The Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Women’s Online Expression and Participation in Uganda

December, 2020
Recommended Citation
Sandra. A., (December, 2020). The Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Women’s Online Expression and Participation in Uganda. WOUGNET.

©WOUGNET 2020
Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables.......................................................................................................i
Acknowledgement..................................................................................................................ii

Chapter One: Introduction.................................................................................................1
  1.1 Background....................................................................................................................1
  1.2 Problem Statement.........................................................................................................4
  1.3 The Purpose of the Study.............................................................................................6
  1.4 The Specific Objectives of the Study..........................................................................6
  1.5 The Scope of the Study...............................................................................................7
  1.6 Significance of the Study............................................................................................7

Chapter Two: Methodology............................................................................................9
  2.1 Study Design................................................................................................................9
  2.2 Study Population..........................................................................................................9
  2.3 Sampling Procedures....................................................................................................9
  2.4 Data Collection Methods............................................................................................10
  2.5 Data Analysis...............................................................................................................10
  2.6 Study Limitations........................................................................................................11

Chapter Three: Presentation of study findings............................................................12
  3.1 Participant Information...............................................................................................12
  3.2 Nature and Forms of Internet Shutdowns..................................................................16
  3.3 Perceptions of Internet Shutdowns............................................................................19
  3.3. Women’s Online Rights are Violated/Affected by Internet Shutdowns....................20
  3.4 Coping Strategies Adopted by Women to Circumvent Internet Shutdowns...............24

Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusion...................................................................26
  4.1 Discussion.....................................................................................................................26
  4.2 Conclusion....................................................................................................................30
  4.3 Recommendations.......................................................................................................31
Figure 1: Map of Uganda Showing Study Areas (Districts) 7
Figure 2: Participation of Participants by Gender 12
Figure 3: Education Characteristics of Participants 13
Figure 4: Frequency of Internet use as Reported by Participants 14
Figure 5: How Internet is used in a Typical Day 15
Figure 6: Knowledge about Internet use among Men and Women 15
Figure 7: How Internet is Facilitating Economic Activities 22
Figure 8: Extent of Loss Experienced by Women during Internet Shutdown 23

Table 1: Gender Distribution per District 12
Table 2: Nature of Internet Shutdowns Experienced by both Male and Female Participants 16
Table 3: Web-based Applications used by Women 18
Table 4: Showing Women Rights Violated/Affected by Internet Shutdowns 21
Table 5: Showing Factors that Constraint Women’s Ability to Access Digital Platforms Besides Internet Shutdowns 24
The Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) with generous support from the Global Network Initiative (GNI)-Internews is pleased to produce this report on the impact of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online experiences and participation in Uganda as part of 2020 GNI-Internews Fellowship. WOUGNET would like to thank in particular, the following individuals who in one way or the other, contributed towards this final report. Special thanks to Isaac Amuku, Moses Owiny, Patricia Nyasuna, and Peace Oliver Amuge for their guidance and invaluable contribution throughout the entire process of producing this research report.
Executive Summary

Access to information is a universal human right enshrined in article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Globally, the Internet has become the main source of information with over 4.8 billion users of which 12% are in Africa.¹ In Uganda, there were more than 10 million Internet users in 2020 according to the Data Reportal which is around 24% of the country’s population.² The Internet is changing traditional ways of conducting information and business by establishing new sources of information and new methods of communication on a global basis.³ Access to the Internet is increasing rapidly across the African continent and developing economies are becoming more reliant on internet,⁴ with millions of individuals getting online and engaging on a wide range of issues on social media and in other digital platforms – including political matters, governance, and social and economic development, among others.⁵ Though there is increasing access and use of Internet services across Africa, progress towards improving Internet access has been hampered by Internet shutdowns.⁶ Over time, Uganda government has come on the spot for shutting down the Internet and disrupting telecommunication network. Internet connectivity once disrupted, the ability to gather and share critical information,

access essential products and services, learn and work from home effectively, connect with loved ones, and speak truth to power is obviously taken away especially with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic which has made the Internet borderless being interconnected.7 Shutting down the Internet can be highly targeted and sometimes focused on specific groups of individuals.8 However, these disruptions have far reaching negative effects on women on how they use Internet. There is a lacking research evidence on how Internet shutdowns affect women online participation and expression and how women cope with the effects of Internet disruptions in Uganda.

Therefore, this study sought to interrogate the effects of Internet shutdowns on women’s online participation and expression and coping mechanisms adopted by women. Specifically, the study was set out to find out the nature and forms of Internet shutdown; examine how women’s online rights are violated/affected and investigate the coping strategies adopted by women to circumvent Internet shutdowns in Uganda. The study was conducted in the three districts of Kampala, Mukono and Lira. This study employed a mixed methods approach including Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussion and Semi Structured Question to collect data across the spectrum of different participants. The study population included women and girls, men and boys, human rights advocates from civil society organizations, digital security trainers, telecom service providers, informal sector, policy makers from government agencies and ministries and district local government employees.

The findings show that the Internet is used daily for information sharing, socializing, online biz and Internet games. The nature and forms of Internet shutdowns included; the Internet service provider disables network, Uganda Communications Commission sanction blocks, inhibitive taxes (OTT), throttling/slow connectivity,

---
disruption of voice calls and SMS services/jamming, social media censoring and shutting down or blocking of specific websites and applications.

Participants perceived Internet shutdowns as an infringement on their rights spanning through the social, economic, health and political rights. Specifically, Internet shutdowns were reported to affect a spectrum of women's rights and freedoms including economic rights; political rights; social freedoms and other indirect rights such as access to quality health care, education services and access to justice. Financial loss was reported by women during Internet shutdowns. Women reported resisting Internet related taxes by organizing social mobilization to advocate against unfair policies such as the Over-the-Top Tax (OTT).

All forms of Internet shutdowns are occurring in Uganda affecting the most used platforms such as social media. This has further been worsened by Over-the-Top Tax preventing people from accessing the Internet. Women rights are violated and abused economically, socially and politically during Internet shutdowns and this is worse in rural areas and some pockets of cases in urban areas. In general, women have started to embrace other ways of accessing and using the Internet when there is Internet shutdown through platforms such as the Virtual Private Network (VPN) and using other non-internet or technical platforms such as using radios and loudspeakers.

Participants recommended measures such as; more attention and investment needed to advance the access and use of internet services to rural areas; strengthening awareness campaign on critical role played by the internet in advancing realization of women's rights online and rights of the marginalized. The internet also helps in addressing structural and legal bottle necks to quality information access for all Ugandans with priority to most vulnerable groups such as women.
Chapter One: Introduction

Access to information is a universal human right enshrined in article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 calls for respect of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which “includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)\(^9\) reinforces these provisions and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights.\(^{10}\)

Globally, the Internet has become the main source of information with over 4.8 billion users of which 12% are in Africa.\(^{11}\) The Internet is serving most of the major sectors globally such as the health, social sector, economics and political sectors. Information and Communication Technology is central and vital in achievement of the SDGs 2030 targets.\(^{12}\) The Internet is changing traditional ways of conducting information business by establishing new sources of information and new methods of communication on a global basis.\(^{13}\) Around the globe, powerful forces continue to threaten the vitality of the Internet with a number of countries blocking particular applications, shutting down specific services (e.g. instant messaging and voice over Internet protocol calling), turning off mobile telecommunications services, or disrupting the entire Internet causing Internet

---


Outage. These actions separate family, friends, and undermine economic growth, interfere with the startup ecosystem, and threaten social stability by interrupting economic activity.

Access to the Internet is increasing rapidly across the African continent and developing economies are becoming more reliant on the Internet, with millions of individuals getting online and engaging on a wide range of issues on social media and in other digital platforms – including political matters, governance, and social and economic development, among others. Though there is increasing access and use of Internet services across Africa, progress towards improving Internet access has been hampered by Internet shutdowns. African countries, that have had notable Internet shutdowns include Cameroon, Gabon night Internet curfews, Burundi and Ethiopia.

In 2017, seven African countries including Uganda were leading in Internet shutdowns. The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) established by UCC Act 2013 is mandated to regulate the Communications sector, which


22 Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, M.D.K., Mr. Joseph Cannataci, Mr. Maina Kiai, Mr. Michel Forst, Ms. Faith Pansy Tlakula, and Ms. Reine Alapini-Gansou., Internet shutdown in Uganda and elections, A. Union, Editor. 2016.
includes Telecommunications, Broadcasting, radio communication, postal communications, data communication and infrastructure.\textsuperscript{23} Over time, the UCC has come on the spot for shutting down the Internet by blocking specific social platforms and disrupting telecommunication network. For instance, during the 2016 general elections, the country was shut out of social media platforms on two occasions - first disruption on February 18, 2016, on the eve of the presidential election, and restrictions lasted for four full days which affected social media platforms and mobile money services.\textsuperscript{24}

This blocking order also affected the telecom companies such as Airtel Uganda,\textsuperscript{26} Smart Uganda, K2 Telecom, Vodafone Uganda, and Africell Uganda.\textsuperscript{27} Although, these platforms (Facebook, Twitter and etc.) are open to freely express and communicate by fostering transparency around the democratic process and promote active citizen participation, they are a huge threat to many dictatorial regimes and are therefore blocked or sometimes totally shutdown days before, during and after the presidential elections. This is because it is far easier to control and promote the official government narrative when the general population is silenced without the government calculating the far-reaching consequences of Internet shutdowns beyond the election period.\textsuperscript{28}

In all these, the women and other vulnerable groups are the most affected facing economic exclusions, limited online participation, limited free flow of information, limited freedom of expression and association and monitoring or surveillance.


\textsuperscript{26} Mr. Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, M.D.K., Mr. Joseph Cannataci, Mr. Maina Kiai, Mr. Michel Forst, Ms. Faith Pansy Tlakula, and Ms. Reine Alapini-Gansou., Internet shutdown in Uganda and elections, A. Union, Editor. 2016.


\textsuperscript{28} How to Bypass Internet Shutdown? https://mysterium.network/blog/internet-shutdown/?utm_source=Twitter&s=08
by state agents especially when Internet connectivity is restored. Yet these human rights and freedoms are inherent and to be enjoyed by all irrespective of gender, age or location. Internet disruptions continue to widen the gender digital gap between men and women, boys and girls globally but most specifically in developing countries like Uganda. To bridge the digital divide between women and men, there is need to understand how women’s Online experiences are constrained due to Internet shutdowns/disruptions.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the number of Internet users have been increasing in Uganda over time. Similarly, there have been increasing number of Internet shutdowns used overtime as tactics to surveil specific groups such as marginalized and vulnerable groups such as women and minority groups in Uganda. Notably, on February 18, 2016, on the eve of the presidential election, on May 11, 2016, the day before Yoweri Museveni’s inauguration ceremony for his fifth term as president and in 2018 during the introduction of Over the Top (OTT) tax as a way of generating revenue and regulating gossip (Lugambo) which amounted to an Internet shutdown in terms of accessibility and affordability. The Internet shutdowns in Uganda have been reported to occur during national elections periods or whenever there are mass protests.29

There is no doubt that Internet shutdowns affect both men and women-directly, it affects enjoyment of fundamental freedoms of expression, association and political participation.30, 31 Yet for women, the effects of Internet shutdowns may have far reaching negative effects on how they use the Internet compared to


https://mysterium.network/blog/internet-shutdown/?utm_source=Twitter&s=08


Thus, this study sought to interrogate the effects of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online participation and expression and coping mechanisms adopted by women during Internet shutdowns in Uganda.

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to examine the impact of internet shutdowns on women’s Online expression and participation in Uganda.

1.4 The Specific Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by three specific objectives, namely;

i. To assess the nature and forms of Internet shutdown in Uganda.

ii. To examine how women’s Online rights are violated/affected by Internet shutdowns in Uganda.

iii. To investigate the coping strategies adopted by women to circumvent Internet shutdowns in Uganda.

1.5 The Scope of the Study

The study sought to assess the impact of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online expression and participation in Uganda. In this study, we documented some of the Online platforms that are accessed and used by women and girls during elections, the forms of Internet shutdowns, women’s Online rights violations as a result of Internet shutdowns and coping mechanisms adopted by women during Internet shutdowns. Particularly, the study attempted to seek answers to the following questions: How do women and girls access Online platforms in periods of election and violent situations? Do they use circumvention tools, and if so, how do they use them? How do they cope with shutdowns and other Internet disruptions, and what perception and attitudes do they hold towards these measures? How does this alter women’s free expression Online?

The study was conducted in the three districts of Uganda that included: Kampala, Mukono and Lira with an aim of documenting how Internet shutdowns may affect women’s online expression and participation in these three districts. These
The study was conducted between May and August 2020 to examine the impact of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online expression and participation in Uganda.

Districts were purposively selected because of high population density in urban and peri-urban areas and extensive number of Internet users as per the UCC records. These three districts would provide a comparative for urban, peri-urban and rural context regarding the effect of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online participation and expression in Uganda.

![Figure 1: Map of Uganda Showing Study Areas (Districts)](image)

The study was conducted between May and August 2020 to examine the impact of the Internet shutdowns on women’s Online expression and participation in Uganda.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study sought to generate evidence on the effects of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online expression and participation and women’s coping mechanisms in the event of Internet shutdowns in Uganda. The findings of the research will influence the Gender and ICT policy advocacy in Uganda to help policy makers, private sectors and civil society organizations to engage in an evidence based and
data driven policy advocacy to enhance women’s Online freedom of expression and participation. In addition, the coping strategies or the circumvention tools produced will help women to safely browse the Internet during periods of Internet shutdowns or restrictions on access and use of the Internet by the government.
Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to provide a snapshot of the phenomena. The design was opted for because it allows the researchers to triangulate methods and data sources to improve validity of the research findings. Furthermore, this design allows researchers to collect information on key variables at one point in time. This study employed a mixed methods approach. The qualitative data collection technique sought to describe/collection reliable data on the behaviors and attributes that were more difficult to measure numerically on Internet shutdowns while the quantitative technique was employed to collect reliable data on attributes that are numerical in nature. In addition, policy makers were selected to examine their understanding about the nature of the Internet shutdown and its impact on women’s Online freedom of expression and participation from their perspective.

2.2 Study Population

The study population included: Women and girls, men and boys, human rights advocates from civil society organizations, digital security trainers, telecom service providers, informal sector workers, policy makers from government agencies and ministries and district local government employees. Women and girls were selected to be part of this study because they are key Internet users and the shutdown of the Internet by the state authorities directly impacts on their Online freedom of expression and participation. Men and boys provided their perspectives of Internet shutdowns impact on women’s Online expression and participation. Human rights defenders were purposively selected based on their understanding of the subject matter and experience in advocacy for marginalized groups while the government officials provided the policy framework around Internet regulation, consumer protection and facilitation.

2.3 Sampling Procedures

Participants for this study were purposively sampled. Community participants, that is men, women, boys and girls were identified based on their ability to share
their own experience using the Internet, the key informants were identified based on their current involvement in advocacy, policy formulation, and implementation of either communication or women and girl's Online rights centred programs.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

The primary data from the field was collected using Focused Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informants’ Interviews (KII), and Semi-structured Interviews. This was further supplemented by desk review of the relevant literature related to the Internet shutdown, women's Online freedom of expression and participation, access, experience as well as some of the circumvention tools and strategies available for use by women during periods of Internet shutdowns.

The data collection tools were designed with the help of the gender audit tool kit - a framework of analysis developed by the World Wide Web Foundation and partners to help interrogate women's access, utilization and participation in digital platforms.37

The tools were pretested by research teams and adjusted based on field pretest before adopting them for final use in collecting data from the three study districts.

2.5 Data Analysis

The study generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 24 while Qualitative data was analyzed with the aid of Atlas.ti.version 8.0. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was majorly descriptive in nature. The analysis team sequenced the analysis starting with quantitative data to ensure that qualitative data provides possible explanations to observed trends from quantitative data. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically, deriving subthemes and themes inductively.

2.6 Study Limitations

Though this study generates rich qualitative and quantitative evidence on effect of Internet shutdowns on women’s Online presence, the limited sample size does not give it statistical power to generalize the findings for entire country or to accurately represent experiences of women and girls in Uganda.
Chapter Three: Study Findings

3.1 Demographic Information

3.1.1 Gender of Respondents

The study findings show that more females (66%) participated in the study compared to men (34%) figure 2. However, there were more females from Mukono who participated in the study compared to Kampala and Lira respectively (Table 1). Kampala had more males who participated in the study followed by Lira and Mukono respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender Distribution per District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lira</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukono</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kampala</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Data

3.1.2 Education Level of Respondents

The study findings show that most of the participants in the study had completed Secondary, Diploma, Bachelors and Masters respectively in that order while a few of them did not go to school and others stopped in primary level (Table 2). Kampala district had more respondents who were educated (Masters 39.1% and Bachelor 39.1%) compared to Mukono and Lira. Respondents in Mukono district were moderately educated (Masters – 18.5%, Bachelors – 29.6%, Diploma – 29.6% and Secondary – 22.2%). Lira district had more less educated respondents who stopped in Secondary (58.6%), Diploma (24.1%) and Primary level (17.2%).

Figure 2: Participation of Participants by Gender
3.2 Assess the Nature and Forms of Internet Shutdowns in Uganda

3.2.1 Frequency of Accessing the Internet

Participants from the three districts were asked how often they used the Internet in their work. The findings show that majority of the participants used the Internet on daily basis with Kampala district (91%) leading followed by Mukono district (59%) and lastly Lira district (48) figure 4. While fewer people reported to be using the Internet once a week, Kampala district (9%), Mukono (30%) and Lira (21%) a month, other participant reported limited or no access to the Internet. No participant reported to be using the Internet in more than 3 months and only 4 percentage reported to be using the Internet in 3 months times.
3.2.2 Daily use of Internet

The study further sought to find out how the Internet was used on a daily basis from three districts. The findings show that the Internet is mostly used daily for information sharing and socializing. However, others reported that it is moderately used for Online business. Few participants use the Internet for games (6%). The findings further showed that respondents mostly use the Internet for information sharing (37.7%) and socializing (32.5%). While conducting FGDs, participants said they use the Internet for socializing, communication, research, advertisement, studies, entertainment, games, dating news, consultations, campaigns, advocacy, pornography, Online transactions, e-banking, social networking, entertainment, shopping, news, Online dating, betting, and e-learning.

"I use the Internet when there is a certain information I want to get. For example, during this COVID-19 with lockdown, I go to find out information on updates that I am supposed to follow on COVID-19. FGD_WOMEN _LIRA"
3.2.3 Knowledge on Internet use

The study findings show that participants have got some level of knowledge on Internet use. It further shows that participants (men and women) in Kampala were more knowledgeable (100%) on use of Internet than the other two districts (figure 5). Lira district had the highest percent of men (25%) and women (41.2%) with no knowledge on Internet use. Mukono had 81.3% of women and 100% of men with Internet knowledge. More participants both men and women had knowledge on use of the Internet compared to participants who did not have knowledge.
3.2 Nature and Forms of Internet Shutdowns

Respondents reported forms of the Internet shutdown as service provider disables network, the Uganda Communications Commission sanction blocks, inhibitive taxes (OTT), throttling/slow connectivity, disruption of voice calls and SMS services/jamming, social media censoring and shutting down of specific websites in Uganda (table 2). The results further show that men are affected more by throttling/slow connectivity and social media censoring while females are affected more by inhibitive taxes (OTT), throttling/slow connectivity and social media censoring. The results reveal that women are affected by all the forms of the Internet shutdown while men are not affected by service provider disables network in all the forms of Internet shutdowns reported (matrix 2).

“A respondent said that “the most experienced form of Internet shutdowns was the social media blackout in 2016 and the subsequent censoring of Online media content through the UCC and relatedly, Over the Top Tax introduced by Uganda Revenue Authority was perceived to have further led to internet shutdown for some sections of the community.” FGD_Mukono District

Table 2: Nature of Internet Shutdowns Experienced by both Male and Female Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Reported by Men</th>
<th>Reported by Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Service provider disables network</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>UCC Sanction blocks</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inhibitive taxes (OTT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Throttling/Slow connectivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Disruption of voice calls and SMS services/jamming</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Social media censoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shutting down of specific websites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*legend: ✓ indicates Item was Reported in Focus Group discussion
3.2.5 Scenarios of Internet Shutdowns

The respondents reported that various forms of Internet shutdowns have been observed to coincide with events such as major national elections, visit by high-ranking government officials such as the head of state, political or public protests or when publishing media prohibited the laws of the republic of Uganda. Others included when someone is using the Internet in commission of crime, when someone sets up a website to carry out Online child exploitation or publishing content that is against the state or content that is false or fabricated, then that website maybe denied access and as a result, people who consume content on that website experience a shutdown on that particular website. KII with government officials indicated that Uganda Communications Commission has the mandate to regulate Internet activity in Uganda and as guided by the law, some actions are taken to protect the sovereignty of Uganda.

“We have the first law we talk about the UCC act defines what we call how people should behave Online. We now have guidelines which were passed in 2019 which even defines how people should behave if they are doing their work Online. So, section 56 of the UCC act provides for denial of service upon which a subscriber could be denied a service. When he or she doesn’t comply with the behavior when they are using their Simcard or the operating,” KII_National_Kampala District

3.2.6 Devices and Ownership of Internet Gadgets

During the focused group discussions, it was reported that more women are owning mobile phones and a few cases of co-ownership. There were no difference between women in rural, peri-urban and urban in terms of ownership of phones. The mobile phone was the most accessed device by women. These phones ranged from smart phones to feature phones (mapesa). The use of smart phones was reported across the three districts though majority of the women who accessed the smart phones were from Kampala and Mukono. The popularity of smart phones for accessing the Internet among women was attributed to ease of use and its relatively affordable costs of buying and servicing.
Participants reported limited use of laptop computers by the women for accessing the Internet. This was attributed to ease of access and affordability of the devices. In Lira, some of the women reported accessing the Internet through the Internet café or community computer centers or using laptops owned by their spouses. However, there were some women who reported being unable to access the Internet in their community, as noted by this female respondent:

“It’s because of easy access, something you are with all the time and easy to use and easy to manage and it’s affordable, yeah compared to the laptops, it is not simple to manage a laptop, a phone is a personal asset while a laptop is often use by many people. FGD_FEMALE_MUKONO

3.2.7 Web-based Applications used by Women

Participants from the three districts were asked to share various web-based platforms accessed by women. Results show that women use mainly search engines such as google to seek new information online. Social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were used for social networking and conduct of online business (table 3).

Table 3: Web-based Applications used by Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Application</th>
<th>Reason for Accessing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lira</td>
<td>Facebook, google, YouTube, opera, WhatsApp, Jumia</td>
<td>To search for information. Social media is cheaper for accessing information Online business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kampala</td>
<td>WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, globe, google</td>
<td>Socializing (“killing stress”) Online business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mukono</td>
<td>WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, globe, google</td>
<td>Online business Online learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3 Perceptions of Internet Shutdowns

Participants perceived Internet shutdowns as an infringement on their rights spanning through social, economic, health and political rights. Women reported emotional, health, economic effects of Internet shutdowns. However, some respondents argued that women experience Internet shutdowns differently. In rural settings because of limited access to the Internet coupled with often poor connectivity, such, women might not even notice that the Internet has been shut down. Whereas the women in urban settings might be swift to notice the absence or limited access to Internet during Internet shutdowns.

Men similarly viewed Internet shutdowns as a violation of their fundamental rights to information access a right given to all Ugandans through the national constitution. The young men perceived Internet shutdowns as a point when there is no access or when they experience restricted access to the Internet.

During Key Informant Interviews, the respondents perceived Internet shutdowns to be partial shutdowns, mostly effected by the local Internet service providers. They further contend that it’s almost unimaginable for any government to effect a total shutdown since most if not all Online activities dependent on the Internet will be affected; in essence even government/institution will have to experience it the same way. Other key informants perceived Internet shutdowns as part of political games based on when they are usually effected- as illustrated by this participant.

“Without hesitation, that is entirely a political game because you just ask yourself why it happens only during elections. Why doesn’t it happen now? KII MALE MUKONO”
3.3. Women's Online Rights Violated/Affected by Internet Shutdowns
3.3.1 Women's Online Rights Violated/Affected

Internet shutdowns were reported to affect a spectrum of women's rights and freedoms including economic rights for women operating small Online business enterprises; political rights especially use of social media platforms to campaign or campaign for their candidates of choice or present their political agenda if such women are contesting for political spaces; social freedoms of Online expression and association with Online groups. Other rights that are indirectly affected include access to quality health care, education services and access to justice (table 3).

During FGDs, women reported violations such as right to freedom of expression especially on social media and the right to conduct Online business for example Online transaction such as sending or receiving money on phone as some of the Online violation due to Internet shutdowns. Sometimes women reported mental problems or psychological torture during Internet shutdowns which makes them feel depressed. Participants in Kampala reported denial of access to health emergencies, violation of freedom of speech and expression, violation of the right to Online business and freedom of association as Online right being violated. The participants reported that there are specific platforms used by the women to conduct their business such JUMIA APP and others such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram among others that are used to conduct Online activism to dismantle gender base violence. Women in Lira reported that Internet shutdowns deny and violates women’s right to information access and sharing, Online business transaction, association and communication Online.

“The previous Internet shutdown left some services dysfunctional for instance mobile money, WhatsApp’s, Facebook, activism, actually freedom of expression, studies and association and doing trade was greatly affected,” FGD_Kampala District
Table 4: Showing Women Rights Violated/Affected by Internet Shutdowns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rights of Women</th>
<th>Areas identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic rights</td>
<td>Free choice of employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Social rights   | Right to freedom of opinion and expression  
|                 | Rights association and assembly  
|                 | Social security  
|                 | Right to cultural diversity  
|                 | Right to access to information  
|                 | Right to leisure and rest                                                                                                                                 |
| Political rights| Political participation  
|                 | Choice of political party                                                                                                                                 |
| Health          | Right to access public services                                                                                                                                 |
| Education       | Right to quality education                                                                                                                                 |
| Legal           | Legal rights                                                                                                                                               |

3.3.2 Internet Shutdowns and Women’s Economic Rights

The participants were asked about how they use the Internet for doing economic activities. They reported activities such as e-commerce through Online networking and marketing as the most prominent economic activities facilitated by the Internet (figure 4). They reported that networking (30%) with colleagues for business purposes and marketing (28%) their products are the most business activities
they do with Internet. However, they reported that Online business meetings (22%) with business community, Online shopping (16%) and other things (4%) also take their time on the Internet.

“The Internet has become the market place for most women because of its ease to use and how it connects the business globally. The women have embraced the use of Internet for business through various social media platforms and personal websites.” KII_MALE_KAMPALA

**Negative Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Women’s Economy**

During FGDs and KIIIs, participants reported total collapse of their businesses because the business capacity is small to absorb the shock, increasing operational costs or actual destruction of their investments, loss of money and profits, prematurely collapses, delayed communication with customers and sometimes cut off communication.
During the administering of semi structured questions, participants reported financial loss during Internet shutdowns. Uganda shillings between 6,000/ to 50,000/ were most lost by women followed Ugandan shillings between 500/ to 5,000/. Uganda shilling between 5,100/ to 2,500/ is moderately lost while Uganda shillings between 251,000/ to 1 million is least lost during the shutdowns (figure 7).

Figure 8: Extent of Loss Experienced by Women during Internet Shutdown

3.3.3: Factors that Constraint Women’s Ability to Access and Use Digital Platforms besides Internet Shutdowns

Participants reported constraints such as affordability, digital literacy, digital security and safety, accessibility and cultural factors to access and use of digital platform (table 5). Participants noted other key reasons of low access as; low levels of income, high cost of the Internet enabled devices, Over the Top Tax and high cost of Internet bundles.
Study findings show that women resist the Internet related taxes by organizing social mobilization to advocate against unfair policies such as Over-the-Top Tax (OTT). Some of these actions have included street protests over this tax in Kampala City. Some women attempted to circumvent Internet shutdowns especially those from rural areas by not attempting to find ways of access Online platforms during times of Internet shutdowns. Other women reported to have resorted to communal access to Internet through pooling resources to procure Internet bundles and others used of FM radios or the community radio (Kazindalo) to advertise their services or goods. Other embraced the OTT tax after failed attempts to access the Internet using the VPN apps.

### Table 5: Showing Factors that Constraint Women’s Ability to Access Digital Platforms Besides Internet Shutdowns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraints</th>
<th>Key Issues Stated by Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>In all the three districts, participants noted constraints such as; low levels of income, high cost of the Internet enabled devices, Over the Top Tax, limited access to Internet enabled devices like smart phones and computers and high cost of Internet bundles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital literacy</td>
<td>Participants noted limited knowledge and skills about the Internet usage, some women are limited by their status (disabilities) and others by limited exposure to these platforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security and safety</td>
<td>Some women have faced violence because of lack of approval from their husbands, cyber bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Limited or poor network in rural areas, lack of electricity and limited access to Internet enabled devices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural factors</td>
<td>Most women have limited time to access the platforms, women are burdened with too much domestic chores, technophobia, lack of exposure, primitive culture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.4 Coping Strategies

#### 3.4.1 Coping Strategies Adopted by Women to Circumvent Internet Shutdowns

Study findings show that women resist the Internet related taxes by organizing social mobilization to advocate against unfair policies such as Over-the-Top Tax (OTT). Some of these actions have included street protests over this tax in Kampala City. Some women attempted to circumvent Internet shutdowns especially those from rural areas by not attempting to find ways of access Online platforms during times of Internet shutdowns. Other women reported to have resorted to communal access to Internet through pooling resources to procure Internet bundles and others used of FM radios or the community radio (Kazindalo) to advertise their services or goods. Other embraced the OTT tax after failed attempts to access the Internet using the VPN apps.
The respondents reported to be using Virtual Private Networks (VPN). The types of VPN reported included Psiphon, Super VPN free, secure VPN, Thunder VPN, and Speed VPN although majority of women were reported to have low illiteracy skills especially in the rural areas. Some women reported to be using Tor browser, Bridges and Tails for Internet access.

Some respondents reported to be sharing devices to access the Internet due to affordability issues and digital skills gap among women when the Internet is shut down and others reported to have migrated to less Internet dependent activities such as voice calling and SMS to set up meetings and communicating with prospective clients and friends and boda boda and courier services to send and receive money or goods.
Chapter Four: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Nature and Forms of Internet Shutdown

The Internet is widely used in Uganda and many Ugandans are knowledgeable and use it to do their businesses. The study results show that more participants both men and women had knowledge on use of the Internet compared to participants who did not have knowledge irrespective of their location. 85.8% of Ugandans have people that used the Internet at home and of these, 99.1% have people that used their mobile phones to access the Internet at home including 8.0% people who are below 15 years of age that used the Internet at home. This however show that when Internet is shutdown, Ugandans are knowledgeable of the shutdown but remain with no power or authority to change the situation while their rights are being infringed by the government.

Study participants recognize the existence of Internet shutdowns in Uganda. There are however broader differences on how they experience Internet shutdowns and the perceived effects on their way of life. There are also differences on how women experienced Internet shutdowns based on whether they are in a rural or urban setting. The women in the rural communities didn’t seem to feel the burden of Internet shutdowns and in some cases, some of them have limited Online presence and therefore activities that are dependent on quality Internet. This is opposed to a majority of women from urban settings who are slowly migrating to Online business processes and also highly engage on social media.

Internet shutdowns in Uganda are seemingly predictable. A cross the three districts, participants noted that shutdowns often occur during the election time, during political unrest or when the head of state is visiting a certain district. In fact, the government of Uganda made a concerted effort to restrict Internet freedom in the run-up to the presidential election and inauguration in the first half of 2016, blocking social media platforms and communication services such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for several days. Based on this study findings,

it's no doubt that women remain the most affected during periods of Internet shutdowns because of the shift to e-commerce and Online political engagement for the majority of urban women but also it will widen the gender gap in Internet access and use among the rural and urban women. Women and girls, people with disabilities, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, and people living in rural areas are always threatened with exclusion and marginalization in relation to use of the Internet and digital technologies.\textsuperscript{40}

Internet taxes such as Over the Top tax (OTT) have significant effect on the Internet usage, access to social media and affordability.\textsuperscript{41} A majority of women who participated in this study reported increased costs of doing business because of the introduction of OTT tax even when they attempt to adopt circumvention tools such as VPN applications. Further women's Online presence and active participation is hampered especially because women may not be able to consistently pay this tax in order to access social media. The advent of the scientific elections amidst the COVID-19 pandemic might turn out to be a major setback for women's involvement in elective politics either as candidates in elective positions or to mobilize support for their most preferred candidates- yet, these rights are enshrined in democratic principles which empower and encourage the active participation of all citizens at all levels in their own governance.\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
4.2 Women’s Online Rights Violated/Affected by Internet Shutdowns

In Uganda, there is still a wider gender gap in terms of ownership and access of ICT tools and devices. Though there has been progress, in some areas of the country, women remain disproportionately affected and marginalized from participating in development programs because of their gender. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is a universal goal for all UN partner states, including Uganda. The United Nations Sustainable development goal 5 is integral and key for attainment of ending poverty by SDG2030.\textsuperscript{43} However, key attention should also be drawn to SDGs 9 which talks about Universal Internet Access for all.

Gender discrimination undermines all efforts geared towards attainment of sustainable development. The Universal declaration of Human rights Article 29 (1-2) acknowledges that everyone has duties to the community. Further in the exercise of these rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

Internet shutdowns have far reaching impacts on women; affecting a broad spectrum of their rights and directly affecting their livelihoods. Most business women in Uganda are engaged in private small business enterprises which often are operated at home or online. This mode of operation is conducive because it reduces the recurrent expenses and also red tape associated with owning physical space and therefore women are able to realize minimal profits from such establishments. However, in the event of shocks to their business operations, such women and their families might suffer huge economic


setbacks and in other cases the business might be terminated because of increased operational costs.\textsuperscript{44}

4.3 Coping Strategies Adopted by Women to Circumvent Internet Shutdowns

Women respond differently during periods of Internet disruptions. While some choose to protest, majority silently withstand the situation. The findings from this study indicated high use of Virtual Private Networks during Internet blackouts sometimes referred to as “kill switch” and also to avoid payment of the social OTT tax imposed by the government of Uganda in 2018 for use of social media platforms. In some cases, participants reported using VPN and paying OTT tax interchangeably.

In an attempt to adapt new ways of business operations, women tend to migrate business offline. This makes them to incur additional direct costs such as the cost of rent, transport costs and costs of marketing. Studies have reported increased costs of business as a result of OTT tax\textsuperscript{45} and widening of the gender digital divide for Uganda’s poorest residents, and in turn left them with less access to information\textsuperscript{46} as such, the benefits from use of digital technologies are not evenly distributed because women are less likely to have access to the Internet for political and economic empowerment. These findings are consistent with findings from other studies.\textsuperscript{47, 48}


4.4 Conclusion

From the discussion above, the researchers make the following conclusions:

All the forms of Internet shutdowns occur in Uganda affecting the most used platforms such as social media for example WhatsApp and Facebook by women. The introduction of OTT tax has further affected access and use of social media among women and other vulnerable groups coupled with limited knowledge regarding the use of the Internet and e-services available for them.

Women rights are violated and abused economically, socially and politically during Internet shutdowns and this is worse in rural areas and some pockets of cases in urban areas where people do not have advanced Internet accessing devices or do not have other means of circumventing the blockage. This has increased their vulnerability to violence at home, income equality and political space among others.

Though not widespread, the women are starting to embrace other ways of accessing and using the Internet when there is the Internet shutdown through platforms such as VPN and using other non-internet platforms such as using radios and loudspeakers to advertise their products. However, much women have made progress towards digital transformation, Internet disruptions continue to undermine this progress limiting their active participation in national development processes.
4.5 Recommendations

From the conclusions above, we make the following recommendations:

a) Recommendations to Development Organizations
i) More attention and investment are needed to advance the access and use of the Internet services to rural areas. There is completely a big gap between the rural community and urban community in terms of access to information through use of the Internet.

ii) Strengthen awareness campaign on critical role played by the Internet in advancing realization of women's rights Online and rights of the marginalized.

iii) Advocate to highlight the effect of social media censoring on women's Online participation.

iv) Advocate for Internet rights and freedoms through regular monitoring of Internet or ICT laws and regulations and deliberately highlighting abuses to digital human rights.

v) Provide more trainings on network measurements, how to document blockings of websites and applications and how it affects vulnerable and marginalized groups such as women and girls.

b) Recommendations to Government
i) Address structural and legal bottle necks to quality information access for all Ugandans with priority to most vulnerable groups such as women.

ii) Deliberately strengthen women's access to digital technologies through making ICT a cross cutting issue for all development programs.

c) Recommendations for Companies
i. Telecom companies should always inform citizens about any shutdowns just like they do for any other services such as mobile money as a way to respect the principles of internationally recognized human rights.
ii. Telecom companies should review and identify laws that govern network disruptions in Uganda which is giving the government far-reaching authority to order disruptions for vague reasons.

iii. The need for improvement in documenting increasing demands of shutdowns using properly established policies and procedures to allow companies easily deal with government orders of shutdowns.
References


xiii. Mr. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, M.D.K., Mr. Joseph Cannataci, Mr. Maina Kiai, Mr. Michel Forst, Ms. Faith Pansy Tlakula, and Ms. Reine Alapini-Gansou., (2016). Internet shutdown in Uganda and elections, A. Union, Editor.


Plot 360 Kansanga - Gaba Road off at UBA Bank. Sali Road Warade Close.
P.O. Box 4411
Tel: +256 394823109, +256 414532035
Info@wougnet.org
@wougnet1
@wougnet
Women of Uganda Network
www.wougnet.org