



Filipino Women's Digital Agenda

Policy Brief

Foundation for Media Alternatives
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Background

In 2021, the Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) released a policy research paper tentatively titled “Filipino Women’s Digital Agenda: Inclusion of Women’s Voices Towards Policy Reform.” The policy paper generally aims to shed light on the state of the digital divide in the Philippines, especially the gender digital divide. Specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do women use information communications technology (ICT) services in the Philippines? Are there problems/issues encountered like cybersecurity, connectivity, affordability, and others, in the use of ICT?
2. Are women aware of the ICT content and their potential to co-create content to enhance their potential in various fields like education, information, freedom from violence, ease of business, and others?

The policy paper used the REACT Policy Framework developed by the World Wide Web Foundation. The REACT framework highlights five priority areas that should be considered in all aspects of ICT policy for government and state actors to address the digital gender divide: rights, education, access, content, and targets.

The research approach employed a selection criteria to identify research participants from diverse sectors. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with various women’s sector representatives: youth, educators, women with disabilities, women human rights defenders, poor urban women, indigenous women, and LGBT. Key informant interviews (KIIs) provided the insights of the experts who worked with women’s networks.

This policy brief describes the findings and analysis of the policy paper and includes inputs from a consultation forum held on November 18, 2021.

Women's use of ICTs and issues encountered

A. Rights

Women are often targets of gender-based violence online and other forms of discrimination

Most of the FGD participants in this study said they have experienced sexual harassment and abuse, unwanted sexual advances, and threats in the online space. FGD participants reported the following: unwanted tagging in pornographic materials online; using photos and identities online for online bullying; requests for nude photos; and threats for posts advocating for reproductive policies such as abortion and for assisting victims and survivors of sexual harassment.

Women of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) report that students in learning environments can choose their preferred name by changing their display name; nevertheless, they experience discrimination when they are still called by their legal names.

The rights of women with disabilities are also affected when the rights of Filipino sign language (FSL) interpreters are impeded. FSL interpreters also experience bullying and harassment online.

Women are concerned about privacy, surveillance, and other security matters

Women recognize the possibility that the personal information they share online can end up in the hands of unscrupulous individuals. Personal information, including social media accounts, can be stolen or hacked. On privacy, FGD participants reported the following: wariness of Facebook's pervasive access to personal information, affecting the content of their news feeds; lack of understandable terms and conditions for ordinary users of social media platforms; self-censorship after a previous red-tagging experience online; fear of creating own content because of the possibility of attacks or judgment; the extension of the male gaze into content online; and the ease of 'archiving' in the internet translating to ease of access to unwanted previous content. Social media platforms are deemed toxic, and while reporting and complaint mechanisms exist, these are ineffective and usually employ exploited moderators.

On surveillance, FGD participants reported the following: security concerns from the issuance of government-issued laptops (which may be used for student

surveillance); and cultural struggles with installing and maintaining security devices for groups vulnerable to red-tagging.

Specifically, urban poor women are especially vulnerable to consuming 'fake news' and to experiences of red-tagging. Women with disabilities (specifically the visually-impaired) are more vulnerable to violations of privacy rights when they require assistance from another person in navigating the internet, due to the lack of assistive technology. These women may experience discrimination twofold: both as a woman and as a person with disability.

Migrant women point out privacy and security issues in using social media, particularly on the storage of passwords and personal information. Migrant women also report confiscation of phones abroad, hampering their access to government services online.

B. Education

Digital and media literacy skills are prerequisites for services, processes, and education facilitated online

FGD participants point out how government agencies, such as the Department of Education (DepEd) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), did not consider connectivity issues, technological resources (gadgets and laptops), and digital literacy, among others, in deciding to hold classes online. This holds true especially for marginalized groups, including indigenous women. While government (both national and local) may have programs to capacitate individual women on these skills, many lack awareness and access to these programs. Urban poor women state that they are forced to step in as teachers for their children even without being trained to do so. Mothers belonging to indigenous communities have difficulties tutoring their children for online classes, since they are not knowledgeable on the lessons taught.

Basic technical know-how on navigating technology (uploading files, accessing government websites, setting up emails) is also lacking, in particular for migrant women.

Media literacy skills are especially needed to combat disinformation

Urban poor women, in addition, may not be trained to fact check online content, making them more vulnerable to disinformation or 'fake news'.

While migrant women may be ‘strong enough to handle trolls,’ the same holds true: they are also vulnerable to disinformation because as migrants, the internet is where they connect with relatives and spend most of their time.

C. Access

Barriers to connectivity constrain the empowerment of women

Barriers to connectivity include lack of access to the internet and devices such as laptops or computers. These barriers, according to FGD participants, directly affect how women, such as indigenous women interviewed, access or fail to access basic government services (Philhealth, SSS, Pag-ibig, or IDs), including online medical services especially during a pandemic. These also affect how civil society or non-government organizations communicate to partner organizations on the ground (better smartphones have to be provided to facilitate better signals).

Refusal to use technologies is also a barrier; some indigenous women refuse to use devices such as mobile phones because these cause family feuds. Traditional family roles—with women as caretakers—also impede access, as in the case of an FGD participant who is unable to attend online classes to take care of family members sick with COVID-19. The tedious paperwork involved in applying for quality internet services also affects women’s access to these services. Indigenous women also state that even if gadgets were available, access to the internet remains a challenge to use these devices effectively (e.g., for learning modules).

For women with disability, learning online presents difficult challenges: materials and devices are usually not made for their accessibility. Disability-related services, like rehabilitation and therapy, are not accessible online. There are limited work opportunities and income-generating activities for persons with disability, let alone women with disability. For the elections, FSL interpretation is crucial for women with disability to understand platforms of candidates, and thus the availability and protection of FSL interpreters are also crucial to empower women with disabilities.

Quality internet comes at a cost

Meaningful—beyond basic—connectivity comes at a cost. Wired internet and data are expensive. Internet consumption is expensive for women from the urban

poor, indigenous, and youth sectors, adding to financial burdens aside from other basic needs such as food and income, and further challenging mothers' lack of training in educating their children during a pandemic.

Assistive technology for persons with disabilities are not for free, and are usually pre-installed at high-end mobile phones and have to be separately purchased, if available, in basic mobile phones. For the hearing-impaired, video calls are a preferred mode of communication; however, internet connectivity problems and high costs limit this preference.

D. Content

Disinformation sows confusion

FGD participants who are indigenous women, as well as those from urban poor communities, state that they access news through social media. This exposes them to disinformation and 'fake news.' Verification and fact-checking is difficult, however, because of unreliable internet connections.

An FGD participant described the internet as 'profit oriented'—interpreted to mean that businesses that use the internet, such as social media platforms, can manipulate the circulation of information by paying for ads. On the other hand, another participant acknowledged the internet as a diverse source of art and creative media, enabling her to explore her sexuality better.

Existing inequalities affect or compound content access

For youth and students who desire to express themselves online, access to quality content is impeded by financial resources (e.g., some content may be accessible only via subscriptions or paywalls). Youth and students who have better resources are also more able to disseminate information.

Women with disability, especially the hearing-impaired, face barriers in consuming content online when sign language interpreters are not available. Information regarding rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals are not accessible to persons with disability. Further, because the deaf and mute have access issues both in language and technology, they are also more vulnerable to consuming disinformation online.

E. Targets

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, while the country has made progress in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), there were a few goals whose progress cannot be ascertained because of lack of information, and a few goals that regressed. SDG 5 (achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls) is one of goals that have regressed since year 2000, where the country has achieved only 4 out of the 11 identified indicators. Targets underachieved involve early child marriage and violence against women. Further, there were no indicators on SDG 5.b or the use and access of technology by women and girls for gender equality and empowerment.

Laws and policies need to catch up with technology

Laws and policies governing the use of ICTs are gender neutral, and do not consider gender differences at all to some extent. These policies assume an equal footing across all genders and ignore the unique circumstances and needs of women. The prevailing gap in digital inclusion as well as the prevalence (or absence) of women in certain aspects of the digital world were not considered in the policies. The scant publicly available sex-disaggregated data may have also contributed to the false assumption of gender equality or the lack of gender perspective in current policies.

Addressing the gender-disaggregation of data

As early as 2014, the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) has adopted Memorandum Circular 2014-05 for the Adoption and generation of data support to the Magna Carta of Women (MCW) indicators. Among others, this MC enjoins all government agencies mandated to implement provisions of the Magna Carta for Women (MCW) and its implementing rules and regulations (IRR) to generate timely, accurate and sex-disaggregated data support to the MCW indicators. However, the adoption of this MC has been slow.

Awareness of ICT content and the potential to be content creators or co-creators

Women allocate budgets for connectivity

FGD participants realize the value of being connected, thus they set aside an amount to be able to use technology, especially for their children: to connect to their classes, connect to their organizations, and access information.

Some groups provide digital literacy training

An example of a good digital literacy training, according to one FGD participant, is actual training of communities to document their experiences via the internet. In teaching communities to document their struggles themselves, one FGD participant said the documentation is more authentic, and not merely viewed from the lenses of third persons.

Women have developed strategies to counter risks online

While there are challenges for women when they navigate the web, they have also developed strategies to protect themselves. As a result of the various experiences they have had, they have also developed some form of resilience. The strategies, as reported by FGD participants, include: utilizing privacy mechanisms; utilizing multiple Facebook accounts for different purposes (such as online gaming, which is known to be harsh to women); calling out perpetrators of online offenses and abuses; establishment of support groups such as those by the Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB) and the Coalition against Trafficking in Women – Asia-Pacific (CATW-AP); and documenting experiences and processes.

Government programs for women in ICT exist

The DICT says it is committed towards the achievement of SDG 5. It also seeks to improve the environment for women empowerment and equality, specifically the gender scorecard released by FMA in 2017, where the Philippines received a 50% overall score out of a 100%. The ICT Literacy and Development Bureau, which is the training arm of DICT, offers different training programs for (1) out-of-school young women and girls; (2) women solo parents; (3) women deprived of liberty (PDLs); (4) women entrepreneurs; (5) returning Women OFWs; and (6) grandmothers or elderly women. The DICT is also an academy partner of the United Nations – Asia Pacific Center for ICT Development, under the Women ICT Frontier Initiative. Under this initiative, they help women entrepreneurs use ICT in support of their businesses.

Analysis

RIGHTS

Findings:

Women are often targets of gender-based violence online and other forms of discrimination

Women are concerned about privacy, surveillance, and other security matters

Analysis:

- Women's safety online should be addressed.
 - As more women turn to social media and navigate the web, the need for online safety and security becomes a must. Women's experiences of online abuse and harassment are many, and these take a toll on their physical, psychological and emotional well-being.
 - Existing internet intermediaries have policies on safety, privacy, and harmful content that includes hate speech, nudity and sexual activity, graphic content, and sexual solicitation but these are not enough to respond to the different types of abuse and violence experienced by women in their platform.
 - Existing laws and policies that relate to women and ICT have to be implemented properly, or reviewed for necessary amendment.

- Designing a platform for women with disability should take a human rights approach to encompass all rights. The human rights approach should be employed at the outset. It is also important to see intersectionality as a right, as it is a basis for inclusivity—especially for indigenous women and persons with disabilities.
 - For example, for women with disabilities, where content is inaccessible, they are more exposed to GBV.

EDUCATION

Findings:

Digital and media literacy skills are prerequisites for services, processes, and education facilitated online.

Media literacy skills are especially needed to combat disinformation

Analysis:

- More than complicated skills, women, especially those in the communities, need to learn basic skills such as how to use mobile phones and navigate the internet.
 - The internet may provide for an alternative means of education, or a way to address inclusivity, but only if users are capacitated to overcome varied challenges to access, including literacy, connectivity, language, and gadget availability.
- Digital as well as media and information literacy is included in the DepEd's basic education curriculum, and the DICT created the Digital Education program to respond to the shift to online learning. Still, the number of basic education enrollees dropped this school year because of the following reasons:
 - Weak internet connectivity
 - Financial burdens brought by remote education (need for gadgets, reliable internet, cost of transportation)
 - Adjustment for new modes of learning taking a toll on students' mental health

ACCESS

Findings:

Barriers to connectivity constrains the empowerment of women

Quality internet comes at a cost

Analysis:

- Accessibility should recognize the distinct context of marginalized groups and include access to a full set of services.
- A digital divide exists in the Philippines, mainly around cost and geography.
 - Connectivity is most concentrated in densely populated urban areas, while many poor, rural areas remain largely underserved. Such digital divide or the gap between individuals, businesses, and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels have an impact on opportunities to access information and communication technologies and the use of the internet for a wide variety of activities.
- Access to the internet is not a luxury but a need.
 - While online connections are a lifeline especially in a pandemic, the development of internet infrastructure in the country is dominated by private firms, with government only beginning to ramp up efforts to build cell towers.
- Access means economic opportunities and should be equated to economic justice.
 - While there are good practices when it comes to integrating digital technologies in women's work, there is also need to question if such are really beneficial to women or not, and a need to make training programs to access online work known and accessible to women.
- More than basic access, there is a need for meaningful access.
 - Access is just not about connectivity, but also being able to articulate women's

issues, while at the same time being safe online. According to the WLB, meaningful access is one that is adequate, where access is affordable, physical, and effective. It is also one where control is accounted for—knowing who controls access to the internet in households.

CONTENT

Findings:

Disinformation sows confusion

Existing inequalities affect or compound content access

Analysis:

- Access to the right information can help women make the right decision and protect themselves from online risks.
 - The availability of information in social media and other online platforms, although not a guarantee that it can be accessed by all, still improves the odds that more individuals can access it. Making information available online allows grassroots communities to know and understand issues that would otherwise be difficult to get, had it only been accessible offline.
 - Accessibility of certain content online (health platforms) is also crucial not only for information purposes, but more so to address disabilities (especially for women with disabilities) and to avoid being targets for profiling, tracking, harassment or red-tagging (for urban poor women especially).
- Digital literacy and skills are necessary to make sense of / verify online content.
 - Women, such as indigenous women and migrant women, are not well-versed in using technological devices, but need the skills to use them to facilitate the most basic of government services. Media literacy is also a must, and this includes

raising awareness on existing ways and methods to verify information online and develop critical thinking. There is also a need to create content catered to women and girls (without fear of judgment or attacks), and create more safe spaces for expression online, with terms of usage that are understandable and known to women.

TARGETS

Findings:

Laws and policies need to catch up with technology

Address the gender-disaggregation of data

Analysis:

- The Philippines has robust laws for the protection of women. However, these should be properly understood by the implementors of the law. Further, laws should be continuously and arduously reviewed to check if its provisions and implementation conflict with those of other laws.
- Existing laws on women's rights, labor, and reproductive health already incorporate a gender component in their provisions. However, even with the existence of such laws, the equal participation of women, particularly, in male-dominated sectors such as the technology industry, continues to be fraught with problems. In 2017, less than 4 in 10 workers in the information and communication industry were women.
- While the DICT has programs in place for women, it has to be noted that the top leadership of the DICT, from the Secretary, the Undersecretaries and the Assistant Secretaries, are all men. Such a leadership structure may have an impact on how the agency treats and prioritizes issues concerning women.

Work in progress: an ideal internet for women

An ideal internet for women is one that has the following characteristics:



1) Fast, reliable, and accessible not just in urban areas, but also in the rural areas because there is a disproportionate effect of an unaffordable internet to those who need opportunities. Investments must be made on infrastructure to address accessibility and affordability issues, and promoting accessibility should include addressing the safety and security concerns of users.



2) Inclusive and responsive to the distinct needs of different marginalized sectors, most especially people with disabilities. Inclusivity also means mitigation of risks that come with addressing these distinct needs.



3) Affordable. Women state that there should be a policy or law to promote and protect the rights of the consumers to have a high standard and quality of internet connection, and to make it more affordable. They also express that load promos offered by service providers do not have an expiration date as it will allow them to maximize the use of their internet for a longer time. The government should look into regulating the cost of internet subscriptions.



4) Safe. It is a safe space where women can speak out about issues, promote their rights and advocacies, and express their sexuality without fear of being threatened or harmed, and where privacy matters.



5) Free from discrimination. An ideal internet is one that accommodates different points of view, where everyone is welcome and can freely express themselves without fear of being abused and bullied.



6) The internet should be an empowering platform for women, where they themselves can help promote the well-being of other women, where women and girls can fully develop, participate and contribute, including in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).



7) Transparency and accountability. Women expressed that they want to see the platforms and intermediaries to be responsible and accountable for the impact of their services to users, where community standards and guidelines are implemented. If there are complaints or reports of abuse, these should be acted upon immediately. These platforms should be transparent on their policies in dealing with hate speech, OGBV, discrimination, and the like.



8) Human rights-based. The design of the internet should incorporate universal standards for human rights and freedoms, including the rights of women in all their intersectionality and their needs. Web developers and computer professionals should understand human rights principles and incorporate them in the design of technology, one that is friendly across all spectrums and human rights-based.

Ways Forward

1) Improve and build infrastructure.

The digital divide is a reality, both in rural and urban communities, and spans issues from devices to internet connectivity. The digital divide experienced by women exacerbates existing gender issues. It is worthwhile to explore other forms of media that can be used to address access issues such as cable network, radio, etc., and not just rely on business decisions by telecommunications companies.

2) Allocate resources.

There is a need to empower women not only as users of digital technology but also as creators. For example, more efforts should be made to empower women entrepreneurs and encourage women to join male-dominated fields such as science and technology. Government must allocate budgets for ICT for students and women with disabilities. Further, while government and CSOs may have trainings for digital literacy, these must also cater to people with other needs, such as people with disabilities.

3) Prioritize content and safety.

Content must be created that caters specifically to audiences belonging to marginalized groups, such as content for women particularly for those with disability. Content must be made available in local languages. There is a need to ensure women's participation in social media and also train them to think critically with the information that they see and read online. Lastly, tech companies must create applications and programs based on human rights approaches.

4) Bring policy reform to the digital age.

There are existing bills pending in Congress that can already address some of the needs as identified and experienced by women:

- Open Access in Data Transmission Act – Competition promotes better internet services.
- Better Internet/Faster Internet Services Act
- Spectrum Management Act
- Rural Wired Connectivity Act

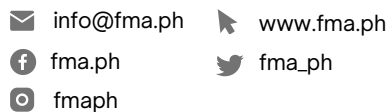
In crafting gender-sensitive and responsive ICT policies, different stakeholders (women included) should be actively engaged and consulted as partners in policymaking. Women should not be considered as a homogenous group and any discussion of issues should be intersectional. Lastly, policies should be cascaded to sector groups for them to be aware of these policies.

5) Foster partnerships

Meaningful partnerships and collaboration are needed to address the issues raised.



Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) is a non-profit organization advocating for ICTs for democracy and sustainable development.



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