



EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE ON FEMINIST ORGANIZING ONLINE, PARTICULARLY FOR STRUCTURALLY SILENCED WOMEN IN UGANDA

In restrictive and even open civic space environments, structurally silenced women such as Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and sex workers tend to suffer additional layers of difficulties based on their gender as a result of patriarchal norms. According to the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) research on examining women's access to digital platforms in Uganda, online spaces such as social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube are increasingly being used by women and WHRDs to advocate for women's rights, as well as educate masses about feminism and women's rights.

Similarly, women are using these online civic spaces for documenting and reporting human rights abuses and violations against women. They are also accessing news and information on issues that affect women as well as building movements and networks at national and global level.

However, there have been restrictions, arrests and detentions of structurally silenced women and WHRDs due to the information they distribute online which threatens the Structurally Silenced Women's level of engagement, in human rights work, both in the online and offline spaces.

Shrinking online civic space is a limitation on the freedoms of expression, the press and assembly, which threatens many types of civic actors especially Structurally silenced women by reducing their ability to advocate for or exercise rights to freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of assembly as enshrined in the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda and other human rights instruments.

Although women carry out a large proportion of grassroots peace building and development activities, the majority do not have the rights to participate in the political processes and governance of their communities.

In countries characterized by pervasive gender inequality, civil society is the major sphere in which women can organize.

The implications of the shrinking space for feminist advocates and feminist civil society ties together observations about the restrictive interpretation of charitable activities, severe cuts to health and social programs, the blurring of public and private funding strategies, and the conversion of social perception about the value of civil versus corporate influence on governance.

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) with support from Association for Progressive Communications (APC) conducted a research study with the major objective of understanding the online discourse and the impact of shrinking civic space on feminist organizing online, particularly for structurally silenced women.

The specific objectives of the study were;

1. To understand the online discourse and situation of shrinking civic space on feminist organizing online in Uganda.
2. To identify the issues faced by structurally silenced women to reform and/or develop policies for online and offline spaces.
3. To understand the impact of shrinking civic space on digital technologies on structurally silenced women (WHRDs) to ensure Inclusive participation in the digital space.
4. To ascertain how structurally silenced women (sex workers and WHRDs) can meaningfully and strategically engage with treaty bodies and UPR processes.

The WOUGNET study on examining the Effect of Shrinking Civic Space on Feminist Organizing Online, Particularly for Structurally Silenced Women in Uganda

was conducted in the six districts of Uganda namely; Kampala, Mbarara, Kabale, Kabarole, Gulu and Mbale.

The findings indicated that; (58.7%) of the WHRDs interviewed use mobile phones, while (22%) use personal computers and (19.3%) use organizational computers to connect to the internet.

More still, it was revealed that 65% of WHRDs we spoke to engage in online spaces through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, while 25% use online media like music, videos, photos distributed on the internet and 16% engage in online civic spaces through writing blog posts.

In terms of the status of online civic space in Uganda, 71.3% of the WHRDs said that civic online space is shrinking.

A total of 51% of respondents interviewed shared that they experience online sexual harassment, while 41% exclusion from online media like music, videos, photos, films among others because of the shrinking civic space.

The ultimate impact of this is remaining inactive online, while 22% deactivated their online accounts which they said limits their engagement online yet digital advocacy is one of the forms they find most effective to advocate for women's rights. Their access to online information is also limited and subsequently shrinking the space and making their voices not heard, and as well widening the gender digital divide between the structurally silenced women such as sex workers and WHRDs.

According to this study, the women more likely to be silenced in online civic spaces included; women in the media and journalists and women/feminists for political rights, 10% and 8% respectively. WHRDs in rural areas are also likely to experience more of the shrinking civic space as a result of their location

compared to those in urban areas as one key informant explained;

"I stand for the rural women and fight for their rights, but my space is affected by not having the internet, data, Smartphone and access to the News because even some do not have television sets. But even those who have radios, it's the husbands to listen to them because the woman will be in the kitchen, or busy with other house chores as important information is passed on the radio. She is not listening to the radio most of the time because she does not own one," said KIL_ WHRD_ Kabarole.

According to the study, 70% of respondents stated that internet shutdowns are a major tactic used to shrink online spaces for feminists organizing online, while 19% said increasing taxes on the internet and social media use.

The Key Recommendations from the study include;

- There is need to advocate for equality as well as sensitizing women on how to use online platforms and general digital security.
- There is need to collectively engage all WHRDs and feminists including structurally silenced women activists in their different diversities, to jointly advocate for the protection and safe use of online civic spaces as well as strengthening women movements and creating partnerships to effectively run online civic spaces.
- There should be progressive laws and policies that allow structurally silenced women to freely and safely access and use online civic spaces.
- There is need to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the existing laws and policies by the government.
- The law enforcers should adhere to the national and international legal instruments to avoid torture and abuse of citizen rights.