



# THE INTERNET AND ITS ROLE IN ADVANCING WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

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WeAreSocial and Hootsuite report in their 2019 Datareportal findings that by January 2019, East Africa had an internet penetration of 32%, with a social media penetration of 8%, with 62% of mobile connectivity. To break down further for Uganda, its population is estimated to have hit 45 million, with 24.89 million having mobile subscriptions, 19 million being internet users, 2.5 million being active social media users and, finally, 2.3 million being mobile social media users.

Women and girls from Uganda and all over the world are accessing the internet as we speak now. That does not mean there are no other women and girls who are not using the internet. In fact, the reasons why some women and girls don't use the internet range from issues of affordability (handset, data and OTT costs), usability and skills (not knowing how to access the internet on a mobile set, not knowing how to use a mobile set, reading and writing difficulties), relevance (the internet not being relevant to them, insufficient local information), issues of safety and security (insufficient content available in local languages, harmful content, contact from strangers, information security) to accessibility (no access to an internet-enabled phone, the internet draining their gadget batteries, poor network coverage, lack of approval from their families to use the internet, little or

no access to agent support, a slow connection).

I cannot stress enough the fact that women and girls are human beings just like you and I. With that come their rights. Whether they are aware of these rights or not is a story for another day. I want to direct our discussion to the internet and the role it has played in advancing the rights of women and girls!

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that '[e]veryone has the right to life, liberty and security of person'. The internet comes with the advantage that once you have social media accounts of your own and access to them, you have the power to express yourself on them the way you like and about

what you want. Do you remember the Women's March of Uganda in 2018? It was organised by women and girls to speak out against sexual harassment and any other form of violence aimed at them and once their intention was made over the internet, it raged like a wildfire and all corners of the world got to know about it.

With the internet comes an opportunity to explore financial freedom. Financial freedom is a right to be enjoyed by women and girls, just as the men do. In Uganda today, women and girls run their own businesses, which range from dealing in clothing and shoes to catering to the need for fitness and relaxation, among others, and they utilise the internet as the major marketing avenue.

With the presence of the internet around us has come knowledge about women and girls' rights. If you have mastered or now know your way a little bit around the internet, you will realise that it is the one place where women and girls' rights can be accessed from any source literally anywhere in the world. Many times, learning something 'new', say from a document like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the Maputo Protocol or constitutional amendments in the Constitution of Uganda of 1995, causes excitement and fascination. People get to share what they have learnt about on their social media platforms, hence creating awareness about it all. You should be aware that all this happens in a matter of seconds, usually at the total discretion of the user, and involves a very large

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audience. I had a chat with Ahumuza Patience about these possibilities and this is what she said:

Social media is playing a big role in boosting the feminist movement. It has created a safe space and given women a platform to share their experiences like sexual harassment, domestic violence, gender-based violence, sexist work systems, among others. Hashtags like #Metoo, #StopSexualHarassmentAtWork, #AmInext and #MeTooUg, among others, have created a sense of togetherness. It has portrayed that we are not alone and if we come together a lot will change...our voices will be heard.

Article 16 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

With the introduction of the internet, many people have become courageous enough to open up about what they think or want to say on the dissolution of a marriage, irrespective of their culture, nationality or religion. In a way, this has promoted the growth of transparency and ratcheted up the pressure to dismantle patriarchy, on which so much in the world is still hinged.

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that states that '[n]

o one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms'. Uganda, for a number of years now, has been a country where many young women and girls are trafficked to engage in labour in the Arab countries like the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar, among others. It is a terrible thing that so many of them have been treated like slaves by their bosses and contacts! Quite a number of them have been able to utilise the internet to share what they are going through wherever they are. As such, the culprits have been called out to behave better and to keep their word. Information in the form of chats on WhatsApp, email and videos has spread like a wildfire

here and, in some instances, the relevant authorities, like the Uganda Police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Uganda's foreign missions have responded and rescued some of these women and girls. As a result, a number of the girls and women have been brought back to Uganda.

Article 33 (1) (2) of the Constitution of Uganda provides for the rights of women thus:

(1) Women shall be given full and equal dignity of the person, and equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities with men.

(2) The State shall provide for the facilities and opportunities necessary to improve or realise women's full potential and advancement.

There are also specific laws, such as the National Action Plan on Women, the Gender Policy Act, the Domestic Violence Act, and the Female Genital Mutilation Act that aim to advance women's rights in Uganda. However, as noted above, they need to be conscientiously enforced and implemented for gender equality and the empowerment of women to be fully realised. There are no specific laws focusing on fighting violence against women online. In 2014, the Government of Uganda enacted the Anti-Pornography Act as a measure to curb pornography both online and offline; however, the law has been used to harass women victims of so-called 'revenge' pornography.

The Stakeholders Report of March 2016 submitted by the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), on the background to

internet access and online freedoms in Uganda is worth quoting here:

While freedom to access the internet is generally unfettered, access is mainly restricted by infrastructural and economic reasons. Only 18% of Ugandans live in urban areas, and just over 650,000 people, out of a total estimated population of 37.5 million, were reported to have access to electricity by the national distributor in 2014. Despite the enthusiasm for connectivity in the capital, the rural regions of Uganda remain grossly underserved.

The majority of Ugandan women live in rural areas, constituting more than 90% of citizens, particularly the northern region, and therefore do not have consistent access to electricity or telecommunication services, including limited internet access. At the moment, mobile cellular signals cover almost 100% of the population, but in rural areas these signals are weak and huge improvements are needed, including reduction of broad-band costs as well as tax burdens, which are three times as high as the average in Africa.

For those Ugandans who are online, the internet is only 'partly free'. According to the 2015 Freedom House rankings, the Ugandan government is increasing its surveillance of Ugandan citizens, thus rendering the internet less conducive to freedom of expression and discussion. There are several laws in Uganda that severely infringe on internet rights and have been used to either prosecute or intimidate internet users. These laws include the Regulation of Interception of Communication Act (2010), the Computer Misuse Act (2011), the Anti-Pornography Act (2014), and the Uganda Communications Act, (2013). These laws have been widely criticised

for violating individuals' right to privacy on the internet. Recently, the Ugandan government, through the Attorney General, presented a bill to Parliament which human rights activists believe is largely intended to gag media freedom and critical opinion in Uganda, including free speech on social media. The Uganda Communications (Amendment) Bill, 2016 seeks to give the executive arm of government outright powers to control communications in any way the sector minister deems fit.

In conclusion, I say that the internet has been and still is very fundamental in advancing the rights of women and girls in Uganda. If the challenges that the women and girls face in the ICT sector can be urgently addressed, I will confidently say that we are all destined for a better Uganda - women and girls will be better placed to defend their rights whenever they are violated through the internet.

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