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Women's rights, gender and ICTs

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Women's rights and access to the internet

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Introduction

The internet is an important resource that allows individuals in general, and women in particular, to exercise their right to free speech, share their opinions and ideas, develop new skills and understanding, and share information. Internet access allows women to participate in the information society, exercise their rights as citizens, access information about health care and other services, form communities, engage in both the formal and informal processes of shaping their social, cultural, and political lives, and construct movements for their own rights.

However, in recognising the role of the internet in the empowerment of women in the West, one might ask if the internet plays the same role for women and girls in African countries, such as the Republic of Congo.

Before responding to this question later on in the report, it is first important to specify how many internet subscribers there are in the Congo. According to the Agency of Regulation of Post and Electronic Communications (ARPCE), there were approximately 15,000 subscribers in 2009 out of an estimated population of four million. Additionally, ARPCE indicates that there are 4.3 million mobile phone subscribers accessing internet service through the four telecommunication companies in the country.

This study examines how information and communications technologies (ICTs), especially the internet, are used to both promote and defend the rights of women, as well as to support their fight for equality and the end of social, economic, cultural and political inequalities. What are the challenges that are facing women and their organisations?

Analysis of legislation relating to ICTs and women's rights

For the purposes of this report, it is important to understand how the legal framework relates to ICTs, as well as how it relates to the protection of women's rights.

The legal framework for ICTs

Currently, Law No. 9-2009 of 25 November 2009, which regulates the electronic communications sector, is the only one that relates to ICTs. This law describes the conditions for the installation and use of electronic communication services and networks. Article 6 of the law specifies that electronic communication activities may be carried out freely as long as they strictly respect the conditions of the legislation.

Article 85 of the same law states that the public powers shall guarantee the necessary conditions for developing universal access and service. To this end, the Republic of Congo adopted a national policy on the development of ICTs. Law No. 11-2009 also created an agency that regulates electronic communication.

Other laws are currently in the works; these include a law that would protect personal data in the Republic of Congo, a law on cyber security, a law to combat cyber crime, and a law on the digital economy. A national high-speed internet development plan is also in the offing.

The legal framework for women's rights

With respect to legislation on women's rights, it is important to emphasise that different laws cover different aspects. These include a law from 17 October 1984 establishing the Family Code, the Penal Code of 1810, a law from 14 June 2010 on the protection of children, a law from 25 February 2011 that promotes and protects the rights of indigenous populations, and a law from 3 June 2011 that supports the fight against HIV/AIDS and protects the rights of those living with HIV. Drafts of other laws are underway, such as a law on gender parity. No specific law exists on violence against women and girls, and the texts that do touch on the subject, notably the penal code dating from 1810 and the family code of 1984, no longer correspond to the current realities of our society.

Pertinent questions on women's rights

The women's movement can be considered as the ensemble of groups and networks of women who have fought in the political, social and economic spheres for the empowerment of Congolese women

and girls. Congolese women have been actively involved in the fight for independence up to today. The fight for women's rights has been primarily focused on social, economic and political rights, and Congolese women have worked on numerous issues important to them. These include the fight for women to be able to assume positions of power, particularly in politics; education; the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria, sickle cell anaemia and other illnesses; the fight against violence against women and girls; the fight against discrimination of indigenous populations; and more recently, gender parity.

Whether the demands were put forth by women in political groups or women in civil society, they have been successful in bringing about change. The demands of women in both political groups and in civil society have produced tangible results, such as the creation of a Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Integration of Women in Development in 1992, the adoption of a national action plan, and their integration in strategic documents and programmes.

The strategic use of ICTs in promoting women's rights in the Congo

Internet access for women's organisations

Despite problems of internet access for Congolese society, and particularly women – problems even more pronounced in rural areas – the internet's contributions since 2000 must be recognised. It has supported women's movements on crucial topics such as the right to health care, education and female leadership, and the fight against violence, among others. Some women's organisations describe having paid 5,000 CFA francs (USD 10) an hour to use the internet in cybercafés, and today they are able to do so for 500 francs (USD 1). The desire to gain knowledge and to be connected has led women to seek information and develop new programmes. Many stories like the following have been told.

This story takes place in Makoua, approximately 800 kilometres north of Brazzaville. Lucie, the director of a women's rights NGO, is there to monitor the activities being carried out by an organisation leading the fight against HIV/AIDS. Aware of the difficulties of accessing the internet in the area, she buys a modem in the form of a USB drive from a mobile phone company so that she may access the internet during her trip to Makoua. As soon as she has arrived in the area, she discovers that she is unable to connect to the internet. There is no network, and no internet connection. Having resigned herself to the fact that she cannot connect to the internet,

residents of the neighbourhood inform her that she must go to another neighbourhood to try to access the network. However, after two days, she is still unable to access the network. Faced with the need to connect to the internet to get news from partners and colleagues, she said, "I cannot spend an entire day without internet. It's my sole source of communication with our organisation's partners." Finally, she ends up going to the only cybercafé in the town, which is operated by a religious group. This story, among others, shows that internet access in certain areas of the country remains extremely difficult and requires overcoming obstacle after obstacle.

In the Republic of Congo, as in many African countries, violence in its many forms is a daily occurrence for many women and girls. Faced with these cases of violence, some associations are fighting back, each with its own approach and particular methods. Today, with the help of the internet, many organisations are now working together. Among these organisations are AZUR Développement, l'Association pour le Développement des Femmes dans la Bouenza (AFDB), Réseau des Associations de Solidarité Positive du Congo (RASPC), and l'Agence Régionale d'information et de prevention sur le SIDA (ARIPS). Their work consists of educating women in order to prevent these types of violence. Additionally, these organisations train survivors on social communication to further prevent the violence and to provide psychosocial, medical and legal aid. The internet has been an asset in this fight; specifically, women are able to use an internet platform created by the Association for Progressive Communications and AZUR Développement[1] to report and map domestic violence. Now, domestic violence, long considered normal in our country, is being denounced and reliable data on this violence is available online.

However, as the story of Lucie in Makoua demonstrates, Congolese women still experience difficulties in gaining internet access. The internet is helping women in their fight, but under what circumstances and with what results?

"In theory, we would love to be on the internet every day, but we have a problem: we have no computers or internet connection at the office. In short, we're able to use the internet at least four times a week because we access it at the office of another women's association," declared Blandine Sita, president of Association Femme Plus du Congo, a women's AIDS organisation. Internet access for Congolese activists who work with civil society organisations is further complicated by a lack of equipment, financing and technical skills.

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1   africatti.apc.org

The different uses of ICTs for women's rights

The most commonly used internet applications are email and search engines, such as Google. Electronic forums, online classes and workshops, blogs and social networks are also occasionally used by women's organisations.

However, as a result of skills workshops organised by AZUR Développement, Association Dynamique Plurielle and Handicapés Sans Frontières, more women and organisations are now using blogs to make their voices heard.[2]

The personal accounts received from women recognise the place of the internet in their work: "Before we had access to the internet, we would call friends on the telephone to let them know that we had a meeting. People would either come to the meeting or not, and when the quorum was not met, we weren't able to hold the meeting and had to push back certain deadlines. Today, we no longer need to meet up in one location; we are able to connect with each other via the internet and can exchange ideas there," stated Carine Ndamba, president of Association Dynamique Plurielle (ADP). As such, the internet has not only facilitated the work done within associations, but it has also improved the ability of organisations with similar goals to work collaboratively.

Some women's organisations have seized upon the idea of using ICTs and the internet to carry out tasks, do research, and communicate with other organisations and networks. These organisations have been able to join regional and international networks, as well as benefit from the reinforcement of skills, grants and knowledge.

Today, "certain at-risk women who have been trained have created blogs and been contacted by others, even here in the Congo. Each year, we receive emails from people who tell us, for example, 'I am a victim of violence and I don't know where to go. Am I alone?' Several years ago, this wasn't possible," said Sylvie Niombo, director of AZUR Développement.[3]

As women's organisations today search for current information on women's rights, the internet has allowed them greater access to the information they need. Often, existing texts are outdated; for example, the Penal Code dates back to 1810. Internet access has improved the response to the needs of the women these organisations serve. Amaïcool Mpombo, of the Women Lawyers Association of Congo, describes this change:

> Before the internet, people had to head to libraries. Law books are expensive, so most people didn't have them readily accessible. But even then, women in the professional world didn't have much time to go to the library. Now, when I'm in my office, I can easily access the internet and find the information that I need on the subjects that interest me. The internet is of fundamental importance and helps us greatly in our work, most notably in improving our research so that we can better help the people who contact us.

Enough cannot be said about how much the internet has aided in advocating for and inciting change in legislation, policies and programmes for women.

Factors limiting internet usage among women's organisations

It is important to remember that electricity is a prerequisite to internet access. However, the electricity grid remains inadequate and unreliable in both urban and rural zones, presenting a great obstacle to internet access. In Sibiti, Makoua, Mossaka and Mossendjo, among other places, the population has electricity only between 6 pm and 11 pm, and even then, it is not guaranteed, despite the current efforts to bring electricity to these areas of the country.

As there is a lack of basic infrastructure, it is inherent that there is also insufficient ICT infrastructure. The National Coverage Project seeks to extend access to remote areas and to move closer to universal broadband access. The country also foresees joining the fibre-optic cable system in West Africa through the WACS Project. The CAB Congo-CITCG project (Central Africa Backbone-Communication Infrastructure and Technology) in Central Africa should also improve connectivity.

Moreover, competition in the mobile phone market has intensified in the past few years. Consequently, approximately 70% of the country's population is covered by a GSM signal as compared with 48% in resource-rich African countries, according to a March 2010 study published by Africa Infrastructure Country Diagnostic (AICD). While it is true that all the mobile phone companies provide internet access through the use of modems, it must be recognised that not only is the service extremely weak, but certain areas are still not completely covered.

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2   The blog feministescongo.wordpress.com publishes various women's blog entries. Other women's rights blogs include www. iteco.be/Au-Congo-des-blogs-pour-les-femmes, arletteraymonde. unblog.fr/2009/12/30/la-cedef-bilan-et-perspectives, azurweb. blogspot.com/2008/02/formation-pour-le-leadership-des-jeunes. html and pambazuka.org/fr/category/features/66640

3   Several blogs published by women on the subject of violence can be viewed at feministescongo.wordpress.com/blogroll-des-congolaises

A lack of infrastructure also means that there is a lack of personal computers. According to a 2010 study done by the Pratic Association, 0.9% of the population used personal computers and 56% used mobile phones. Certainly the situation has changed since then, but not significantly; the price of a computer remains high, at least USD 500.

There is a gap in internet accessibility for women in both rural and urban zones. Problems linked to women's socioeconomic status, family responsibilities, and the lack of content responding to their needs can account for some women's disinterest in the internet.

The strategic use of the internet by women's organisations to advance women's rights assumes that they are already savvy internet users. Women's technology skills remain weak, however. According to surveys conducted with 15 organisations, among groups of 20 to 50 members, only two or three female leaders on average per group are trained in and regularly use the internet.

Conclusion

Although the internet is an invaluable tool for raising awareness about the challenges faced by Congolese women, internet access remains limited for many women. As such, actions must be undertaken in order to give Congolese women from every level of society and from all corners of the country the ability to access and use the internet to both gain autonomy and contribute to the development of the country. These efforts can be realised only if the suggested measures are implemented.

Action steps

In order to allow Congolese women to benefit from all that the internet has to offer, civil society, the government and even international groups must take certain measures:

Civil society organisations

- Train women on the strategic use of the internet in the domain of women's rights.

- Encourage the creation of internet content that responds to the needs of women and girls.

- Advocate at the national level for national coverage of ICT infrastructure.

- Encourage networking and collaboration among different organisations and movements on the internet.

Public authorities

- Pursue projects to connect to the fibre-optic network.

- Pursue policies to bring electricity to rural and outlying zones.

- Integrate the teaching of ICTs into the Congolese educational system at all levels.

- Develop and adopt legal policies protecting women, taking into account the strategic use of ICTs.

International organisations and partners

- Grant the necessary financial resources to civil society to train women on the internet. ▪