**Comments from Access Now to Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13**

Re: [Call for Inputs](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/WaystoBridgetheGenderDigital.aspx)

February 2017

**Introduction**

Access Now ([www.accessnow.org](http://www.accessnow.org)) is an international organisation that works to defend and extend digital rights of users globally. Through representation in 10 countries around the world Access Now provides thought leadership and policy recommendations to the public and private sectors to ensure the internet’s continued openness and the protection of fundamental rights. We engage with an action-focused global community, and our technology arm operates a 24/7 Digital Security Helpline that provides real-time direct technical assistance to users around the world.

Access Now appreciates this opportunity to input into this OHCHR consultation. We believe that extending access to the internet and ICTs is essential to defending human rights in the 21st century. The gender digital divide exacerbates economic inequality, obstructs the free flow of information and ideas, prevents the exercise of human rights, and slows innovation. Our organisation works to bridge the gender digital divide via a human rights-based approach in four main areas: strengthening our policies and practices on gender *within* Access Now; digital security assistance for organizations led by and advocating for women’s rights; advocating for internet connectivity and capacity building; and international advocacy for digital rights.

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### Internal policy and practice: Expanding our community

For Access Now, achieving diversity is a mission-critical activity and purpose.[[1]](#footnote-1) Access Now created an internal Diversity Working Group (DWG) to strengthen our commitment to diversity and empowerment.[[2]](#footnote-2) Through this entity we aim to cultivate a working culture, policies, and programs that are considerate of, reflect, and support our diverse staff and the diverse global community we serve.

To begin, the Diversity Working Group conducted two surveys of our staff to assess our needs and establish baseline priorities for supporting diversity as a global organisation. One area that staff identified for supporting diversity is recruiting, hiring, and development. To improve our staff diversity, we are reaching out to independent consultants, human rights groups, and others to develop strategies to improve our outreach to women and members of other marginalized communities. Beyond ensuring that our job descriptions are diversity-friendly, we also work to ensure that people in marginalized communities get job announcements and feel comfortable applying. Inclusive and diverse staff can also be cultivated through an organisation’s policies and benefits. We introduced new recruiting strategies but also are examining our employment benefits offerings so that Access Now appeals to candidates and staff with diverse demographic profiles and backgrounds.

Recently, the Diversity Working Group put significant effort into the creation of the Access Now Anti-Harassment Policy.[[3]](#footnote-3) The organization strives to treat people with dignity, decency, and respect, and to build a community without intimidation, discrimination, or hostility for everyone — regardless of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, nationality, origin, race, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or physical appearance. Putting this into practice required crafting a policy with clear definitions, confidential reporting mechanisms, and escalation and appeals processes. The policy prohibits harassment, including sexual harassment, of any kind, and encourages reporting by at-risk persons. Its drafting required input and expertise from across the organisation, and the resulting policy and processes will assist staff in creating and maintaining safe spaces for people, on and offline.

### Digital security assistance:

#### Direct technical support

Access Now contributes to efforts to close the gender digital divide by producing and disseminating technical guidance and support tailored to mitigate digital security threats based on the target’s personal and professional profile, including characteristics such as gender.

Access Now runs a [Digital Security Helpline](https://www.accessnow.org/help/), a free-of-charge resource for civil society around the world. We offer real-time, direct technical assistance and advice to civil society groups and activists, media organisations, journalists and bloggers, and human rights defenders.

In 2016, we handled more than 800 requests for assistance through the helpline. A single case can take weeks and involve dozens of people to reach resolution. We help journalists protect their documents and sources; activists manage their social media accounts and safeguard their online identities; bloggers set up secure communications channels; and much more. We also help civil society organisations audit and harden their communications infrastructure, and offer digital security clinics at conferences across the globe. Our Helpline staff provides assistance in eight languages: English, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Tagalog, and Arabic.

Our Helpline does not track the gender of the individuals we work with, but we keep record of the focus of their work. For example, we have dealt with 118 cases in total for groups or individuals that defend women’s rights. Most of these cases were preventative in nature, meaning the client wanted advice on securing their communications or requested assessments of their security. In response, we may provide tailored advice to the clients on security methods, including threat modeling and risk assessment, or about privacy-enhancing tools, like encrypted messaging applications and website security enhancements, appropriate to their situation. The minority of the 118 cases responded to incidents, including attacks where social media accounts were compromised by malicious third parties, or cases of censorship online, where content or accounts were removed or restricted without consent. In these post-incident cases, we might facilitate contact between the clients and social media companies to help redress abuses and remedy harms.

We also track our work with a sometimes-overlapping set of groups working on LGBT / Gender / Sexuality issues. Our Tunis office, in particular, has worked with several different organizations defending LGBT rights in places like Egypt, Uganda, and Tunisia. These groups frequently face harassment both online and offline, and conscious of that, they preventively reach out to the Helpline to improve their digital security practices and mitigate the threats. A variety of different actors, including governments, police forces, and privately organized individuals and groups, pose threats to these clients’ basic rights.

Qualitatively, one of the main challenges of the gender digital divide arises where issues that we see in the 'real' world are amplified on the internet. Often, the solutions that are proposed to deal with problems like harassment are reactive -- both online and offline -- meaning that it is not until harassment has occurred that some action is taken. This discourages women's participation and prevents marginalized communities from freely expressing themselves, innovating, and exercising their rights online.

#### Guidance tailored to common threat models

Many internet users, NGOs, and activists are contacting us for the first time, and we expect to see even more requests for support in 2017. To better handle this demand for digital security guidance, we develop resources like [A First Look at Digital Security](https://www.accessnow.org/a-first-look-at-digital-security/).[[4]](#footnote-4) This booklet aims to provide a friendly and personable first look at digital security for people at risk, like activists, journalists, human rights defenders, and people in marginalized communities. The guide tailors advice based on various personal and professional profiles, taking into account characteristics like gender and the particular threat models various stakeholders may face.

For example, the guide features one character, Jaha, “a student in her final year of college," who is interested in taboo or stigmatized topics, and whose “preferred gender pronoun is she/her/hers.” The guide continues:

Many resources on such topics are blocked by the university, and she’d face stigma and suspicion if it was a known interest of hers. Jaha needs to stay anonymous and keep her browsing private while online. Jaha does not want her family, or many of her social circle, to know her interests yet. She wants the freedom to explore this possible new side of herself without feeling watched and judged by others. Jaha has created a separate self online and does not want to risk public exposure until she is ready, but she still wants to access some material the university has censored.

Advice for Jaha, to help her meet her goal of accessing taboo materials online anonymously and privately, includes:

* circumvention and anonymity tools to protect her identity and avoid censorship;
* privacy enhancing browser extensions to avoid ad-tracking which may reveal some of her interests;
* regularly deleting chat histories to avoid malicious access to previous conversation logs;
* anonymous chat to meet like-minded communities;
* separate online personas to divide her personal life from her academic life; and
* mindful posting to ensure what she publishes online cannot be traced back to her (wary of posting locations, specific dates, home addresses, etc.).

This guide, and the Digital Security Helpline cases and expertise that contributed to its development, provide one example of how gender perspectives inform our mission of fighting for everyone’s right to enjoy open and secure communications online.

### Connectivity and capacity building:

#### Grantmaking and convening to support inclusive advocacy

Access Now also works to keep civil society secure through our grants program.[[5]](#footnote-5) In 2016 we reaffirmed our commitment to supporting those in our community who are most at risk, and most in need of resources, such as those courageously defending their rights to freely express their sexual and gender identities. We provided technical and financial support to LGBTQI and feminist organisations to strengthen their digital rights capacity and join the movement. Our grants program will grow significantly in 2017 and we are committed to identifying those most in need of support and responding to the needs of the communities we serve.

One grantee, Japleen Pasricha, founder and director of Feminism in India.com,[[6]](#footnote-6) wrote a blog post for Access Now’s website titled, “Keeping the internet safe for women and marginalized communities in India.”[[7]](#footnote-7) She writes:

“Cyber violence against women or cyber ‘VAW’ includes, but is not restricted to: cyber stalking, cyber bullying, cyber harassment, identity theft, breach and violation of privacy/confidentiality, voyeurism, and image-based sexual violence, popularly known as ‘revenge porn’. These are all serious problems in India, yet women and other targets lack the understanding and support to respond effectively.”

Japleen recounts data from her research report, showing that, “Online abuse is a serious issue in India, affecting more than half of survey respondents… Thirty-six percent of respondents who had experienced harassment online took no action at all. Twenty-eight percent reported that they had intentionally reduced their online presence after suffering online abuse.”

Many affected women never report assailants or incidents. Japleen finds, “To support victims and stop abuse, we need to educate women, communities, and law enforcement agencies, helping them to understand the importance of prosecuting, not ignoring, individuals who use social media as a tool to perpetuate violence against women and minorities.” Her organisation’s campaign #DigitalHifazat aims to raise awareness about this problem and help develop solutions that empower people.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Additionally, our tech team has supported initiatives aimed at welcoming women into the technology sector. In the MENA region, only 25 percent of women participate in the labor force on average as of 2013,[[9]](#footnote-9) despite making up 50 percent of university graduates. Still, some 30 percent of entrepreneurs in the region are women, according to the Economist.[[10]](#footnote-10) These trends vary according to country and even by city, but overall they demonstrate an abundance of talent in the region and not enough opportunities for women to become leaders in technology. To address these divides, and celebrate women in tech, we organized the 'Women's Hack Day' in Tunisia, a hackathon style event specifically for women coders in Tunis.[[11]](#footnote-11) Similarly, the Access Now team in Costa Rica has collaborated with Cooperativa Sula Batsu to produce women-only hackathons.[[12]](#footnote-12) These initiatives create open and safe spaces for women in technology, where they can freely express and develop technical products without having to hear a male voice trying to limit their potential and creativity.

#### World Summit on the Information Society

Access Now joined a broad coalition of civil society groups advocating for openness and human rights protections throughout the World Summit on the Information Society 10-year Review process. We support the Outcome Document, which recognized that "only 41% of women have internet access" and drew "attention to the gender digital divide, which persists in access to and use of ICTs, and also in ICT education, employment, and other economic and social development factors."[[13]](#footnote-13) The Outcome Document called for “immediate measures to achieve gender equality in internet users by 2020, especially by significantly enhancing women’s and girls’ education and participation in ICTs, as users, content creators employees, entrepreneurs, innovators, and leaders,” and committed to “ensure women’s full participation in decision­making processes related to ICTs.”

At the WSIS+10 General Assembly High-level Meeting on Dec. 15-16, 2015, Access Now was represented by Deniz Aydin, who was chosen as one of the five civil society speakers in the meeting where delegates adopted the Outcome Document. She began her speech by identifying herself, saying, “I am speaking here today as a 23-year-old internet user from Istanbul, Turkey, and I have been told that I am the youngest person to address this room in the past two days.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Ms. Aydin set an agenda for the next ten years of the World Summit on the Information Society, exhorting the multi-stakeholder community to:

* place human rights at the center of the development agenda for the internet, and to bridge of digital divides;
* protect privacy in the digital age;
* ensure a free and open internet, with net neutrality ensuring end-to-end access to global networks and providing a foundation for opportunity and innovation;
* and stop censorship and blocking of content, noting that barriers to participation in the information society including content filtering, shutting down networks, and imprisoning bloggers, LGBTQI advocates, human rights defenders, and climate activists.

#### Principles for rights-respecting ICT infrastructure development

Upon the launch of the Global Connect Initiative, a joint US government, World Bank, and IEEE project to bring the next 1.5 billion people online, Access Now developed principles to ensure that programs meant to increase connectivity and access to ICTs both respect and promote human rights. The Human Rights Principles for Connectivity and Development are grounded in international human rights law and norms, consistent with the SDGs, and replete with ICT development best practices.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Principles maintain that "connectivity should be rights-respecting, equitable, inclusive, promote gender equality, and strive to bridge race, class, language, culture, and similar divides. Vulnerable groups should be meaningfully consulted and their human rights robustly protected before and after coming online."

For example, Principle 1 declares that "assessments of connectivity investments must include an evaluation of the impact on human rights." Projects should deploy social, cultural, and human rights impact assessments for progress checks and ensuring accountability of connectivity processes. Impact assessments should be carried out for all connectivity projects, in close consultation with civil society, affected communities, and human rights experts. Principle 2 establishes that investment in infrastructure should be deployed hand-in-hand with human rights-based capacity building, public access points, and skills development. To bridge persistent digital divides will require more than simply extending infrastructure. Education, outreach, and community control are vital for unlocking the full benefits of connectivity for vulnerable or marginalized groups.

### International advocacy: Freedom of expression and privacy on digital platforms

Access Now advocates for businesses operating internet platforms, apps, and services to better respect the rights to privacy and freedom of expression.

As one example, we have tracked the ways that identity policies and requirements can adversely impact the human rights of internet users. The inability to use a pseudonym has placed people in danger, making them targets of persecution and harassment, including on Facebook, one of the world’s most popular websites. Access Now joined a coalition of women’s rights, human rights, indigenous, religious, ethnic minority, LGBTQI, and privacy advocacy organizations who “found Facebook’s name policies to be culturally biased and technically flawed.”

In a letter to the company demanding a series of changes to Facebook’s identity policy,[[16]](#footnote-16) the coalition noted that people use pseudonyms to “protect themselves from physical violence, legal threats from repressive governments, or harassment on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, or political activities.” Requiring people to hand over legal identity documents to access platforms, apps, sites, and services discriminates against transgender and gender-variant people whose legal names do not accord with their gender identity. Facebook made a number of changes in response to the coalition’s demands.[[17]](#footnote-17)

### Conclusion

Access Now continues working with partners in the public and private sectors to ensure inclusive and rights-respecting approaches to bridging the gender digital divide, and remains committed to helping the OHCHR achieve this goal.

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1. https://www.accessnow.org/access-now-diversity-mission-critical/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.accessnow.org/cultivating-a-more-diverse-transparent-and-empowered-culture-at-access/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.accessnow.org/anti-harassment-policy/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.accessnow.org/a-first-look-at-digital-security [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.accessnow.org/grants [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://feminisminindia.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.accessnow.org/keeping-internet-safe-women-marginalized-communities-india [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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