

## **BPF session at IGF 11 6 December 2016**

At the IGF 2016, held in Guadalajara, Mexico, from 5 to 9 December 2016, the BPF held a dedicated 90-minute session (Day 2, 6 December 2016 at 10:15 in Workshop Room 9) that was focused on the work the BPF did on gender and access in general over the past year and, in particular, in relation to the barriers of Internet access women face around the world.

### **Introductory remarks – Anri van der Spuy, Jac SM Kee & Renata Aquino Ribeiro**

To provide context to newcomers to the IGF and the BPF processes, the way in which the BPF fits into the IGF's work and intersessional activities was explained, along with the BPF's general methodology and working approach. It was explained that the BPF's work was driven by community input from various stakeholders through various methods of providing input – including a survey (the responses to and sample of which were discussed at length), regular meetings, case studies, and the participation at various national and regional IGF sessions conducted over the past year.

It was noted that while a lot of substantial work had been done in the field of gender and access, the IGF's multistakeholder advisory group (MAG) agreed that the BPF could contribute by aggregating and mapping the input and investigating more national and regional initiatives.

It was explained that the BPF's work was also conducted in the context of the need to support women and girls' equality goals, and the promotion of the empowerment of women and girls outlined in the UN 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development, specifically goal 9c about access and goal 5 about the need for gender equality and the need to empower women.

In this context, it was stressed that not only access is important, but also questions around what is actually meant by access. As Jac SM Kee asked:

'...does access contribute to the improvement of women's lives and what does this mean?'

In this respect, the importance of ensuring that access is meaningful and do not just become another task or responsibility to women was stressed. A so-called 'value-lag' between whether access is actually perceived as valuable to and by women was identified as an area of potential further research. Jac SM Kee pointed out:

'...if you don't see the value of accessing the Internet to your lives, then even if you gave out free laptops, et cetera, you are not going to take it on. It's not going to matter to you. It's an additional thing you have to take on rather than something that is going to add value to your life.'

The role of women as not only users but also active participants in meaningful access was also stressed as a way to ensure that women become more invested in shaping the Internet they want in the future.

### **The importance of context – Jac SM Kee**

*'Context is at the heart of challenges around access and we have to use it as a starting point to discussions around meaningful access for women' – Jac SM Kee, BPF session at IGF 2016.*

It was noted that one of the BPF's primary findings concerned the central significance of context

in addressing gender digital divides. Factors like the age of users, the region and other dimensions are important to understand, including the different barriers that apply in diverse contexts. At the same time, the fact that content is so important to access challenges causes difficulties for researchers in trying to identify and/or extrapolate best practices.

The point of access was also noted as vital, including whether access concerns to community or individual access, and the barriers and/or solutions that apply to these different dimensions of access.

### **Understanding diverse barriers to access**

It was noted that the BPF identified a series of barriers that are impacting women's ability to benefit from meaningful Internet access. In the remainder of the session, the BPF's findings pertaining to each of these barriers were discussed in turn, followed by comments from diverse panelists working in the field.

#### ***Culture and norms – Claire Sibthorpe (GSMA)***

It was noted that the BPF's findings indicate that culture and norms are a foundational concern that impact women's access, with disparity in terms of Internet access being situated primarily within the context of other cultural disparities. The BPF's findings in respect of this barrier were briefly discussed, including the significance of gender roles, the fact that women have multiple responsibilities and limited time, and the ways in which culture impacts other barriers – including women's literacy skills and digital capacities.

Claire Sibthorpe, who leads the Connected Women programme at the GSMA (UK), was asked about the GSMA's research on the significance of culture and norms in various regions. She referred to the findings of the GSMA on particularly mobile in developing countries, and noted that mobile access is the primary tool for Internet access in developing countries. She noted that while many barriers for women and men are the same, women are disproportionately affected by these barriers. Things like education and income, for instance, and other structural inequalities are driving disparities, she noted, with technology being situated within structural inequality.

Claire noted that the GSMA's research in India, for instance, indicates that women are much less likely to be able or allowed to make decisions pertaining to handsets and credit – thereby affecting the efficiency and cost of devices that women tend to have access to:

*'...if you are not making a decision to purchase your technology device, it means you are often getting a cheaper device, so you are not getting an Internet-enabled device or you are not getting the same access that you would if you had more control.'*

She also noted that fears of safety and harassment are significant, and are much more important to women than men. Their research indicates that men are much more likely to check their wives' phones (etc.), while women are not able to check their husbands' phones. Men are also often not allowing women or wives to go online because of safety concerns:

*It is significant that in Kenya last year, the number 2 most downloaded application was a call-blocking service.*

In response to a question about whether there are limitations to thinking of mobiles as a viable tool for access, Claire noted that the GSMA believes that private and individual access is much more useful than shared access. Their research indicates that in areas where users share access,

women have less opportunity to develop skills needed to benefit from technology, and therefore have lower digital literacy skills and less confidence. Where access is shared, men are given more time with devices than women. Shared ownership therefore results in women having much less access than men.

***Threats and safety – Angie Contreras (Youth Observatory, Mexico)***

It was noted that various BPF participants and survey respondents also stressed the significance of fears pertaining to Internet access and the safety thereof as barriers to access, and reference was made to the BPF's work on online abuse and gender-based violence conducted in 2015.

Angie Contreras from the Youth Observatory, Mexico, described the Declaration submitted by some participants from the Youth Observatory, and explained that the Internet as a space and a tool for confidence and freedom of expression for women is threatened by fears of online abuse and violence. She noted that research shows girls and women are subjected to substantial social surveillance both 'at home and as social surveillance'.

A roadmap of recommendations drawn from the BPF's work in 2015 was shared with the session participants as a potential way for policymakers and other stakeholders to address the challenge of online abuse and gender-based violence.

***Availability of relevant policies – Doreen Bogdan-Martin (ITU, Switzerland)***

Doreen Bogdan-Martin of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) stressed the importance of evidence-based action and the need for working with various stakeholders in addressing policy gaps. She described the development of the ITU and UN Women's Equals campaign, including the way in which existing initiatives has been mapped, and invited participants to a session later in the week at the IGF where the ways in which EQUALS will do its work, and the ways in which the BPF can collaborate with the initiative, will be further discussed.

***Affordability and availability of relevant infrastructure – Alison Gillwald (Research ICT Africa, South Africa) and Nanjira Sambuli (Web Foundation, Kenya)***

It was noted that while affordability and cost (of devices and data plans) and the availability of relevant infrastructure (also including electricity) were discussed as separate barriers in the BPF's report, they were combined for the purpose of the session.

Alison Gillwald from Research ICT Africa, South Africa, lamented the fact that there appears to be little systemic improvements required to overcome the problem:

'...we are still sitting with major evidence problem and a data problem that I think it is really incumbent on us to address if we don't want to come back each year, ten years from now, sort of telling the same tragic story without much progress on how to address them.'

Alison noted that there is a lack of national statistics, or context-specific statistics that are public and non-rivalrous; with supply-side data collected by the ITU being very unequal, particularly where prepaid mobile is concerned. She stressed the need for a governance framework that obliges the collection and use of public data to reach a better understanding of digital divides, and noted that only demand-side data can enable a true measurement of differences in access between men and women. To understand usage problems and other challenges, she noted, there is a need for nationally representative data without which it is impossible to make sound

policy decisions. She also warned that a lack of data can lead to wrong decisions, while some data can also mask other things. For instance, RIA's findings in some countries show that once one looks at data more closely, and controls for some barriers, there appears to be less of a gender gap in certain areas.

Alison concluded by saying that it is vital that the expertise of different stakeholders be leveraged to reach better solutions, as 'this is not only a civil society story', but governments and academia must also be held accountable. She noted that while we 'are going into ICTs as if we're dealing with inequality for the first time', stakeholders need to learn from lessons of the past through doing systemic research and gathering better data.

In her intervention, Nanjira Sambuli from the Web Foundation (Kenya) focused on affordability as a barrier, and noted that the price of devices and broadband represents too high a proportion of income of many. She noted that the Alliance for Affordable Internet has proposed a new and more ambitious affordability target of 1 for 2, namely that 1 GB of data should not cost more than 2% of income. She noted that the existing measure used by many organizations, namely 500 MB of data, is too low to be truly meaningful or useful to anyone.

### ***Digital literacy and other capacities***

Ritu Strivastava from the Digital Empowerment Foundation, India, noted that technology itself often becomes a barrier to women, as women do not feel able to benefit from and use many technologies and even feel pushed aside. She noted that her experiences in India in the roll-out of community networks have indicated that women want to engage in all aspects of building community networks. Yet women suffer from a lack of understanding of technology to an extent not experienced by many men.

Similarly to what Claire noted in the session, Ritu also said that many women only have access to second-hand mobile phones and men tend to make decisions for women; meaning that women often have fewer opportunities to improve their digital literacy skills. Where women have no private access, they often struggle to access and benefit from public access facilities or public wifi points because trainers and facilitators are male. Where female trainers are involved, she has found that women are more likely to make use of a public access facility than when there are male trainers.

### **TOWARDS BETTER SOLUTIONS**

Peter Bloom from Rizomática, Brazil, shared his experience from working in rural areas to establish community networks, asking how such networks can be established in ways that will also be meaningful to women. He noted that underlying gender issues are rarely not addressed in establishing community networks, but that proponents of community networks are increasingly talking about how such networks can become more than the sum of their parts; i.e. how community networks can also become transformative. He noted that while it is often difficult to talk about gender, it is just as difficult to talk about technology; and there is a need and opportunity to do so when new community networks are built.

Peter noted that when community networks are built, they often get questions from men in the community about how they can access metadata to ensure 'their wives, sisters, and daughters are not allowed to talk to men they don't want them to talk to'. While lamenting the ongoing presence of a patriarchal system where women's bodies may be surveilled and controlled, he noted that Rizomática has already changed some of men's perceptions by educating them about why there is a need for supporting women's privacy in building community networks.

### **COMMENTS FROM THE FLOOR**

A participant from the Dominican Republic noted that even if the costs of Internet access were to be reduced, there will still be a gender digital divide in that many women choose not to have access.

Helani Galpaya from LIRNE*asia* noted that negotiating free access in return for giving access to our private data, or the transactional cost of privacy, is important to both women and men; and is also important irrespective to whether we have access to zero-rated content or not. Because women are less likely to have access to education than men, she noted that it is important that women's capacity gap in understanding this transactional gap be addressed and that such education be developed at grassroots levels to improve both capacity and policy gaps.

Wisdom Donkor from Ghana noted the importance of establishing enabling environments, and concluded by saying that to show true impact of the BPF's work, participants would have to bring their grandmothers to the IGF to enable them to tell their stories and to learn more about the challenges women of different ages face in accessing and benefiting from the Internet.

Chat Garcia from the APC, Philippines, stressed that it is 'heartening' to see the recognition of the importance of gender in ICT4D recently at the IGF. She noted, however, that the problem of gender and access can be found at macro and community levels, and therefore has to be addressed with due reference and assistance of a diversity of stakeholders. She noted the importance of building capacities, also at policymaker levels, where there is often a lack of understanding pertaining to gender.

Anja Kovacs from the Internet Democracy Project, India, similarly noted that she is similarly heartened by the attention given to gender and access in the past two to three years, but is also concerned that discourses around threats and online abuse may be abused at other levels, and may even become counterproductive at local contexts. Describing bans by the Punjarat (local councils in India), she explained that the basis for these bans is often that women and girls need to be protected from online abuse and therefore should not have access to the Internet. The fact that there is a generalized perception of threat pertaining to the Internet therefore tends to be used as an excuse for preventing women and girls from accessing the Internet. She noted that there is therefore a need to refrain from fueling the abuse of this rhetoric by stressing the need to empower women, rather to protect them.

Osama Manzar from the Digital Empowerment Foundation noted the need to calculate the 'social journey from being disconnected to being connected', and that connectivity should be regarded from the perspective of inclusion, not exclusion. He stressed the need to consider access as not just about the technology, but about a social need in the community.

Mary Uduma from the Nigeria IGF and Nigeria Internet Registration Association, Nigeria, highlighted the notion that women may choose not to connect for reasons ranging from cultural to literacy reasons. In an area of Nigeria where a sub-regional IGF was held, women are fearful of the Internet due to the presence of Boko Haram in the area and the fear that the Internet is a tool for radicalizing children. She noted the need to consider these local challenges when addressing the gender digital divide and for investigating the reasons why some women may choose not to adopt the Internet even if they do have access to the Internet.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In final comments, Nanjira noted again that we should look at gender and access in terms of not only challenges, but also opportunities; while Claire noted that interventions must be based on rigorous evidence and that we need to stop talking about women as a homogenous group. Alison stressed the need to not strip people of their agency and to enable user innovation;

remembering that the things that drive Internet access and usage for the poor are the same as for the non-poor: 'It's social networking – even if we're morally outraged by it – not because they want access to an e-gov service'. Peter, lastly, stressed the fact that technology is not neutral.

Lastly, participants were invited to further contribute to the BPF's outcome document, which was published on the IGF's review platform on 3 December remained open for public comment until 18 December 2016.