

Promoting Smart Policy Options in Closing the Gender Digital Divide in Uganda

Policy Brief, November 2021



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1.

Introduction

This policy brief is primarily a result of the key highlights from the CSO position paper and the face-to-face strategic meetings held with policymakers and key stakeholders, on how to bridge the gender digital gap in Uganda. It highlights what the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) and the Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA) have been doing over the two years in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda. The brief further highlights the state of the gender digital divide in Uganda, and recommendations to Civil Society Organisations, Ministries, Departments and Agencies, the private sector, and other stakeholders in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda.

Background

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) in partnership with the Centre for Multilateral Affairs (CfMA) and with support from the World Wide Web Foundation has been implementing a two years project titled “Promoting Smart Policy Options in Closing the Gender Digital Divide in Uganda.” The main goal of this project has been to engage and build the capacity of policymakers on gender-sensitive ICT policy making, implementation, and evaluation. A series of activities were implemented since the project’s inception in August 2020 in fulfillment of the set project objectives. These activities implemented include; two multi-stakeholder convenings of the civil society organizations; the first multi-stakeholder civil society inception meeting was held on the 5th August 2020 where policy advocates and human rights defenders from various civil society organizations convened to clearly understand the women’s rights online, advocacy strategies and further identify the key policy gaps in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda. This convening was attended by 25 persons of these, 64% were female, leaving 36% as male. All participants were from the Civil Society Sector. None of the members registered themselves as belonging to the private sector or government.

The second multi-stakeholder convening was conducted on the 16th, September 2020 where 22 participants from civil society organisations attended. The primary goal of this convening was enabling civil society organisations to identify policy advocacy priorities that can be used by CSOs and identify relevant government ministries and departments that can be engaged by CSOs in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda.

The coalition further developed a civil society position paper from the emerging issues from the two multi-stakeholder convenings of the Civil Society Organizations. While the issue of access came out as a major concern, the paper highlighted that access alone is not enough and thus emphasised that women need agency and capacity to leverage access. In order for the civil society coalition to make final input or contributions to the position paper before it could be disseminated to policymakers and other stakeholder groups, a multi-stakeholder meeting was held on the 7th of May 2021 to validate the paper. The paper further highlighted the increasing significance of making assessments of the gender digital gap in Uganda and the need to develop meaningful indicators that contribute to the design and implementation of effective policies that drive adoption.

The multi-stakeholder civil society position paper validation meeting was later followed and held on the 28th of July 2021. The policy round table was attended by policymakers from different ministries, departments and institutions and participants from civil society. The CSOs and policymakers discussed policy advocacy issues highlighted in the Civil Society position paper and identified potential windows for change together. These issues include aspects like gender and internet rights, Women's Rights Online with a focus on the R.E.A.C.T framework.

As a strategy to enhance the competence of policymakers in designing and implementing effective ICT policies, WOUGNET organized a workshop on gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation of ICT Policy interventions on the 15th of September 2021. As a result, policymakers who attended the training acknowledged the need for the government to develop meaningful indicators and targets that can contribute to the design and implementation of effective ICT policies that drive adoption. The meeting achieved its goal because it was intended to equip policymakers with skills and knowledge on setting smart indicators and targets for monitoring the implementation of ICT policies as well as devise strategies to engage in future gender-sensitive ICT policy debates and conversations.

In order to create entry points, build rapport and push forward the discussions and decisions reached from a series of workshops that took place throughout the project implementation period, WOUGNET carried out six strategic face-to-face meetings with the key policy influencers and decision-makers. These meetings included discussing policy issues emerging from a series of workshops that have been implemented under this project. As indicated in this policy brief, WOUGNET has generated commitment and feedback from these engagements to inform policy discussions and advocacy strategies in the future. Finally, a project coordination meeting was held on the 25th of November 2021 at Protea Hotel with CSOs groups, MDAs, and other stakeholders to provide an overview of what has been done in closing the gender digital divide and identify what more can be done in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda. A presentation of the policy brief was also done to elicit stakeholders' feedback for improvement of the policy brief.

The State of Gender Digital Divide in Uganda

Access to a meaningful internet and technology has played an immense role in promoting and enhancing the social and economic growth of developing countries. Internet access proved more to be an indispensable tool to development and a basic need when the world was brought to its knees by the unpredicted outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic that had a damaging impact on every economic activity. The internet facilitated the continuity of work for different companies, ministries, and organizations through online conferencing platforms. Although access has been highlighted as a major concern when it comes to closing the gender digital divide, access alone is not enough, this requires the need for agency and capacity. When women are being excluded from the digital society, this becomes a huge threat towards the progress to achieve gender equality. This further denies women the opportunities to improve their livelihoods. Despite the milestone in technological advancement and the registered benefits of the internet in developing countries like Uganda, women and girls are continuously deprived when it comes to accessing and using the internet and digital tools compared to their male counterparts thus widening the gender digital divide. According to a study that was conducted by the World Wide Web Foundation in 2020, Uganda was pointed out as one of the African countries with the largest gender digital divide in Africa with 43% of the men more likely to use the internet than women in Uganda. These findings indicate that the growing gender digital divide in Uganda incapacitated the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goal number 9 which called upon member states to work towards attaining universal internet access by 2020. The obstacles to closing the gender digital divide in Uganda according to CSO groups, policymakers, and other stakeholders who engaged in various project activities conducted included: -

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- The high cost of internet data and devices.
 - Inadequate suitable devices.
 - Low self-esteem among the female gender.
 - Data privacy online.
 - Socio-cultural perceptions on technology.
 - Inadequate infrastructure especially in rural areas.
 - Online violence and insecurity.
 - Internet disruptions such as internet shutdowns.
 - Content regulations and surveillance.
 - Gender insensitive ICT and Internet Policies.
 - Inadequate skills to navigate online platforms.

These obstacles need to be solved for both men and women to access and use the internet since they continue to recur and curtail the maximum benefits that Uganda can potentially arrive at as a result of equal access to the internet and technology for both women/girls and men/boys.

Conclusion

Although the internet facilitates connection, participation, and engagement, there is a need for new and innovative strategies for closing the gender digital divide in Uganda. A socio-economic, political, and robust legal approach is needed to close the gender digital divide. This requires regular reviews of existing legal frameworks to ensure they are aligned with the latest technological trends and issues, evidence-based research conducted, strategic litigation and guidelines for the government in formulating national policies in closing the gender digital divide in Uganda.

Recommendations

(a) To government ministries/institutions/agencies (policymakers)

- Government ministries or institutions such as the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), NITA Uganda, and Ministry of ICT and National Guidance should adopt the R.E.A.C.T framework when planning, implementing and monitoring ICTs policies to ensure that these policies benefit both women and men equally.
- The UCC should allocate funding to support the efforts of civil society organizations that work towards closing the gender digital divide.
- The UCC, Uganda Revenue Authority (URA), and Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development should waive the taxes levied on licenses for community hubs and devices.
- The Ministry of ICT and National Guidance should continuously engage all relevant stakeholders including CSOs and Internet Service Providers when planning, implementing, and monitoring ICT policies.
- The Parliament of Uganda in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, URA, the UCC, and all the responsible ministries or government agencies should reduce taxes levied on devices and other inputs around internet connectivity to enhance the affordability of these devices and the internet data bundles.
- The Ministry of ICT and National Guidance should enact specific policies and laws that allow women to invest in the technology sector.
- The Uganda Communications Commission should include the aspect of the gender digital divide in Universal Access Funds.
- The Uganda Communications Commission should put in place policies and guidelines that allow infrastructure sharing among Telecom Companies for community networks.

(b) To civil society organisations

- There is a need for civil society organizations such as WOUNET, Unwanted Witness, CIPESA to strategically position themselves so that they can participate in influencing ICT policies that are directed at closing the gender digital divide. Some of these strategies may include investing in evidence-based research that spells out gender disintegrated data, taking part in reviewing ICT bills before they are passed, engaging in international dialogues on ICT policies and digital rights, etc.
- CSOs should focus on making their data or research more accessible, usable, and evidence-based.
- CSOs should continuously enable policymakers to understand and appreciate the need for policy change through awareness-raising and capacity-building programs given that gender-sensitive ICT policies may not be their priority.
- CSOs that work in the legal field such as BarefootLaw, should take on the mantle of lobbying for policy change in order to influence the decisions of the policymakers through policy advocacy to ensure that the available laws work.
- WOUNET should operationalize a coalition/movement that can constantly monitor government ICT policies, plans, and implementations to ensure that they are gender-responsive. This can be achieved through periodic engagements with policymakers to review their progress and set away forward to improve accountability.
- Engagement of cultural and religious leaders in the struggle to close the gender digital divide in Uganda.
- Engage the beneficiaries of the different ICT innovations or policies especially those at the grassroots so as to fully understand their challenges in regard to access to the internet and digital technologies.
- WOUNET needs to identify political leaders who can push ideas in areas of advocacy through movement building starting from the grassroots local leaders.
- The need for effective promotion of women's digital adoption not only from the government but also from the private sector and civil society in order to lead the digital adoption of best practices for women's rights online in Uganda.

(c) To Telecom companies/Internet service providers

- Telecom companies such as (MTN, Airtel, and Uganda Telecom) should work together to establish an association just like other industries to set up terms of operation to enable them to have a leveled ground for all players in the telecom industry. This will in a long run reduce the high rate of turnover of Telecom Companies, bring experiences together, thus improving the service delivery through affordable and internet data bundles/broadband.
- MTN, Airtel, and Uganda Telecom should review the existing ICT and internet policies, identify gaps, and devise practical strategies on how they could work together, for example by including the gendered broadband plan into the policies.

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