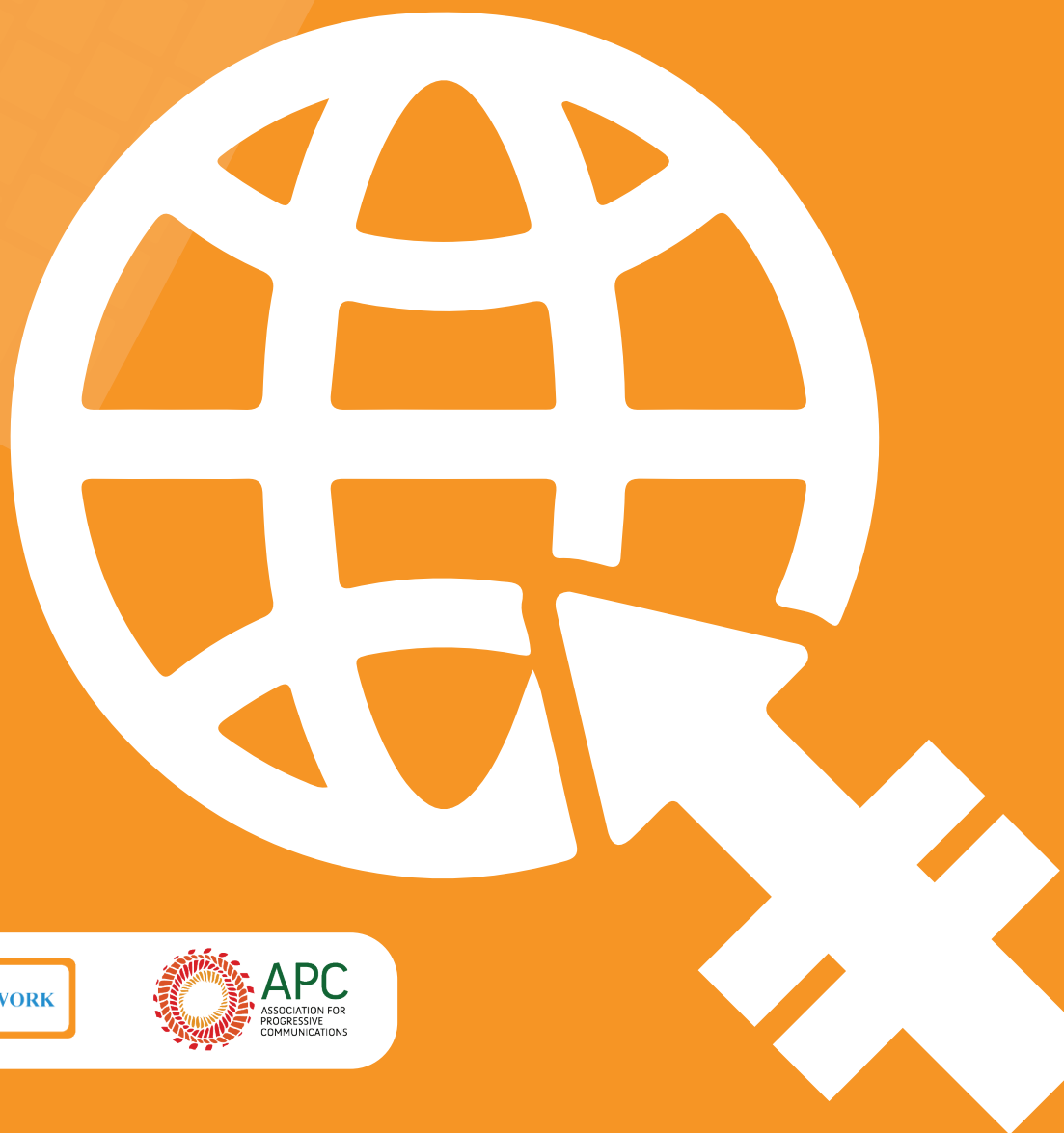


Position Paper

Promoting Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda:

Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategic Pathways

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WOMEN OF UGANDA NETWORK



APC
ASSOCIATION FOR
PROGRESSIVE
COMMUNICATIONS

Introduction

The Internet offers opportunities for people to access, utilise and engage in various online spaces including forums, websites, social media platforms and communities. These spaces facilitate sharing of information, stories, ideas and content to a broader audience. Real-time interactions involve individuals and groups in a digital or online space. As a result of these interactions, many people today can provide, seek and communicate information and ideas virtually in online spaces.

Online spaces are platforms where knowledge is generated, shared and disseminated. Online spaces today have fostered and served as a marketplace of ideas and innovation. However, only some equally take advantage of the online spaces and use them in ways that empower them. For instance, due to lack of knowledge and information about the internet, illiteracy, age, income disparity and cost of internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) based services, not everyone can fully leverage online platforms to interact, share ideas, learn and network.¹

Societal negative perceptions, stereotypes, norms and cultural values affect individuals and communities differently. Often impeding their potential to use online spaces as platforms for growth and development. Online spaces are not inclusionary but often exclude certain individuals and groups of people in society such as women, girls, persons with disabilities, structurally silenced persons and the LGBTQTI communities.

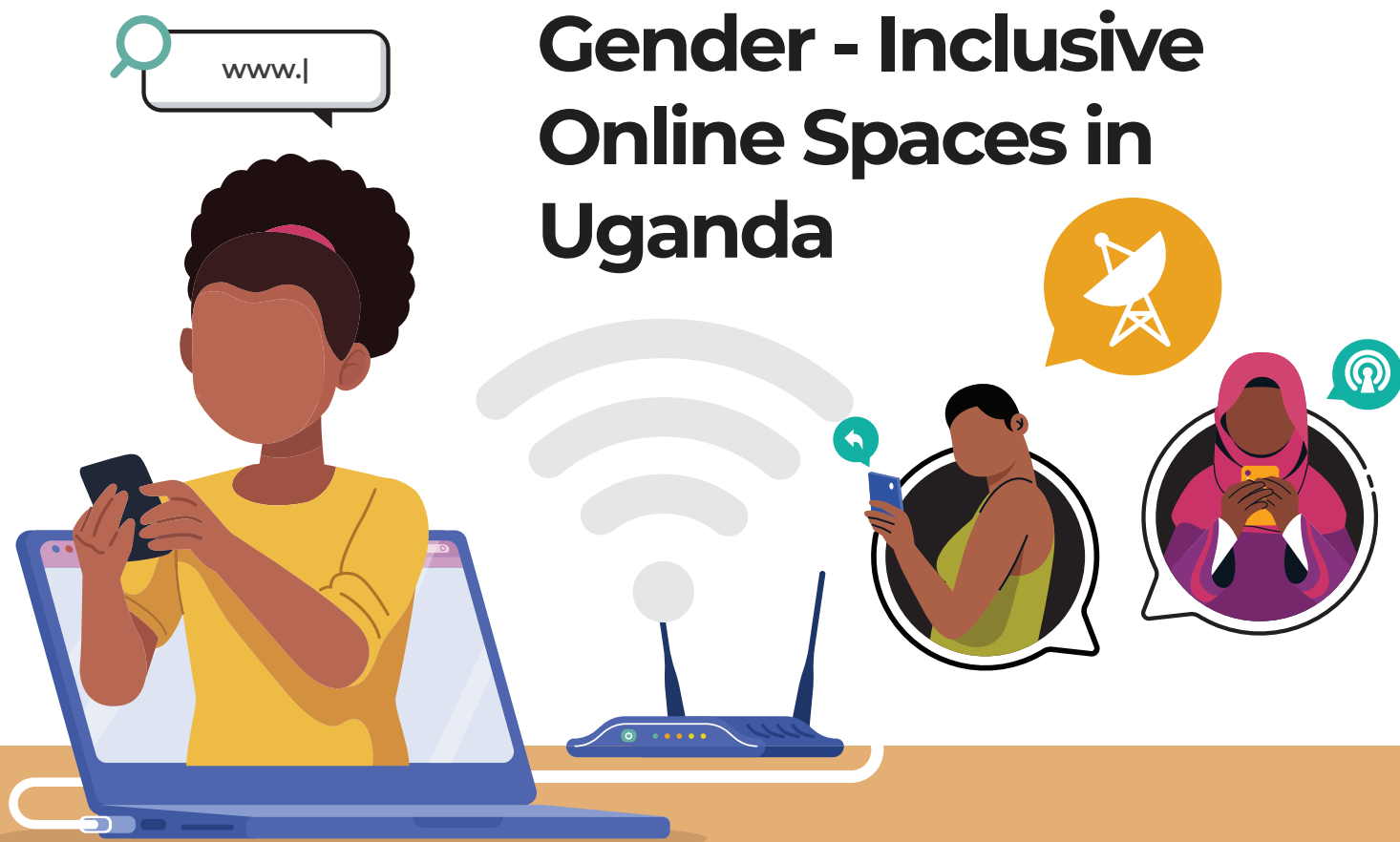
A gender-inclusive approach to online spaces necessitates the development of policies, regulatory frameworks, languages, and societal norms that respect and acknowledge diverse gender identities, aiming to reduce gender bias.

This position paper emphasises the importance of ensuring gender inclusion in online spaces and advocates for the establishment of best practices for online interactions in Uganda. The objective is to create a more inclusive online environment that accommodates and empowers individuals of all genders.

¹ https://researchictafrica.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access-The-State-of-ICT-in-Uganda.pdf

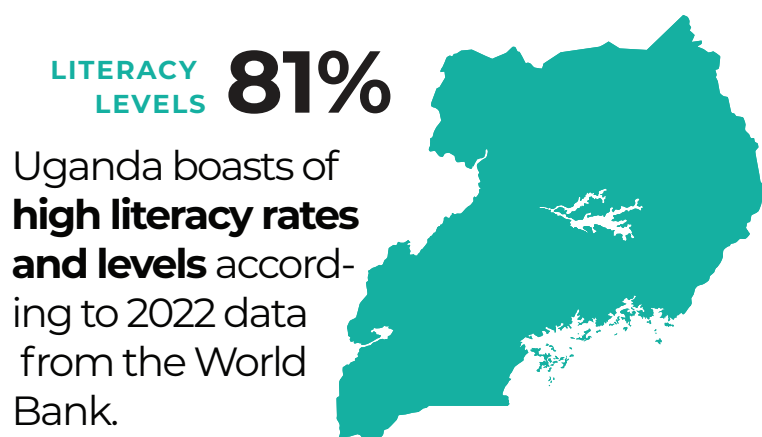
Enhancing Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

Gender-inclusive online spaces are a concept that transcends mere presence in the online world. During a stakeholder meeting that convened members of civil society, government bureaucrats, lawyers and law enforcement agencies, among others; participants expressed how they envisioned gender-inclusive online spaces in Uganda.



Challenges to Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

Illiteracy has been cited as a major hindrance for women and girls and other marginalised communities to effectively tap and utilise the opportunities provided by the digital revolution. This is about digital literacy and awareness creation around the potential benefits of information and communication technologies. Conversely, Uganda boasts of high literacy rates and levels with an 81% literacy rate according to 2022 data from the World Bank. The World Bank Data shows that there is a 93% literacy rate among young females ages 15 to 24 years.⁵



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⁵ World Bank (2023) Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) - Uganda

Challenges to Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

It costs more than 12% of a person's average income to purchase 1 GB of internet data in Uganda. Compared to its most immediate neighbours, the cost of internet data in Uganda remains relatively high⁷



⁷ WOUNET (2022) Feminist and Gender Analysis on the impact of shrinking civic space online, particularly for structurally silenced women in Uganda

Challenges to Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

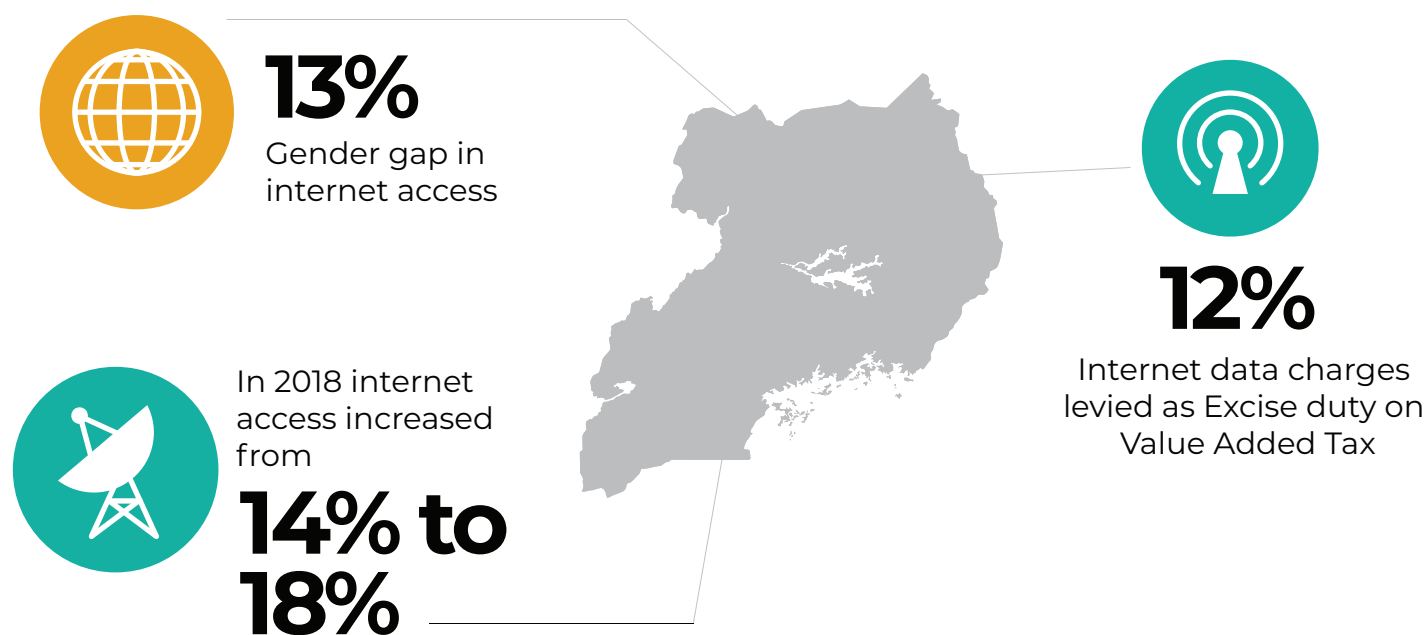
Gendered disinformation against women and girls in online public spaces in Uganda revolves around the spread of rumours or alleged ‘facts’ often of a sexualised nature with the intention of humiliating, discrediting and disempowering these women.¹⁰ Many Ugandan women and girls have been victims of sexualised distortions in the form of non-consensual distribution of real, faked or doctored sex tapes or nude images. The above challenges faced by Ugandan women and girls, structurally silenced groups and other minorities have greatly and negatively affected their online participation and influence – a key prerequisite for gender-inclusive online public spaces in Uganda.



¹⁰ *ibid*

Bottlenecks to Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

There is a 13% gender gap in internet access in Uganda. However, individual internet access in Uganda has continued to increase over the years. For instance, in 2018 internet access increased from 14% to 18% in 2022.¹¹ Nevertheless, women continue to face increased marginalisation in internet access. The main barriers to internet access in Uganda include; a lack of awareness and knowledge about the internet and how to use it and also a lack of internet-enabled devices, especially in rural areas.



¹¹ Research ICT Africa. Policy brief (2022) After Access 2022. Internet Usage trends in Uganda

Bottlenecks to Gender-Inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

Internet shutdowns in Uganda form part of a more long-standing trend in the country to disrupt communications and the free flow of information among citizens before and during elections.

¹³ Justifications for the various shutdowns in Uganda by the state have included threats to “national security” from public unrest, the elimination of “the connection and sharing of information that incites the public”¹⁴ and protection of the “national interest”.¹⁵ The circumstances under which the shutdowns occurred reveal the intent to restrict rights to freedom of expression and information and to interfere with the right to freedom of assembly and association, particularly during events such as elections, conflicts, or mass demonstrations.¹⁶ The UN Special Rapporteur, Clement Voule, has noted that national security cannot be invoked as a rationale for blocking Internet access when in an actual sense the very reason for deteriorating national security is the suppression of human rights itself.¹⁷



¹³ Moses Owiny, Sheetal Kumar (2021) *Disconnecting from Cyberstability. An Assessment of how Internet Shutdowns in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Uganda Undermine cyberstability*

<https://thecfma.org/report/disconnecting-from-cyberstability-an-assessment-of-how-internet-shutdowns-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-tanzania-and-uganda-undermine-cyberstability/>

¹⁴ *Assessing the impact of social media on political communication and civic engagement in Uganda.* Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=95eec5bf-c11c-c4eb-f504-90a4e5a4d54d&groupId=252038

¹⁵ *Switching off the Internet has a huge cost; it must never happen again.* Daily Monitor.

<https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/business/prosper/shutting-the-internet-must-never-happen-again-3277616>

¹⁶ *Internet shutdowns and elections handbook. A guide for election observers, embassies, activists, and journalists.* Access Now. Accessed July 2, 2021.

<https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-and-elections-handbook/>

¹⁷ *“Ending Internet shutdowns: a path forward: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association”.* June 15, 2021.

A/HRC/47/24/Add.2. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/24/Add.2>

Pathways to Attaining Gender-inclusive Online Spaces in Uganda

As already pointed out, gender inclusion transcends the notion of equality. It's premised on the fact that all online services, opportunities and platforms are open to all people and that gender stereotypes do not define societal roles and expectations. During stakeholder consultations, it was noted that addressing the challenges and hindrances to a gender-inclusive online space would go a long way in opening up opportunities for all people including women and girls, structurally silenced groups and other marginalised communities to effectively participate and benefit from the online world.



Summary and Conclusion

From the above submissions, it is evident that several challenges hinder gender-inclusive online spaces in Uganda. These include a lack of digital literacy and awareness of the potential benefits of ICTs on Ugandan society, low internet penetration and coverage, high cost of internet services making it unaffordable for the majority of Ugandans including women and girls, and pervasive online gender-based violence. Other constraints to achieving gender-inclusive online spaces were attributed to cultural and societal stereotypes, the internet access gap, internet shutdowns and other administrative and legal measures instituted by the government which scare Ugandans, especially women and girls from participating in the online world. It is recommended that the government ensures the inclusion of women in policy and decision-making processes and that it rolls out technology education in schools and Higher Institutions of Learning. It was also recommended that the government through Parliament review regressive laws that undermine fundamental rights. Overall, the above factors highlighted once addressed will ensure that the online spaces in Uganda are gender inclusive. Best practices for ensuring online spaces are used by the government revolve around addressing the underlying challenges and recommendations proposed. This will ensure gender-inclusive online spaces and best practices online in Uganda.



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