ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES

The Heart of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the Future We Want for All

Global Thematic Consultation

GOING VISIBLE: WOMEN'S RIGHTS ON THE INTERNET

Women's Rights Programme
Association for Progressive Communications
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Abstract:
Information and communication technologies (ICTs) create new scenarios, new ways for people to live, and these reflect real-life problems. Women need to assert their rights here with determination and without delay. Women may not have been an active part of policy-making conversations when internet governance started, but the rapid pace of change online means they need to participate now to ensure that the future of the internet is shaped taking into account women's rights. For people who have little access to other kinds of publics due to the multiple forms of discrimination they face - including gender, age, class or sexuality - the internet can be a particularly important space to negotiate and realise their rights.

For women, the internet is a vital public sphere due to barriers of access to media or political representation. Inequalities that women face in terms of economic power, education and access to resources also affect access and participation in shaping the internet, its debates and policy. This explains why the internet has become an increasingly critical public sphere for the claiming of citizenship rights and civil liberties, including women's rights. For those who have little access to other kinds of "publics" due to the multiple forms of discrimination faced – including based on gender, age, economic status and sexual identity – it can be a particularly important space for the negotiation and fulfillment of their rights.

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The Women's Rights Programme is both a programme within APC and a network of women throughout the world committed to using technology for women's empowerment. We promote gender equality in the design, implementation, access and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and in the policy decisions and frameworks that regulate them. The WRP is made of feminists and activists who believe that ICTs have a strong role to play in transforming gender and social relations. In our ranks are techies and trainers who help women's organisations and other civil society groups take control of the tools they use to advance their mission and advocacy. More than 175 women from 35 countries – librarians, programmers, journalists, trainers, designers, scholars, researchers, communicators – come together online to work jointly in various projects in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America.

1. Introduction

The internet has become a key space to facilitate the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms, especially to access critical information, to build knowledge, express thoughts and beliefs, to form networks and communities and to mobilise for change. The rapid development and growth of internet access and services in the last two decades indicate their central role in social, political, economic and cultural life. The centrality of internet rights as human rights has grown alongside this development.

ICTs create new scenarios, new ways for people to live and these reflect real-life problems. Women should assert their rights here with determination and without delay. Women may not have been an active part of policy-making conversations when internet governance started, but the rapid pace of change online means they need to participate now to ensure that the future of the internet is shaped taking into account women's rights. For people who have little access to other kinds of publics due to the multiple forms of discrimination they face - including gender, age, class or sexuality - the internet can be a particularly important space to negotiate and realise their rights.

At present, the internet is increasingly being regulated by governments, private entities and other actors, with existing unequal power structures influencing the deliberations. Often efforts to regulate the free flow of information, expression and practices online are justified by the need to regulate and preserve gender and sexual norms. Sexuality traverses the debate on content regulation in key, though invisible, ways. This is supported by conservative forces that act from a moralist standpoint. Often, efforts to regulate the free flow of information, expression and practices online are accompanied by the mobilisation of anxieties and "dangers" around sexual content and interaction. The most familiar forms of restricted content and high-risk activities online centre around pornography, and, increasingly, the protection of children

from sexual harm. However, policy debates and developments rarely take into account the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries – women and children.

Frank la Rue, the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, said in this report to the UN Human Rights Commission in 2011 that "the right to freedom of opinion and expression is as much a fundamental right on its own accord as it is an "enabler" of other rights, including economic, social and cultural rights, such as the right to education and the right to take part in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications, as well as civil and political rights, such as the rights to freedom of association and assembly. Thus, by acting as a catalyst for individuals to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, the Internet also facilitates the realization of a range of other human rights" (La Rue, 2011, para 22).

It is therefore important to include a women's rights perspective to move the development of internet and ICT policies forward. In the World Summit on the Information Society there were recommendations that reaffirmed the need to include women in discussions and decision-making about how these policies are implemented. It is essential to strengthen the implementation of these recommendations. These not only lay the foundation for the development of global communications, but also the management of policies that impact on people's rights.

For women, the internet is a vital public sphere due to barriers of access to media or political representation. Inequalities that women face in terms of economic power, education and access to resources also affect access and participation in shaping the internet, its debates and policy. This explains why the internet has become an increasingly critical public sphere for the claiming of citizenship rights and civil liberties, including women's rights. For those who have little access to other kinds of "publics" due to the multiple forms of discrimination faced –

including based on gender, age, economic status and sexual identity – it can be a particularly important space for the negotiation and fulfillment of their rights.

Taken from the contexts of people who are discriminated against because of their gender or sexual identity, exercising their basic rights is a daily struggle. For them, the internet is an especially vital space for democratic deliberation and political contestation where different actors, struggles and concerns are able to converge to inform or transform norms, public opinion and in turn, policy that regulates their lives. Particularly for young people, whose political experience and activism has matured and evolved since the late 1990s, they become ready to engage in public deliberation through novel modalities of mobilisation and activism in social networks and the internet. Political awareness for these activists does not come from textbooks or outside interference, but grows from within discussion groups and is informed by sharing personal experiences, and through forging transitional or long-term alliances.

Gender-based violence, nonetheless, remains a global concern and technology is transforming the ways that women experience violence, take action to end it and obtain recourse. Issues of security, privacy, and surveillance are now part of the debate around ICT development. Threats, stalking, sexual harassment, improper use and circulation of intimate images or tricks to demean women, among others, constitute the universe of aggression that women face. This leads to both moral and psychological hazard. In addition, a significant proportion of these actions start as virtual violence, but end in physical assault.

The Gender Dynamic Coalition, which works in the framework of the Internet Governance Forum, said in a statement in 2011 that "Women and girls have, in creative ways, explored and appropriated the power of the Internet to define their agenda and influence social norms and public policies. This active agency of women is an indicator of how the Internet is an exciting frontier of political activity for social change. It also suggests the need for public authorities to

develop strong policy frameworks that strengthens the Internet as a public domain and uphold its architectural openness as non-negotiable to ensure equitable participation of the marginalised" (Gender Dynamic Coalition, 2011).

Examining the role of the internet while being rooted in a gender and rights framework is vital to envisioning a post-2015 development agenda. The transformative impact of the internet is one that is inclusive of diversity and affirming of equality.

This paper will explore the following issues:

-Self, body and autonomy

The internet is a key channel for access to information otherwise difficult to come by due to existing regulation, monopolistic media or censorship by the state and culture. Access to critical information such as support services for survivors of violence against women, information on reproductive health or sexual rights enables women to make decisions about their selves, lives and bodies, and to exercise autonomy and self-determination. Control and ownership over internet technologies can also result in a sense of personal empowerment. Ensuring equal and meaningful access to the internet includes issues of costs, availability, relevant content, privacy and safety.

- **Culture and society**

The internet can be an important space to engage in the shaping of culture and society. Women and girls can express their diverse realities without being confined by the gate-keeping of institutions such as broadcast media. This means that different discourses are able to proliferate and norms that discriminate against or silence marginalised sections of society can be challenged or dismantled. It enables women and girls to overcome limitations in mobility, culture and cost to form communities, discuss shared concerns, provide mutual support, create

knowledge and organise for change. However, increasing censorship and regulation of online spaces, sites being hacked or blocked and silencing tactics through misogynistic hate speech on feminist blogs threaten to narrow spaces and limit freedom of expression.

- Economic power and development

The internet has also brought new economic models based on sharing and openness, such as the free and open source software movement; copyleft to increase cultural and knowledge circulation in the public domain; and crowdfunding to mobilise resources from the public. Many governments have dedicated resources for improved internet infrastructure under the framework of economic development. Mobile phone and community internet access in rural areas have broadened women's livelihood options and wellbeing. The increasing enforcement of intellectual property rights and erosion of privacy online threaten this framework of openness and its potential for alternative forms of capital circulation.

- Public and political participation

Online, ordinary citizens are coming together to demand change in governance, culture and market ideologies - from the Pink Chaddi campaign, to collective mapping of violence against women, to the Arab uprisings to Occupy Wall Street. The internet has played a key role as a site where alliances and communities are formed, violations are surfaced, supporters are mobilised and communication spaces for action are created. It is an important public sphere for political contestation where different actors, struggles and concerns are able to converge to inform or transform norms and public opinion, and in turn influence policy. Governments, however, are demanding greater control over the way that the internet is governed while divesting their duties to the private sector to enforce legislation or ensure human rights are respected.

2. Communication technologies in women's hands to challenge gender inequalities

"Our culture dictates that women should not talk or answer back and because of this many of us suffered the violation of their rights", relates Sella, a woman trained as a paralegal who works in Uganda's countryside to assist other women whose rights have been infringed. "Women and girls were denied property and education. If they refused to be inherited by male in-laws then they would be thrown out of their homes after their husbands died. Some HIV positive women were isolated and suffered more stigma. We sensitized these women and girls on their rights to own property and attain education."

In a training programme developed by ISIS WICCE with the support of the APC Women's Network Support Programme in the framework of its project "Take Back The Tech! To Eradicate Violence Against Women", Sella learned to use her cell phone and a laptop to send text messages to groups, upload reports to websites, to blog and record information and stories, and to take photographs to report cases.

Using ICTs as a tool to denounce and report the violation of women's rights has helped Sella and her paralegal colleagues assist other women recover their property, their right to education and their respect. Sella also says that being able to master ICTs has made a significant change in her life. "It has helped me to feel free and respected in the community. People recognise me as an important person even though I am HIV positive."

When highlighting new and emerging communication rights issues, access to the internet is a critical part of exercising the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association. Sella's experience in Uganda shows that access is a multi-faceted concept, including not only physical access to the internet but also access in local languages, accessibility for disabled persons and access to locally produced content. The consideration of human rights and the internet requires an intersectional approach that can make the links between, for example, universal access to

infrastructure, accessibility and usability for marginalised groups and the promotion of linguistic diversity.

In June 2011, at the 17th Human Rights Council session, Frank La Rue, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, focused on the internet in his report (La Rue, 2011). It was the first time that the internet was being examined at this forum.

In his report, La Rue said "The right to freedom of opinion and expression is as much a fundamental right on its own accord as it is an "enabler" of other rights... by acting as a catalyst for individuals to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression, the Internet also facilitates the realization of a range of other human rights." (para. 22)

However, for the internet to fulfil its potential as a platform for shared learning, innovation, solidarity and collaborative action for justice, multiple factors must be considered. This includes worrying trends in limitations on freedom of information by means of intellectual property rights enforcement, blatant disregard of personal privacy by social networking platforms, and the building in of surveillance tools in network infrastructure (Association for Progressive Communications, 2011a).

The need to fulfill this potential and override social limitations and censorship was illustrated by Judy Monroy, from Yakojumo LGBT Association in Colombia, when she decided to launch an internet initiative "Connect to the network, defend your rights, we are with you, you're not alone". The goal was to teach and promote ICT use among LGBT women, so that they could find a safe space to discuss their rights, join forces to defend them and receive information about the institutions that are ready to support them[i]. The website opened a space to assist LGBT people who are often the victims of homophobia and domestic violence. The site provided the services of a psychologist and a lawyer, so that people could talk about their problems or find

answers to their questions, using secure online spaces. It also provided information on public policies for the LGBT population, as well as on legislation about violence against women and other legal matters. Judy says that the site became an important tool for the LGBT movement because it helped to create a safe, trusted environment, where sensitive issues regarding LGBT's rights could be discussed privately and respectfully.

In his report, the Special Rapporteur also highlighted women's human rights. Women's rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association must be respected and protected. All forms of gender based violence (including domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment) in both public and in private spheres are forms of discrimination and are violations of women's human rights (Committee for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, 1992). States must take all steps to prevent and eliminate such violence. In relation to the internet this means ensuring that laws, policies and practices do not permit or create new forms of violence against women such as cyberstalking, digital surveillance, data monitoring and other transgressions of women's rights. Women's human rights must be respected and protected and not restricted, directly or indirectly, in the name of 'security' or other law enforcement measures except as determined in accordance with agreed human rights standards, including women's human rights standards. For example, when a sexual rights approach is faced with the multilayered challenges of internet regulation, other critical dimensions emerge, such as intimacy, confidentiality and self-expression. This area of legal and political thinking is still poorly developed and understood in most countries (Kee, J sm 2011; p61).

Women's rights on the internet are affirmed in the APC Internet Rights Charter[ii] .When addressing the right to equal access for men and women, this charter considers that "in many places women and men do not have equal access to learn about, define, access, use and shape the internet. Efforts to increase access must recognise and redress existing gender inequalities. There must be full participation

of women in all areas related to internet development to ensure gender equity".

This charter is one of the earliest expressions of how human rights relate to internet issues, focusing on seven thematic areas which were seen as key to developing countries. It was also aimed at circumventing potentially polarising debates that raised the question of whether the huge impact of the internet brought with it new forms of rights such as the right to internet access – an issue which still resonates in current communications policy movements. In that way, it became a valuable strategy and platform to directly engage the rights language and framework in advocacy work on the internet, and to enable continuous analysis of the rapidly changing internet landscape.

Gender equality and development go hand in hand, and on the internet women's rights to freedom of expression and association must be respected to ensure development. From our research and training with women's human rights defenders and activists, we find an urgent need to ensure that emerging forms of online violence against women are decisively confronted. There is also a need to address blocking and filtering from a gender perspective as blocking and filtering of content related to women's sexuality has adverse effects on women's and girls' rights to participate in cultural life and fully exercise their citizenship within the evolving information society.

Debates on internet content regulation, surveillance and privacy are rarely informed by the hard lessons learnt from feminist movements. These include the conceptual complexities of private/public in the criminalisation of domestic violence; and the policing of sexual behaviour and identity on the basis of public morality and national order. There is a need for these insights and perspectives to inform the debates on internet governance, particularly in relation to clarifying limits to contesting rights and interests, and deciding the principles upon which they are to be decided.

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This is especially relevant when current approaches to content regulation in relation to sexuality are from a protectionist standpoint on the basis of "harm" to either private individuals or public morals. This approach neglects important questions such as how is "harm" measured, on what value system, and how does this empower or further constrain already marginalised sections of society? And in what ways can we approach internet regulation to create the conditions necessary to provide the protection and fulfilment of the rights of a diversity of people, towards inclusion and equality (Kee, J sm, 2011)?

This concern was expressed by the IGF Gender Dynamic Coalition in 2011: "Public policies at national levels in all social and economic domains need to keep pace with the rapid changes being ushered in by the Internet and also pay heed to the inherent tensions arising in the Internet ecology - for instance between the right to privacy and the right to know - managing them not through retrograde, patronising and patriarchal visions of women's needs and rights, but with a strong commitment to human rights, equality and social justice. There is increasing evidence to show how private interests and state control can compromise the potential of the Internet to be an open and inclusive space" (Gender Dynamic Coalition, 2011).

Access to the internet is enabling women to exercise their right to expression and access to information and in the process, it also enables their participation in the economy, to exercise citizenship rights, access services, engage in formal and informal processes to determine their social, cultural and political life. However, growing incidence of censorship measures such as blocking and filtering internet content disproportionately restrict women's right to freedom of expression. In particular, content related to women's sexuality has been the target of censorship. For example, images of breastfeeding were removed on Facebook, advertisements on abortion services were restricted in some countries by Google and, in Indonesia, national internet service providers were ordered to block access to a webpage that published a comic

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book that talks about the human rights of lesbians on the grounds that it was pornographic. These restrictions run counter to the fulfilment of bodily integrity rights and individual self-determination (Association for Progressive Communications, 2012).

Another question that arises is that of transparency and accountability. When just about anyone can determine what can and cannot be seen, the whole system becomes worryingly arbitrary. In the above examples, censorship was primarily exercised by private providers of services. The EroTICs project, an exploratory research study on sex, rights and the internet, has also revealed that access to information in these instances is often arbitrary and confusing. It is difficult to say with certainty what information will or will not be available at any given location. The factors that influence access in some countries are obscure, and those responsible for making decisions are hard to identify and often unaccountable for the choices that they make. Many times not only governments but also third parties - library committees, software developers, interest groups and others - may determine access. These are, or should be, issues of concern for everyone. The benefits that the internet can bring are considerable, but issues of uncertainty, arbitrary decision-making, over-blocking and unequal access can outweigh those benefits (Kee, J sm, 2011; p21). The potential for creating a "digital divide" is considerable. On the one hand, there are people who control their own internet access and enjoy essentially unrestricted access to information. On the other, there are those who are dependent on others and whose access is limited by technical issues such as low-speed connectivity or no access to broadband. The risk for electronically disenfranchised users is that reduced access to information will deepen their marginalization and make it harder for them to keep pace with people fortunate enough to enjoy unhindered access.

3. Safe online environments: facing limitations to full online participation

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ICTs can be used in different ways, including to increase or to limit freedoms and rights. This can be seen in relation to violence against women (VAW) - the physical, mental or sexual harm that women experience because they are women or which affects them disproportionately. More and more women experience violence through the use of internet and mobile phones. However, ICTs can be used to increase women's access to information and to services necessary to protect and further their rights.

Few women's rights activists address the complex relationship between VAW and ICTs in their work. In most countries there is also little legal and political framing of this issue. Globally, women experience gender-based economic, political, social and cultural inequality, including in access to rights such as education, health and safety. VAW is also prevalent in different forms worldwide. The ways in which women experience inequality and violence depend on their race, class, sexual orientation, nationality and geographic location.

Technology related violence is a form of VAW that manifests in the context of these new technologies. ICTs can be used to perpetrate violence in a variety of ways. Perpetrators of violence use mobile phones and the internet to stalk, harass and monitor women's movements and activities. Specifically, perpetrators use mobile phone tracking services, obtain control of passwords and monitor text messages and incoming calls. Perpetrators also use ICTs to collect and distribute intimate and sexual photos and recordings of women without their authorisation.

According to results of recent research by APC (2011b), the most frequent forms of technology related VAW are:

• Online harassment and cyberstalking, which constitutes one of the most visible forms of VAW.

• Intimate partner violence, where technology is used in acts of violence and abuse in intimate or spousal relationships.

• Rape and sexual assault, where technology is used in various ways. It can be used to track the movement and activities of women and to provide location information. Violence can continue to be perpetrated through digital recording and distribution of violations. Technology can also be used to attract women into situations where they are sexually assaulted through fake internet postings or adverts, for example.

• Culturally justified VAW when technology can play a role in creating a culture of VAW or perpetuates the use of culture or religion to justify, ignore or accept acts of VAW.

• . Violence targeting communities, where communities face targeted online attacks and harassment because of their gender or sexual identity and/or political stance.

ICTs allow perpetrators to commit violence anonymously and at a distance from the women they are targeting, making it harder to identify perpetrators and charge and prosecute them. Phone tracking services and web sharing platforms also allow surveillance of women's activities and replication and distribution of intimate photos with little cost to and effort by the abuser. These acts of violence violate a range of women's rights, including a woman's right to privacy and protection of personal and sensitive information and the right to bodily integrity. Feminist researchers argue that within the context of ICTs, the body transcends the physical. Consequently, the distribution of intimate and abusive representations of bodies violates women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy. Furthermore technology related violence affects women's freedom to express themselves, move freely online and enjoy online communities, violating their autonomy, freedom of expression and access to information.

Responding effectively to technology related VAW requires action by everyone who shapes ICTs and everyone who is responsible for addressing VAW. This includes ICT users, internet service providers, the state, organisations working on VAW and the media. Action also needs to take place on different levels: to tackle the root causes of VAW and transform unequal power relations; to limit the consequences of VAW for victims/survivors by ensuring immediate response and support; and through long term care and support for victims/survivors.

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It is crucial to take an holistic approach to the issue of violence against women, which recognizes the interconnection between multiple forms of discrimination and the generation of different forms of violence. Attention must be paid to these emerging forms of technology mediated violence that compromise women's security and safety. Restrictions (whether due to state, family or cultural reasons) to women's use of the internet and communication technologies adversely affect women and girls rights to participate fully in cultural life and to enjoy the full exercise of their citizenship of the evolving information society (Association for Progressive Communications, 2011c).

In Congo, for example, women's and girls' use of ICTs proved to be vital to stop the harassment of school girls. Severa, in charge of the Junior Legal Desk in Pointe-Noire, coordinated a project that has reached more than 200 female students and 20 teachers in two schools. She worked to enable girls to stop sexual harassment in the streets and to know how to proceed if they were victims. "We trained girls on how to record a conversation on their cell phones in case they were harassed or abused, without the abuser noticing it."

The heart of her work through this project was to ask the girls to talk about their painful experiences "26 girls had the courage to confide in us, and three teachers too," recalls Severa. She recognises that at the organizational level, they deepened their knowledge of sexual harassment through this initiative, supported by AZUR Development. She explains, "We found that harassment is not limited to only the teacher-student relationships, but also between male and female teachers; and female teachers and management of schools. Girl students are also on the line of abusers in their own schools". Severa says that their work has been very successful "The project's impact on the work of the organization is now visible. Now the victims of violence contact us because they are sure they will actually find a solution with us. We are well known and trusted by students, other schools and civil society organizations."

It is is critical to encourage strategies, such as this, that empower women to use technology,

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including the internet, to realise the full range of their human rights, combat discrimination and protect themselves from violence and to take part in framing policies that govern the use of such technologies, including cybercrime legislation.

Going visible: mapping VAW and ICTs

There are many stories like the ones Severa recorded that remain untold because there is no name for them, because of shame, and because they lie hidden beneath everyday acceptance. These are stories of violence that women and girls face all over the world. When it comes to online violence, this invisibility is deepened. There are yet more stories that remain untold and undocumented. Their invisibility and our seeming acceptance inflect online spaces and practices with a culture that appears willing to tolerate acts of violence against women.

Monitoring efforts by governments in many parts of the world on cases of violence against women often omit this critical and growing form of violence. Without documentation, they remain unrecognised, excluded from the policy environment and little understood in the concerted efforts to end the persistent reality of violence against women globally.

In 2011, the Take Back the Tech! Campaigniii called on women to document these stories and bear witness. The aim is to make the invisible visible so that women and girls can take control of technology to tell their own stories, create their own testimonies, represent and shape their own narratives about the violence that they face.

The ongoing campaign helps to show the connections between women who think their stories are isolated, insignificant or anomalous, to a global picture of violence that women are facing, simply because they are women, so that each of them knows that their story matters. This initiative is in the tradition of a feminist way of knowing, of representing, and bearing witness. It demands change.

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Let's consider some examples:

-A young Philippino woman was engaged in a group texting activity or forum called Clan, which has been made popular through the cellphone carriers' promotions of unlimited texting. Clan is a network activity where different people who do not know each other and exchange text messages with the different members in their clan and also in other clans. The young woman started to have a relationship with a male member of her clan, even without seeing him in person. When they finally met through a group date with other members of their clan, she was made to drink. She got drunk and the man took her to a motel and raped her and filmed the scene. The sex video of her and the man was uploaded in facebook. In a highschool reunion, she was taunted by her former classmates who told her they saw her video. They called her names. The young woman almost don't go out of her house for fear of being tormented by those who saw her video (Take Back the Tech!, 2011).

- A 24-year-old girl from the USA was stalked via cell phone and online by her ex-boyfriend for nearly a year. It almost destroyed her life,"Over three years ago I broke up with a guy I had been dating for five months. When we started going out he seemed really nice. But two months into the relationship I realized that he wasn't as perfect as I had imagined. He was super clingy and there were times when he would get mad and start shouting at me one minute and crying and apologising the next. I should have left him sooner, but when he wasn't mad about something he really did care for me a lot." Mansi now thinks stalking should be considered a crime (Take Back the Tech!, 2011).

-A senior female official of a multinational bank in Rawalpindi, Pakistan,was harassed via emails. She was the head of the HR department in the bank which was in the process of

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downsizing its staff. This official had to fire/ let go of a few contractual male employees. One of them decided to take revenge. He created an email address from her name, put porn images and videos in the content and sent it to about 300 employees of the bank including the CEO, saying that "I want to do these things to you". Not only did she have to face embarrassment but was also questioned for her conduct, even though she had been working for the organization for over a decade. An FIR was filed but since no cyber crime laws are present nothing could be done about it (Take Back the Tech!, 2011).

Each story is part of a whole and telling them helps to advocate for recognition and redress for technology-related violence against women at local, national and international levels. They are relevant to strengthening the capacity of women and girls to address and deal with violence that they might face online, and for the work of women's human rights defenders and internet rights advocates on the issue of violence against women.

ICTs pose new challenges to the safety and privacy of women and girls. The multiple platforms for posting and reposting information in social networks make it hard to control and regulate the personal data women want to share with a limited audience. Viral circulation of private pictures and videos is a common problem in social networking along with unwanted comments, sexual solicitation, obscenity and stalking. With these, how can women and girls ensure safe participation in social networks?

Safe participation in social networks requires the involvement of all ICT users, internet intermediaries, organizations, the state and the media. For women, the first defense in protecting privacy and identity online is to know their rights as ICT users and as women. Women should be aware that whether in an online or offline environment they are entitled to have their human rights respected, protected and fulfilled. These include the right to access a secure internet connection, the right to express and associate themselves on the internet

without interference and discrimination, the right to control personal data disclosure, and the right to remedy, among others (Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, 2012).

Recommendations to governments and international organisations:

- Promote respect for human rights online and offline. Freedom of expression and opinion must be protected online, the same way they are protected offline. There is need to understand the nature of communications in the online and the offline worlds in order to correctly identify where these freedoms are exercised and what threats may be posed to these freedoms.

- Promote ICT use and a strategy of information, education and communication in online spaces to combat violence against women and girls and to enhance women's and girls' rights.

- Promote women's and girls' communication rights in ICT use and online spaces, encouraging their participation, content creation and freedom of expression.

- Engage in the political discussion about the promotion of internet development and internet governance with a vision of gender inclusion, gender justice and respect for human rights.

- Promote and encourage women's participation in decision-making processes in ICT policies to secure that women's and girls' needs are properly considered, included and safeguarded.

- Protection and promotion of women's human rights cannot be left to private corporations, ISPs or individuals. States and international bodies have a moral and legal responsibility to uphold and safeguard the rights of women, both online and offline. Transparent, accountable decision-making on decisions to block or restrict content, and a right to redress, for example, are vital in upholding women's human rights.

Recommendations to private sector:

– Internet and telecommunications businesses such as social networking platforms, web hosting companies and mobile phone operators should develop corporate user policies and practices that respect women's rights. This includes the adequate representation of women in policy-making and standards-setting processes, and ensuring that policies and standards consider the safety and security of users.

Recommendations to civil society organisations:

– Women's organisations are called on to take action and use ICTs for activism to combat violence against women, promote equality and build solidarity. Women should take actions to control technology and change power relations in the ICT field.

– Women's organizations must actively participate in movements for communication rights on the internet and affirm women's achievements and full participation in society, both online and offline.

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[i]   This project received the support of Colnodo and the APC Women's Rights Programme in the framework of the project "Take Back The Tech! To Eradicate Violence Against Women"

[ii]   The APC Internet Rights Charter was collectively developed in 2001, building from the People's Communication Charter that was part of the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) campaign. www.apc.org/en/node/5677

[iii]   The Take Back the Tech campaign was launched in 2006 by Women's Rights Programme, Association for Progressive Communications, with the aim of creating awareness, preventing and finding ways to eradicate online violence against women www.takebackthetech.net