues and questions raised in the concept note; and
* Suggestions for new issues for inclusion in the General Comment.

1. **INTRODUCTION** 
   1. Adolescents’ use of, and access to, their digital environment has changed rapidly in recent years, bringing both benefits and risks to their development. The adolescent years of 10-19 are a critical stage of development, in which significant changes occur in the body and the brain that impact young people’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical states (Patton et al., 2018; Dahl et al., 2018). This life stage provides an opportunity for adolescents to prosper from the benefits of technology, while also rendering the second decade of life a period of high vulnerability to the potentially negative influences of technology, such as exposure to harassment and sexual exploitation.
   2. As young people move through their adolescent years, their positive and negative interactions with technology shifts and develops. Thus, it is vital to capture the nuances of this changing relationship through longitudinal research. In particular, as girls progress through adolescence, gendered norms begin to impact their trajectories and they often experience a narrowing of their opportunities (Jones et al., 2018a). This includes their networks in both the digital and non-digital world. An understanding of this impact over time is therefore needed to help expand adolescent girls’ worlds.
   3. ***We recommend that the forthcoming General Comment consider the diversity of adolescents on the basis of age, gender, geographical and political context, disability, religious or ethnic minority status, sexuality etc., paying attention to the different challenges and opportunities that younger and older adolescents face in relation to their access and use of digital technologies in different contexts.***
   4. ***We also call on the Committee to be mindful of the ‘Leave no-one behind’ agenda, taking into account the particular vulnerabilities faced by adolescents living with a disability; married, separated and divorced adolescent girls; adolescent mothers; adolescents from refugee and internally displaced communities. These populations, highlighted by evidence gaps found in our evidence reviews, are often subject to stigma and discrimination which often means they are invisible in their community, to service providers and to researchers. These vulnerable populations are often those with the most to gain from accessing their digital environments and so including those left behind will have far reaching consequences (WHO and World Bank, 2011). Furthermore, they may be less aware of potential online risks (UNICEF, 2018).***
2. **AGE**

‘*Our children have cell phones…as long as they are old’ (Mothers, Focus group discussion, Ethiopia)*

* 1. Our research has found that there is an extremely large age gap in access to digital technologies across all countries. In Ethiopia, our results found that only 3% of the younger cohort have a mobile phone and very few young adolescents have reliable internet access (2%). This is compared to 48% of older adolescents who have access to mobile phones and 34% that have access to internet. In Jordan, access to mobile phones is slightly higher among the younger cohort than in Ethiopia, yet, the percentage still increases dramatically with age, particularly with boys. Access to mobile phones increased from 21% to 71% for older adolescent boys and from 12.5% to 38% for older adolescent girls.
  2. Similarly, in Bangladesh, access to mobiles phones increased from 4% among younger adolescents to 42% among older adolescents. The large increase in access observed is likely due to the increased financial freedom older adolescents are afforded with age, in addition to increased access to paid work. Our qualitative work highlights many examples, particularly in Jordan, of adolescents saving their wages to buy mobiles phones and other forms of technology.
  3. In Palestine, research shows that owning a mobile is positively correlated with age - younger adolescents are less likely to own a mobile. On the use of social networks, a recent study highlighted that 40.7% of children aged 13-15 had a social media profile, an almost two-fold increase in the social media presence of under 12s - 21.7% (Alredaisi, 2019).
  4. ***We recommend the Committee consider age as a key factor when addressing the challenges and opportunities posed by the digital environment. Our evidence shows that there are important differences in access and use – including use of social media - between younger and older adolescents – which will have important implications in terms of children’s education and digital literacy; freedom of (virtual) assembly; right to culture, leisure and play; and health and wellbeing. State Parties will need to consider what age-dependent differential access rates require in terms of protection of privacy, identity and data processing; protection from violence, sexual exploitation and other harms and health and wellbeing.***

1. **GENDER**

*‘They think that the girl must not carry a cell phone…to prevent the girl from talking to young males’* (17 year old Syrian girl, Jordan).

* 1. Gender greatly influences adolescents’ ability to access digital technology. In Jordan, GAGE findings highlight that the gender gap is highly visible. Adolescent girls are 46% less likely to have a phone than their male peers and 18% less likely to have access to the internet as needed. This gap increases as adolescent girls get older; adolescent girls in the older cohort were found to face the highest restrictions (47% compared to 40% for younger adolescent girls).
  2. The difference is less pronounced in our findings from Ethiopia, but it is still apparent with girls being 16% less likely to have a phone compared to boys (47% of males versus 39% of females). In contrast to findings in Jordan, in Ethiopia the largest gender gap was found in the younger cohort. Although, both groups had limited access, younger boys were 45% more likely to have a mobile phone than younger girls (7% and 4% respectively). A large gender gap was also seen in Bangladesh, as boys are significantly more likely to have a mobile phone than girls (24% of boys compared to only 13% of girls). Additionally, 35% of boys had access to the internet compared to only 18% of girls.
  3. In Gaza, studies on adolescent ownership of mobile phones and use of the internet echoes findings elsewhere whilst placing an emphasis on the particular risks that girls face: a 2016 PCBS study highlighted that while 22% of male youth access the internet at a café, only 1% of female youth report using cafés to get online, and 8% of young women admitted in a recent survey to either engaging in or receiving flirtatious exchanges through social media. This percentage increased to 16.7% among Palestinian youth aged 18-22.
  4. Across countries, our qualitative findings found that girls’ restricted access to technologies is largely due to conservative gender norms. In Ethiopia, parents fear that adolescent girls are at risk of being led astray by technology, in particular by certain television stations. Even so, parents appear to place less restrictions on adolescent boys’ internet use. Similarly, in Jordan parental fears that adolescent girls will ruin their reputation by posting pictures online result in strict restrictions. Married girls are particularly restricted when it comes to access to digital technologies largely due to a lack of autonomy and decision-making. Our qualitative work found that husbands will often place strict restriction on their wives’ access to technology in the household. In Jordan, this was often due to their husband’s fears that they will be contacted by other men. Married girls in Jordan were also vulnerable to online harassment from ex-husbands or lovers who would threaten to post photos of adolescent girls without their hijab.
  5. In Gaza, our research notes many Gazan parents’ fear that technology exposes girls to additional dangers. Parental fears related to technological devices and the internet prompt many parents and brothers to restrict their daughters/sisters’ use of television, mobile phones, and computers, which ultimately limits girls’ access to information, social interaction, and virtual communities. The generation gap is huge and is increasing among adolescents’ and their families’ older members due to change in the access to information, globalization and the use of advanced IT. The use of advanced IT also reduces cross-generations interactions ultimately having an effect on the family environment, parenting and care (Abu Hamad et al, 2017, 2018).
  6. Our research also shows, contrary to PCBS survey findings (PCBS, 2016), that girls in Gaza use the internet more than boys but are also more restricted by their parents in their usage. We found more girls than boys regarded their mobiles as the most valuable item they owned. The fact that girls think they use the internet more than boys while statistics indicate otherwise may be linked to their feeling of being homebound, whilst boys have greater access to peer networks outside the home and therefore may not need to use the internet as heavily for socialization purposes.
  7. Girls also reported frequent use of social media and were excited about the new opportunities it opened for them. The internet was not only a source of information and entertainment but also of communication and a way to access support networks in a context where mobility is heavily restricted. With limited access to trusted adults and unbiased information, girls reported using the internet to search for information they cannot obtain otherwise – e.g. access to information on sexual and reproductive health rights.
  8. Adolescent boys, especially as they get older, are afforded greater freedom to access their digital environment, however this can sometimes have negative consequences. In Ethiopia, parents and key informants alike are concerned about adolescents, especially boys, accessing pornography on the internet. Yet, parents appear to place less restrictions on adolescent boys’ internet use, which in many cases, allows them to freely access explicit content.
  9. ***We emphasize the need for the Committee to consider gender as a critical issue for inclusion in the General Comment. Our research shows that girls and boys experience differential rates of access to digital technologies, which in turn has important consequences on their education and digital literacy; freedom of (virtual) assembly; right to culture, leisure and play; and health and wellbeing; protection of privacy, identity and data processing. Additionally, restrictive and discriminatory gender norms have consequences over girls’ usage of digital technology, and can put them at higher risk of violence, sexual exploitation and harassment, potentially damaging their wellbeing.***

1. **CONTEXT**

*‘People can learn through media. If there was electricity and they have TV they can learn from it. Even in the rural area there is a difference between those on the main road and off road….they have better awareness’* (Boys, Focus Group Discussion, Ethiopia).

* 1. Adolescents in rural areas are at a greater disadvantage with regards to access to digital environments compared to those in urban settings. In Ethiopia, GAGE findings show that among the younger cohort, adolescents from urban areas are almost twice as likely to have a mobile phone as those from rural areas (5.2% compared to 2.7%). Additionally, even though only 2.1% of young urban adolescents can use the internet whenever they want or need to, this was still significantly greater than among rural adolescents (none of the younger rural adolescents in our survey reported having consistent internet access). The literature has highlighted the negative impact that living rural settings has on adolescents’ future aspirations (Dercon and Singh 2013). Our qualitative work found that this was largely due to greater access to technology in urban setting that helps shape adolescent aspirations, highlighting the impact that a lack of digital connectivity can have on rural adolescents’ futures.
  2. In Jordan, adolescents in refugee camps have the highest levels of access to mobile phones at 39%, this is compared to 34% in host communities and 25% in the Informal Tented Settlements (ITS). This is possibly due to the greater opportunities for adolescents to engage in paid work in the camps and lower demands on household expenses. Conversely, adolescents in the host communities have significantly better access (74%) to the internet than both adolescents in formal camps (57%) and the ITS (33%). Large differences were also found between nationalities in Jordan with Jordanians having significantly greater access to the internet than non-Jordanians, likely due to income differentials.
  3. In Gaza our research found that electricity cuts particularly affect girls, whose primary use of the internet and other digital services enables them as to connect to peers and information in ways that their context disallows.
  4. ***We urge the Committee to consider how context affects children and adolescents’ access to digital technology. Our research shows that settings have an important impact on whether and how early adolescents are able to access digital world, as well as what the purpose of that access is. Our research shows that this in turn has an important impact on adolescents’ future aspirations – with noticeable impacts on their ability to access to information and freedom of expression and thought; right to education and digital literacy; freedom of (virtual) assembly; right to culture, leisure and play; and health and well-being. In contexts of crisis and limited mobility – like Gaza – the internet and other digital networks enable adolescents to access peer networks and information that they would otherwise be not able to enjoy – fundamental rights enshrined in the CRC.***

1. **DISABILITY**

*‘I post things on Facebook when I am depressed and that helps me… Sometimes I search for videos on YouTube about how to reduce sadness.’ (Girl with cerebral palsy, 18 years, West Bank)*

* 1. It is widely noted that digital technologies are vital to enable adolescents with disabilities the ability to overcome various challenges and access to a plethora ofopportunities (WHO and World Bank, 2011). Yet, due to social stigma, household poverty, and intra-household discrimination, among other factors, this population is often unable to access these technologies.
  2. In Ethiopia, we also found that adolescents with disabilities are less likely to likely to have access to digital or information technology than their peers without disabilities. Gaps in access to reliable internet access and mobile phones were not found in the younger cohort, yet, as mentioned earlier, very few younger adolescents had access to technology irrespective of disability. However, differences in the older cohort were more pronounced with only 31% of older adolescents with disabilities reporting having a phone for their own personal use, compared to 43% of their non-disabled peers. Similar findings were found in Jordan, with adolescents with disabilities 15% less likely to have a phone than adolescents without disabilities and 13% less likely to have internet access.
  3. In line with the literature, our qualitative work highlights the important role technological connectivity can have in the lives of adolescents with a disability. Adolescents spoke of using social media to connect with other adolescents with disabilities (Ethiopia), using Braille phones to listen to music or lectures on YouTube (Jordan); and of computer labs equipped with different applications and technologies that help them in their daily life, including mobile applications for sign language, Braille phones, applications on accessibility (Palestine). Again, this highlights the vital need to bridge the gap in access to technology for adolescents with disabilities.
  4. In Gaza we found that 90% of those surveyed were not aware about the existence of any disability forums including internet forums and only 15% of children with disabilities or their caregivers had used the internet to access information. According to recent research studies, nearly 38% of Palestinian children with disabilities are out of school entirely and less than 45% are enrolled in regular education. Nearly two-thirds of CWDs in the West Bank said their disability limited their access to education (versus 38.7% in Gaza), with only about a quarter feeling their school was supportive of their disability, and a third saying educational tools were not adapted to their needs.
  5. ***We recommend that the Committee consider disability as a significant factor when thinking about children’s access and use of digital technology. Our research shows that discrimination against adolescents living with disabilities results in lower access levels despite evidence of the positive impact digital engagement and digital tools can have on their wellbeing. We recognise that State Parties will need to consider the implications of different kinds of disability in terms of children’s protection of privacy, identity and data processing; protection from violence, sexual exploitation and other harms and health and wellbeing.***

1. **DATA AVAILABILITY** 
   1. ***The current draft of the concept note makes no reference to how children’s rights in relation to the digital environment can be realised on the basis of evidence-based guidance. In line with the 1995 Beijing Convention, we urge the Committee to include recommendations that call for Governments, the United Nations System, research institutions, non-governmental organisations, business enterprises and national and international statistical organisations to collect gender, age, context and disability disaggregated data on children and their access and use of digital technologies and participation in the digital world. It is only through the collection of disaggregated data and its evaluation that we will be able to understand how children’s rights can be both protected and realised in an increasingly digital world, and what good practices are yielding positive results that will enable State Parties to realise their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.***
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