

**Celebrating International Women's Day 2023 -
Thoughts on Digitalization for Women's Empowerment in the Horn of Africa
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Introduction

This year's global theme, "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality," International Women's Day 2023 is timely, as it highlights the need for inclusive and transformative technology and digital education, which contribute to the advancement of women. As technology advances continue and new technologies are being embraced, women's participation and inclusion is even more critical to allow them to access emerging technologies that offer opportunities and platforms through which women can voice their concerns, identify their specific needs and also promote access to basic services. The theme for the United Nations Observance of the International Women's day 2023 recognizes the role of women in transformative technology and digital education in line with the upcoming 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW-67) focusing on "Innovation and Technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".

This first landmark Security Council resolution on Women, Peace and Security 1325 (2000) Agenda underlined four pillars, including participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. The WPS Agenda also recognizes the increasing role of digital technologies in the fulfillment of women's and girl's rights, as digital technology has an impact on both women's safety and empowerment. The link between WPS and digital inclusion is best exemplified in the ways that women access and utilize technological tools to support peacebuilding efforts. Not enough attention has been given to how women use digital tools and platforms in everyday peacebuilding practices. Research from the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP) notes that women use digital technologies to amplify their communication and advocacy efforts to promote meaningful engagement and to gain access to decisionmakers.¹

Women led organizations have used new digital technologies to advance women's empowerment, health and safety, as online platforms provided women access to educational services, while women used social media to share and disseminate information on local political developments. Thus, it is important for the UN and the international community to institutionalize frameworks and strategies that leverage women's digital inclusion. Existing frameworks are limited, and whereas the 2018 Gender Responsive United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Policy has sought to formalize gender mainstream in UN operations, there is still a need to combine gender mainstreaming and digital inclusion into peacebuilding efforts. Similarly, in 2018, the UN Secretary-General launched his Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) initiative, which is another framework that creates policy space for gender mainstreaming, ensuring full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in peace processes, this became another opportunity to develop more systematic approaches to women's participation in peacekeeping.

¹ GNWP. 2021. Women, Peace, and Security and Human Rights in the Digital Age: Opportunities and risks to advance women's meaningful participation and protect their rights Retrieved from: <https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/PolicyBriefGNWP-2021c.pdf>

Despite the promise and immense potential of digital technologies, many individuals and communities are cut-off from this progress, including women especially those from poor communities, indigenous and ethnic minorities, and children who are disconnected from a world that is increasingly becoming more interconnected. As the digital gender gap widens it amplifies economic and social inequalities, bridging the digital divide provides unparalleled opportunities for economic growth and development, as well as in peacebuilding and sustaining peace. The international community's decisive action through sustained commitment to ensure equitable access and digital inclusion for all, can fundamentally ensure basic rights and opportunities for all.

Digital Inclusion allows communities to access digital resources and technologies

The economic effects of digital technologies have reached over fifty-percent of the developing world's population in the last few decades, shifting traditional economies to become more modernized. Recent trends suggest that there is gender gap in digital access, with the number of women accessing the internet being lower, especially in the world's poorest regions.² This digital gender gap perpetuates perverse gender inequities, limiting the ability of women to take advantage of the opportunities for economic and social inclusion that present themselves in a more connected world. According to available data, investing in women's economic empowerment has been shown to drive significant gains in economic growth and poverty reduction, especially in poor countries and post-conflict societies. In the African context, women's participation in economies is growing despite a large gender gap and the greater digital access for women can boost African economies by 10% of their collective GDP in 2025.³ Gender equality and especially women's inclusion in the digital economy will contribute to achievement of various developmental outcomes.

Digitalization and IGAD women peace and security agenda

In Africa, digitalization and new technologies play a critical role in economic development, promoting access to basic services and peacebuilding efforts. Access to technologies, particularly usage of cell phones and internet has shown a significant increase in Africa, including in remote villages. 88.4 percent of the continent has mobile cellular coverage. (ITU, 2021 Digital Trends in Africa). At the regional level, various legal and normative instruments and region-wide initiatives are in place and can be utilized to improve women's rights and gender equality including in the participation and use of digital technologies for economic development and peacebuilding. These include, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the development, in 2011, of the IGAD Regional Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. These frameworks are indicators of the attention given by all stakeholders, including governments, international institutions and development partners on this issue. While various challenges remain in the full implementation of UNSCR 1325 (2000) and other regional instruments, such as IGAD's Regional actional Plan, to ensure women's empowerment and inclusion in policy making, including in technology and digitalization, a next-generation approach to WPS could explore ways to leverage technology and digitalization to fast-

² ITU. 2021. Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2021.pdf>

³ McKinsey & Company. 2019. The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Africa. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-power-of-parity-advancing-womens-equality-in-africa#section-header-2>

track the implementation of the WPS four critical pillars of the agenda in the Horn of Africa (HoA) region, by focusing on 3 key issues.

1. Addressing the digital gender divide: In countries in the HoA, the development of digital infrastructure and coverage, adoption of digital technologies remains at a low level, as there has been insufficient investment in digital infrastructure and skills development in digital technology, among other things. (open society). However there has been some improvement, but regardless of the significant improvements in innovation and access to digital technologies in the region and beyond, the digital realm still often excludes women. Women and girls remain disproportionately represented in innovation and the use of digital technologies. According to GSMA's 2021 Mobile gender gap report, women in Sub-Saharan Africa are 37% less likely to use the mobile internet compared to men, making it the largest gender gap globally. In addition, many women and girls have not acquired the necessary skills to participate in the digital space, which perpetuates their exclusion from future economic activities. Affordability, lack of literacy and digital skills and lower awareness remain critical barriers to accessing and using digital technologies for most women. It is critical to identify the challenges faced by women and girls to access and utilize digital technologies and develop their leadership capacities in this area. This is necessary if we are to close the digital gender gap and achieve global and continental goals in line with Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063. As women make up 50% of the population in Africa, improving skills and access to digital technologies for women is key to ensure their inclusion promote the development of the continent and we must ensure that no one is left behind.

2. Protection of women's rights and digital safety: As new and emerging technologies offer opportunities and platforms for the protection of women's rights, political activism and peacebuilding efforts, they could also serve as tools for instability and harassment. Cyber-bullying, online harassment, coupled with episodes of hate speech and disinformation, particularly in online advocacy and election campaigns as well as in conflict settings. This compounds existing tensions and affects peaceful co-existence of societies and threatens women's efforts at building more inclusive societies. Women and persons advocating for women's rights have been disproportionately targeted using the digital space as well as online and offline platforms. Women public figures, including politicians and human rights defenders have also been particularly targeted. In HoA region, during elections and in conflict settings, women have been targets of online hostility, such as gender-based reputation and privacy attacks. The online space has also been used for advocating against the rights of women and promoting violence against women, with harassment reported more frequently among politicians, human rights defenders and political activists. Increasing awareness and leveraging the WPS Agenda to address issues of cyber-bullying and harassment against women using emerging technologies is critical to maximize the benefits of digital technologies as tools for promoting human rights and for social advancement for women and girls.

3. Strengthening regional collaboration: With the expanding digital economy in the HoA and the continent at large, the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy is designed to guide the continent's digital transformation by leveraging regional cooperation and partnerships. The strategy highlights the need for mobilization and effective cooperation between stakeholders and institutions regionally and nationally. Regional collaboration efforts could facilitate the

exchange of information, best practices and harmonization of policies in areas such as data protection, digital safety, and inclusion of women and girls' in digital technologies. Strengthening collaboration between governments, the private sector and the international community is also important to close the digital gender divide and ensure the empowerment of women to leverage digital technologies for economic development and peacebuilding efforts. The UN looks forward to working with IGAD and in collaboration with other stakeholders to mobilize resources and support a coherent regional approach among its member countries, to enable women to reap the benefits of digital technologies.

The role of African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) on women empowerment

The AfCFTA is a major policy paradigm that is fundamentally changing the economic development and growth narrative in Africa⁴ and presents a seminal opportunity to foster gender inclusive trade and development policies that also create a platform for economic, social, and political empowerment for Africa's women and girls. Women's inclusion in digital economies must be a critical component of the implementation of this landmark agreement. Gender mainstreaming in the AfCFTA can address the systematic barriers of women's inclusion in the formal and informal economy, while it can increase access to capital markets and expand 'Aid for Trade' initiatives that support small-scale funding for women entrepreneurs and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). Ultimately, as reporting from UNECA and WTO shows,⁵ direct funding and capacity building for initiatives that increase women's economic participation represents an untapped opportunity in promoting sustainable economic growth and development.

Opportunities for Digital Inclusion to Sustain Peace

Efforts to build and sustain peace after conflict is increasingly becoming important, as digital technologies help us in making sense of the local drivers of conflict and best strategies to resolve them. While the literature on the link between digital technologies and peacebuilding is in its infancy, a growing body of studies have explored how conflicts are becoming increasingly digitized and efforts to resolve them are also taking an increasingly digital role. Hirblinger et al. (2022) note that today, most peacebuilding and conflict prevention mandates are increasingly relying on digital information and communication technologies (ICT). Conflict and early warning analysis is technologically driven, as it relies on complex data collection and analysis to predict and identify conflict patterns. The use of these technologies provides unique opportunities to engage with historically marginalized groups, such as women, to inform how more effective strategies and efforts can be developed. Advancing digital inclusion for women and girls will not only contribute to better protection and prevention, but it will also provide spaces for greater women participation. Women are drivers of peace, and thus, increasing ways for them to engage and participate through digital participation must be prioritized.

In conclusion, WPS must be considered in a holistic manner and especially in relation to the security, development, and governance nexus. The Sustainable Development Goals, Women, Peace and Security Agenda, and Agenda 2063 are fundamental in securing political commitment and creating roadmaps to close the gender gap in all areas. Digital inclusion can also play an

⁴ Article 3 of the Agreement Establishing the AfCFTA specifically states that sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality, and structural transformation as amongst the core objectives of the AfCFTA.

⁵ UNECA/WTO. 2019. Retrieved from: An Inclusive AfCFTA: Aid for Trade and Empowerment of Women and Young People. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/a4t_e/gr19_e/a4treporteca2019_e.pdf

important role in facilitating women's political, economic and social inclusion. Ultimately, digital technologies can be powerful tools to create opportunities for women and girls, which requires sustained political commitment by the international community to foster inclusive digital engagement frameworks and strategies. In addition, to promote meaningful digital inclusion for women, we must prioritize initiatives that support women's digital skills and capacity building through training and education, while considering the broader barriers that prevent women's digital inclusion and equally supporting sustained societal changes that foster women's engagement.