CWG-Internet: Online Open Consultation (October 2017-January 2018)

Submission by Research ICT Africa and Africa Digital Policy project

What approaches and examples of good practices are available to increase Internet access and digital literacy of women and girls, including in decision-making processes on Internet public policy?

Research ICT Africa and its recently established African Digital Policy Project believes that evidence-based policymaking is crucial to not only overcoming disparities in Internet access among men and women in Africa and beyond, but also to ensuring that the Internet can be a force for sustainable development. This is also one of the reasons why RIA has worked incessantly over more than ten years to develop and gather data on universal indicators on ICT access and use in Africa.

Our work has indicated that women's ability to access and use the Internet depends on a number of interrelated barriers that are inextricably rooted in socioeconomic circumstances. Approaches and examples of good practices to increase Internet access therefore tend to be ones that take due cognisance of women's unique contexts and circumstances. These factors influence women's ability to gain education, be employed, have the skills needed to use ICTs, have the disposable income and time to benefit from ICT access, and to actively protect themselves from online threats or harm. Our research shows that alongside cost, digital literacy skills and related confidence in using ICTs can have an even more significant impact on people's ability to access and use the Internet than gender.

Which are the available sources and mechanisms for measuring women's participation in the digital economy with focus on SME's and micro-enterprises?

One of the most sustainable ways in which in which gender inequities in access can be properly addressed is through evidence-based policymaking. For more than a decade, Research ICT Africa has provided policymakers and other stakeholders with such evidence through the development and gathering of universal indicators on ICT access and use.

RIA's informal sector, household and individual surveys is conducted in seven African countries (Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Mozambique, Ghana and Nigeria), with sex-disaggregated data being collected on social networking, cybersecurity awareness and practices, digital finance, microwork and others aspects of sharing economy. As the surveys are nationally representative, the data can be and is disaggregated on the basis of gender, location (urban and rural), income and education levels. Among other things, these indicators therefore provide a holistic view of women's participation in the digital economy, including SMEs and micro-enterprises.

The surveys are part of a global initiative on producing much needed quality data on ICT access and use in the global South. RIA coordinates the surveys with her sister networks, LIRNEasia in six Asian countries (India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Cambodia), and DIRSI in five Latin American (Peru, Guatemala, Colombia, Argentina and Paraguay).

What measures/policies could be envisioned in order to foster the role of women as entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs, specifically in developing and least-developed countries?

From a research perspective, RIA has noticed that descriptive statistics around the role of women as entrepreneurs and managers of SMEs tend to dominate any evidence that is done to guide policies and measures to bolster women's roles in this field. This is dangerous, as the formulation of policies and measures to foster the role of women as entrepreneurs and managers without proper evidence of the need for and priority areas for intervention lead to wasted resources and other adverse effects.

We believe there is a clear need to move beyond descriptive statistics, as they tend to mask the underlying factors of gender (and other) inequality factors. Supply and demand side data is needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the factors impacting and determining gender and other inequalities.

What are the gaps in addressing these challenges? How can they be addressed and what is the role of governments?

The primary gap in addressing challenges related to gender inequality in access to and use of ICTs is a systemic one, and relates to the lack of quality data (supply and demand-side) available that facilitates a better understanding of the so-called gender digital divide. RIA believes that evidence-based policymaking is crucial to not only overcoming disparities in Internet access among men and women in Africa and beyond, but also to ensuring that the Internet can be a force for sustainable development. This is one of the reasons why RIA has worked incessantly over more than ten years to develop and gather data on universal indicators on ICT access and use in Africa.