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Title: Space for who? Addressing Digital Marginalization of Women in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Many organizations across the globe are working toward supporting women participation in technology-related issues. Activities can include raising awareness, building local capacities and giving financial or technical support to grassroots communities or individuals who are working within the intersection of gender and digital marginalization. Specifically when looking at the area of gender and community networks[1], there remains on-going concerns for there to be sufficient emphasis or effort to develop targeted interventions to support women-led initiatives and gender-specific mentorship with respect to addressing digital marginalization. The reason is that the context of women working within community networks reflect localized situations with strong cultural influences on gender roles as well as societal bias around technology around who can be represented in this specific field. These gender-normalised challenges are hard to overcome. These challenges thereby affects the state of women's participation in community networks in many countries.

The Local Networks (LocNet) initiative has been one approach to globally-supported projects that contribute to working with local or national partners

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[1] Internet Society (ISOC) defines community networks as a telecommunications infrastructure deployed and operated by local groups to meet their own communication needs.

working in community networks. The initiative facilitates women's discussions around the feminist internet, makes visible the women in community networks, and supports grassroots community-led interventions on gender. The initiative also encourages women to lead and take part in the broader discussions on internet governance which speaks to digital divide and gender issues and thereby ultimately affecting the community networks movement. With support from the APC and LocNet, targeted effort has been made in regions like Africa to support the involvement of women in technology-related discussions from multiple angles. From enabling policy, there is support for African women to participate in the internet governance spaces such as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) to share their on-the-ground experiences around the digital divide as well as beyond connectivity issues including digital safety and freedom of expression. Women-specific gatherings or solidarity circles are also convened to ensure a safe spaces to discuss deeply the gender issues within their constituency[2]. In regards to the community networks movement building, the SPACE mentorship program[3] aims to empower women with the knowledge of how to support advocacy with regards to policy, overcome gender digital marginalization and encourage women's active participation in community networks. These interventions mean that such internet governance spaces would include the diversity of voices, especially those coming from the rural areas, and encourage women to take part in the telecommunication debates and decision-making processes within and outside their locality.

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[2] https://www.apc.org/en/blog/community-networks-and-women-circles-gift-being-togetherness
[3] https://www.apc.org/en/news/space-mentorship-programme-addressing-gendered-experiences-access-policy-and-regulation

The work on community networks, technology and gender is also active in Nigeria, especially trying to address that rural internet access to the home where is it available to a meager 2% of the population.[4] Clearly a diversity of complementary connectivity solutions are needed to address this extraordinary digital access gap. In regards to gender, Nigeria has long been facing gender inequality in the technology space, with a gender gap of mobile internet use between men and women, and higher rates in rural areas than those based in urban areas (GSMA, 2021). Women and girls are experiencing digital marginalization from all levels starting from the grassroots all the way up to the higher levels. In discussions with local stakeholders, cultural norms, lack of coordination among key stakeholders and the absence of existing policies to support the implementation of community networks in the country are factors that hampered civil societies and individuals to pursue community-led connectivity.

When discussing participation in technology specifically with women in community networks, gender digital marginalization has been one of the pressing issues that Nigerian women in community networks are facing. Structurally, the representation of women in telecommunication-specific technology spaces is found to be limited as well as the opportunities that are availed to them. Women faces are hardly seen at the top-level discussions of the ICT sector in Nigeria let alone those looking specifically at community networks. This absence of women prompted Nigerian individuals and organizations to start advocacy to support women participation in various socio-economic and political discussions, initiate

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[4] https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/DDD/ddd_NGA.pdf

local mobilization around community networks as well as to highlight the recognition of women's voice during policy discussion.

In the lived experience of the author and when speaking with other women, cultural norms are mostly used by Nigerian society to reinforce manners to exclude women from the public sphere, as illustrated by the below quote from an interview with a woman in community networks:

> "most of the time we are not allowed to attend meetings outside our localities because we are women and we must not to be seen associating with men".

This cultural norm is really affecting our participation in the CN spaces, was also said by a key respondent.

From the author's interviews, women interviewed are generally found to be marginalized in meeting spaces and work-related settings, and many women thereby find themselves participating in the lower rungs of economic activities and professions. Community women also socially and politically lack voice, and their interest are not represented at the decision making level. Women opportunities and interests are stereotyped, with institutions focusing on women to take up the role of secretary and note taking when reporting on activities or they are given the tasks of handling issues like housekeeping. However, some women have been observed to lack certain confidence in participating within the technology space, yet, this can be attributed to the low level of awareness about technology or the lack of safe and open spaces for them to endeavor into the technology side of community networks.

The above experiences triggered the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) team in taking on efforts to overcome digital marginalization. As a national partner, CITAD used its support from APC and the LocNet initiative to complete three specific interventions: the establishment of the feminist internet school, the first and second iteration of the National School of community networks in Nigeria between 2021 to 2022, and the consultative meeting on gender and community networks in 2022. All three of these efforts aimed at building the capacity of individuals and micro organizations in improving awareness around community-led connectivity, strengthening their technical skills that will help them run and manage community networks, and finally visibilize and bring the strong and well-informed African women together to support community networks initiatives.

TARGETED INTERVENTIONS FOR COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND GENDER IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Women in Nigeria especially those in the Northern part of the region are found in situations where culture norms influence their involvement and participation of many socio-political activities including around community networks as well as broader access to digital literacy.

In an effort to catalyze the effective use of internet by local women who were previously excluded and encourage women to participate in the decision-making process around the internet and specifically in community networks discussions and commitments, the three interventions were put into place between 2021 to 2022 in Kano State:

1. CITAD established an annual feminist internet school, where the focus is to mobilize and equip at least 30 young people yearly to become champions and advocates of a feminist internet[5]. The intention is that the young people would not only become champions of the concept, but that they gain the confidence to also understand internet governance-related issues, encouraging them to participate in these spaces and be involved in decision making processes around the internet. After the school training, each participant is then encouraged to enlighten others, including at least 10 persons in their own communities about internet rights and freedoms, thereby expanding the knowledge pool too many at the local level.

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[5] Feminist Internet is the digital feminism used to describe the movement to overcome social constructs, norms and policies that constitutes the obstacles to addressing gender digital divide.

https://newsdiaryonline.com/understanding-the-feminist-internet-discourse-by-y-z-yau/

2. Secondly CITAD hosted two versions of the National School of community networks in 2021 and 2022. One of the aims of the school is to have more people in the seven neighboring communities to be aware of the concept of community-led connectivity and thereby support the community networks movement. The School also helps to build the technical capacity of the local people so that ultimately, they have the ability to manage and sustain community networks.[6] By the second School, there was targeted efforts to have women representation in the community networks discussions, training and mentorship and there were specific online sessions dedicated to gender run by a woman trainer / facilitator.

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[6] https://www.apc.org/en/news/citad-launches-first-nigerian-school-community-networks

3. Thirdly CITAD successfully held a consultative meeting on gender and community networks in August 2022. At this meeting, we engaged women from media organizations, bloggers, civil society, social media influencers and individuals. The aim of the meeting is to let them learn more about our current community-led connectivity initiatives and have them create new content around community networks. The meeting was to emphasize their potential roles and responsibilities in supporting the community networks movement and ensure there is more women participation in awareness raising particularly from the media field.

SUCCESS AND LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Since the inception of the three projects, CITAD recorded a number of successes and lessons learned when exploring women participation in community networks in Northern Nigeria, including around representation, improvement of skills and making visible the efforts of African women around gender and community networks in Nigeria.

1. The feminist internet school help CITAD to have more women representation in the ICT space who can navigate the internet more safely and securely and without having any fear of being intimidated and harassed. A larger pool of women have been trained to be able to go online and report case of online abuse. Beyond connectivity, this encourages women to participate in safer spaces and thereby feel confident to use the internet meaningfully.

2. In regards to the national School, another huge success is the ongoing commitments made by the seven micro-organizations, including the women learners trained at the School. They have dedicated engagements with its own community members in understanding the concept of community networks. Many community members are now interested to support its implementation as well as are advocating for more women's voices in their community's engagement and when possible, available policy space.

3. There was greater participation of women in the second National School. This was evident as more women applied for admission and were accepted into the School. Forty-three percent (43%) of the second National School participants were female students. Because of the nature of selection, the female students are also engaged in sessions and actively interact with the facilitators and the material both through the in-person classes and through

social media platforms like on Whatsapp groups. The gender training sessions has also seen active engagement by all participants.

4. As for the consultative meeting of media persons around gender and community networks, women/journalists can now confidently go online and report on the concept of community networks.

5. As a result of the three experiences, the author had the opportunity to participate and speak in a panel and as a participant about the Nigerian on-the-ground experiences on rural connectivity from the gender lens and from a capacity building perspective on community networks at the 2022 African Internet Governance Forum in Lilongwe.

6. The author also had the opportunity to participate in a lunch meeting with several women working in community networks during Africa IGF. The meeting was about learning, exchanging knowledge and experiences, and networking with other vibrant women who are doing tremendous community-led work in their respective African countries.

CHALLENGES

From the three shared experiences, while there have been some great successes of recent times, there remains some of the general societal challenges of women working in the digital inclusion and community network spaces. The challenges to continue the work within their local context are particularly formidable for those who have returned from the training and workshops, including:

1. Women at the community level are facing great challenges with regards to connectivity, they hardly attend virtual meetings for community networks due to the fact that they have to travel to a distance to get access to mobile networks. In some cases, they are not allowed to do so by their parents and/or spouse.

2. There is an absolute absence of equal gender representation in most local level meetings amongst the micro organizations. The timing of the meetings are not always favourable to the schedule of women.

3. While there is gender representation at the national School, upon return, the women are treated as second class citizens in their communities and micro organizations. They are not given the chance to lead a discussion, so when their contributions are provided, they can either be dismissed or underrated in many technology-based discussions.

4. In specific spaces like community and micros organizations level, women have limited support by others when it comes to expressing their views.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

In sharing these experiences from Nigeria around community networks and gender, the cultural influence is highly entrenched in society and therefore breaking gender digital divides will need decisive, yet incremental steps to improve the future in this work. Below is a list of some recommendations as a way forward:

1. Encourage more women trainers in the capacity building space who can serve as a source of expertise in community networks as well as inspiration to other women.

2. Women should be given the opportunity or spaces to lead community network-related discussions, this could first start within women-only spaces. Incrementally, women can be encouraged to actively participate in the decision-making process within and outside their institutions/organizations. The timing of advocacy or local meetings should be consulted by women to ensure their availability and participation.

3. There is need to translate government policies into simply or accessible languages and local indigenous languages, particularly to the rural parts of Nigeria.

4. Supporting women by providing targeted safe spaces and women-only training on internet use. This training can thereby break the culture of

being silent on online harassment. Encourage women to speak when the need arises without fear of intimidation.

5. Parents and family should promote the culture of equal opportunity, and there should not be restrictions with regard to choices of education for women.

INDIVIDUAL

- Women can break the culture of being silence and speak out when the need arose.
- Individuals of all genders need to be provided with more opportunities to be educated about community networks and how its presence in their local communities can help their socio-economic growth.
- It is important for individuals in the communities to take more responsibility in acknowledging the cultural barriers that continue the digital divide and see how community networks could be utilized in a way of bridging the digital gap for all genders.

Conclusion

The potential impact that Nigerian women can make in community networks spaces, in making it more accessible and welcoming to local communities and women themselves should not be underestimated. In the last three years, the community network experiences of women in Nigeria has seen the outcomes from the CITAD interventions. Women can now come forward freely to express their opinions online without the fair of being intimidated, a result of improved awareness of and training around community-run connectivity. Globally, there has been wider support of the activities of women in the global South working in community network spaces that are also tackling the gender digital marginalization. The learnings from this recent work is that it is now more clearer

than ever that more advocacy needs to be done to improve women participation, and there is a need for a multi-stakeholder approach to approaching gender and community networks. Civil society organizations alone cannot solve the issues of the digital divide, yet when all stakeholders can come together and be involved in supporting the advocacy for more women participation on the ground, the next generation will not need to fight to dismantle digital exclusion. They can rather ride on the success stories achieved by the women of today.

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