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HAUT-COMMISSARIAT

UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

CGHR input to OHCHR for a report on "ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective"

A key research theme of Cambridge's Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR) is 'Politics, Digital Technologies and the Media', within which are two connected projects: PiMA and Africa's Voices.

First, *PiMA*, or *Politics and Interactive Media in Africa*, was an 18-month collaborative research project funded by the ESRC and DFID, with a focus on the expressions of 'public opinion' in broadcast media via new information and communication technologies (ICT) such as mobile phones in Kenya and Zambia. It also examined the political implications of such interactions in the two African countries, with a view to draw conclusions of wider significance to practitioners and policymakers.

Secondly, Africa's Voices Foundation (AVF) began as an applied research pilot and is now a non-profit research organisation, retaining strong links to the university. AVF leverages the digital revolution to reach and engage citizens of African countries, and amplify their voices to the levels of development and governance. A key approach we adopt is to combine the popularity of radio with the ubiquity of mobile phones, to deliver engaging interactive radio shows in which the audience can share their opinions via SMS.

These two strands of activity have endowed us with insights into how stakeholders can help to make digital inclusion a reality. The PiMA household survey in Kenya and Zambia[1], and subsequent applied research projects with Africa's Voices, have demonstrated that participation in interactive radio shows is biased toward men. Our research shed light on the reasons for low female participation, including the centrality of socio-cultural obstacles and barriers faced by women and girls to participate in these digitally convened forums, moreover than their access to digital technologies.

We propose in this submission that it is crucial for stakeholders to understand the socio-cultural factors in preventing girls and women from participating fully in digital life. Further, to better understand these socio-cultural factors and their impact requires sensitive research that listens to girls and women, and reveals the intangible barriers and obstacles that they face and which deepen the digital divide.

The PiMA household survey in Kenya and Zambia found that nearly twice as many men have engaged in interactive radio shows by SMS as have women, with the odds of men having participated being 1.7 times the odds for women. The relative participation (ratio of participation to overall listenership) is higher for men. The consequences of this biased participation are that women's voices and diverse views are not being heard, meaning that their perspectives and priorities are not included in decisions made by their communities, duty-bearers, or service-deliverers.

One explanation for the low levels of participation from women could be a lack of access to and ownership of mobile telephony. In Zambian constituencies, we did find a gap between men and women (62.8% women versus 74.9% men) in terms of access to mobile phones. However, in Kenyan constituencies, the access to mobile phones is nearly universal (over 96%) with no gender gap. Our subsequent analyses revealed that *irrespective* of mobile phone access, women are less likely to listen to and participate in interactive shows, controlling for age and education. From those who listen to interactive shows, men are 56% more likely than women to participate, even if there were no gender gap in access to mobile phones.

In sum, the PiMA research found that differential access to mobile phones nor radio listenership explains

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[1] Srinivasan, S., and Lopes, C.A. (2017). 'Mediated sociability': Audience participation and convened citizen engagement in interactive broadcast shows in Africa.

lower levels of female participation. Rather, socio-cultural factors must be considered, as these shape these spaces of communication, and enable or constrain who participates and how. Even when formal exclusions are removed, informal exclusions can prove far more powerful. Socio-cultural norms on the suitability or appropriateness of women having a voice in public can linger and reproduce themselves in multitudes of ways in digital life.

In particular, female participation is inhibited by socio-cultural norms related to gender roles. Both genders recognise that men in their communities discourage women from participating. There is also shared belief, particularly among men, that women are not interested in current affairs and politics. These norms have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect: as male radio hosts and guests discourage participation from women, radio shows are less inclusive, women become less interested in the shows, reducing women participation and reinforcing the idea that women are not in fact interested in these topics. When balancing with access to mobile phones, the perception of who participates and why are more valid determinants of participation across a wide range of different contexts.

The PiMA study thus underscores the limitation of focusing on access to and affordability of technology, common in the 'digital divide' literature, even when socio-demographic variations are included. Access and affordability are certainly necessary, but by no means sufficient, conditions for fostering inclusive citizen engagement, through digital channels, in the mediated public sphere.

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Participation in interactive shows is not only about the 'vocal minority'. The dominant male 'participants' in such shows are constituted by the demographically wider listenership that they seek to address. This may reproduce existing social relations, but also has the potential to realign them – because publicity is dependent on the configuration and reconfiguration of wider collectivities. The interaction between media producers and the audience can lead to new alignments, such as shows with greater female participation driven by trust in the presenter or the awareness among female listeners of women like them who participate.

These considerations are taken into account at Africa's Voices when designing and delivering research projects that recruit digital channels and forums. Strategies are employed to overcome some of the socio-cultural obstacles and barriers to female participation, leading to an increased number of females who raise their voice and are heard. This is especially true when the target populations, that is, those whose opinions and beliefs we aim to capture, are girls and women. Examples include an interactive radio project the Africa's Voices team conducted on maternal health in Uganda, and an upcoming project to understand why Kenyan girls are not completing their secondary school education. Measures we take to boost female participation include:

- Training radio hosts on inclusive engagement strategies that have been developed from our research. For instance, the host should read on air more SMS messages from female participants than males, helping to realign the forums to be more gender-balanced and encourage other female listeners to contribute.
- Working with female presenters where possible.
- Scheduling shows at times that are most convenient for women in the given population.
- As we have the capabilities to process and analyse local language data, all interaction and data gathered is in vernacular languages so as not to exclude women from linguistic minorities.

Our efforts at Africa's Voices have been fruitful: 49.6% participants in our interactive radio project on maternal health in Uganda were female. For an ongoing interactive radio project in Somalia, 44-46% of participants are female. We are able to determine participants' demographics through SMS questionnaires (always of no cost to participants) which ask for their sex, location, and age.

For more information, please refer to www.africasvoices.org or www.cghr.polis.cam.ac.uk