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Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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NIGERIA

The use of ICTs to express public outrage in Nigeria over child marriage



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Introduction

The areas of the Nigerian national life in which gender inequality appears to be entrenched include the workplace, health services, physical protection, education and politics. Most recently, the issue of child marriages has caused public outrage.¹ In 2010, a Nigerian senator, Ahmed Sani Yarima, divorced a girl-bride whom he had married when she was 15 years old, and then married a 13-year-old.² Although the Nigerian Senate passed a law criminalising child marriage in 2003, only 24 out of the 36 states have adopted the law. Yarima has been at the centre of a recent child marriage furore in the Senate,³ and was the cause of much public outrage against the government.

Using ICTs to channel outrage

The Senate could not muster the number of votes needed to expunge a clause in the 1999 constitution (Section 29 clause 4b) that assumes that any woman who is married is also an adult: “Any woman that is married in Nigeria is of full age.” The general public has interpreted this as a Senate endorsement of child marriage. The Senate’s attempt at clarification went largely unheeded,⁴ as the Nigerian press, websites, magazines, bloggers and the electronic media reported citizens’ concerns and editorialised their disapproval. Ikenna Azuike, the Nigerian-British creator of viral videos, posted a video to satirise and shine light on the dispute⁵ and a Nigerian woman, Dupe Killa, was the brain behind

the #ChildNOTBride⁶ petition which was oversubscribed within hours of its launch.

Most national papers on Sunday, 28 July 2013 gave prominence to the issue: *Thisday*, *The Nation On Sunday*, *Leadership* and *Sunday Vanguard* had headlines such as “In Support Of The Girl Child”, “No Cover For Pedophiles”, “Much Ado About Child Marriage” and “Building Nigeria On Deceit”.

It is noteworthy that the loudest voices in the demand for expunging the offending section of the Nigerian constitution have been from women. Studies of how Nigerian women use information and communications technologies (ICTs) have shown that in spite of the challenges of relevant skills, cost and access⁷ and role models,⁸ more women are utilising ICTs to facilitate “their empowerment and in the fight against gender-based violence.”⁹

Similar to the specific case of the rights of the girl whom the senator divorced, various ICT tools including tweets, blogs, discussion lists, mass SMS distribution and YouTube were widely deployed to raise awareness of the Senate’s discussions, as well as to keep the issue in public view long enough to get the Senate to reverse its earlier decision. With the level of internet penetration in Nigeria, the costs and access challenges, this gives hope for the increased use of ICTs in the furtherance of women’s rights and gender equality in the country.

The Women Empowerment and Legal Aid (WELA) initiative called for the prosecution of Senator Yerima.¹⁰ Women leaders like former minister of education Oby Ezekwesili and Joe Okei-Odumakin, the national coordinator of Women Arise, which represents over 60 civil society organisations, demanded the immediate removal of the offensive section from the constitution permitting child

1 www.itwebafrica.com/ict-and-governance/265-nigeria/231227-fight-nigerias-gender-discrimination-with-ict#sthash.DazQORRa.dpuf

2 7evenminutes.com/2013/07/30/senate-says-child-marriage-is-outlawed-in-nigeria-but-12-states-are-yet-to-adopt-the-law

3 atlashrugs2000.typepad.com/atlas_shrugs/2013/07/nigeria-senator-lamblasts-critics-urges-child-marriage-as-a-solution-to-nations-problems-i-can-give-.html

4 www.clutchmagonline.com/2013/07/nigerian-senator-we-didnt-legalize-child-marriage

5 blazingcatfur.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/nigeria-video-mocks-yeriman-countryrs.html

6 talent.adweek.com/gallery/ChildNotBride-The-story-behind-the-image/10001269

7 www.itwebafrica.com/ict-and-governance/265-nigeria/231227-fight-nigerias-gender-discrimination-with-ict#sthash.DazQORRa.dpuf and unlib.unl.edu/LPP/PNLA%20Quarterly/ogbomo75-3.htm

8 www.dailykos.com/story/2011/05/12/975497/-Women-Strive-to-Close-ICT-Gender-Gap-in-Nigeria and www.punchng.com/business/technology/addressing-gender-imbalance-in-ict-industry/

9 Buskens, I. and Webb, A. (eds.) (2009) *African Women & ICTS: Investigating technology, gender and empowerment*, Zed, IDRC. www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/IDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=61

10 www.dailytimes.com.ng/article/child-marriage-women%E2%80%99s-group-wants-former-gov-prosecuted

brides.¹¹ The WOMAN 2.1 Summit¹² and Women's Health and Action Research Centre (WHARC),¹³ the former government minister Fani-Kayode¹⁴ and the Movement for Islamic Culture and Awareness have all criticised the Senate's (in)action.

Apart from being an affront to the fundamental human rights of the victims, teenage marriage has profound disadvantages on the health and social and physical well-being of underage mothers. Many are not physically or emotionally ready to handle a pregnancy, survive childbirth or nurture a baby. Therefore they face grave dangers during childbirth and are susceptible to pregnancy-related injuries such as obstetric fistula (VVF). Children born to child brides frequently suffer low birth weight. These young brides are unable to negotiate safe sex with older men, making them vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and domestic violence.

Gender inequality

This public outrage on the issue of child marriage highlights the persisting gender inequality in Nigeria, especially in female access to education and economic and political empowerment. The WomenAid Collective in its CEDAW Shadow Report states that females are lagging behind in access to primary, secondary and tertiary education, with a consequent literacy rate of 43% for adult women (compared to 57% for men).¹⁵

While ICTs have been seen as a tool for enhanced opportunities for all, they can also end up exacerbating the existing gender divide. In this child bride issue, several kinds of ICTs were mobilised to keep the issue in the public domain long enough to force a back down by the Nigerian Senate. But the incident also highlights the underlying gender inequities in the national socio-political arena. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action specifically calls on states to "increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication." However, as long as females are subjected to early marriage, domestic responsibilities and socio-cultural prac-

tices can only reduce their access to the information economy and increase the gender gap.

As of September 2013 the situation has yet to show significant improvement, with women's participation and contributions at all levels and in all sectors still largely undervalued and constrained. Moreover, Nigeria has yet to domesticate the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), despite the increase in violence against women as reported by its minister of women's affairs.¹⁶

Conclusion

Nigeria was among the first countries in Africa to sign and ratify CEDAW, and has also had one of its nationals elected to the CEDAW Committee.¹⁷ Yet 29 years after the ratification, the 2008 shadow report on CEDAW and gender accountability in Nigeria observed that Nigerian women were still being subjected to substantial discrimination as a result of the lack of enabling legal and institutional support. The lack of progress is particularly glaring in the areas of access to education, incidence of high maternal and child mortality due to early marriage, human rights violations, harmful traditional and cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, widowhood rites and disinheritance, high incidences of gender-based violence, the trafficking of women, and teenage pregnancy¹⁸.

The Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) advocates gender equality in the "implementation, access and use of [ICTs]."¹⁹ Nigerian women and the general public have demonstrated what ICTs can achieve to promote the rights of girls and ensure that child marriages are abolished. Two recent bills can only strengthen these efforts: the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill and the Violence Against Persons Bill,²⁰ which have been presented to the national assembly.

Action steps

There is a need to work closely with civil society groups whose focus is on women's rights to raise public awareness regarding the non-domestication of CEDAW in Nigeria. Linking this with regular reports of violence against women will help to keep

11 allafrica.com/stories/201307261128.html

12 ghanagist.com/woman-2-1-summit-stands-against-underage-child-marriage-in-nigeria/#.Ufdn5FPagM

13 www.wharc-online.org/2013/07/25/wharc-rejects-child-marriage-in-nigeria

14 premiumtimesng.com/opinion/141879-a-word-for-yerima-and-the-pedophiles-in-power-femi-fani-kayode.html

15 WomenAid Collective (2008) *CEDAW and Accountability to Gender Equality in Nigeria: A Shadow Report*, WACOL.

16 www.nguardiannews.com/national-news/132759-minister-decries-non-domestication-of-cedaw-gender-bill

17 www.dailyindependentnig.com/2012/07/nigerian-elected-into-uncedaw-committee

18 WomenAid Collective (2008) Op. cit.

19 www.apc.org/en/about/programmes/womens-networking-support-programme-apc-wnsp

20 allafrica.com/stories/201305231144.html

the issue in the public eye until positive steps are taken.

Closely related to this is the domestication of the Convention on the Rights of the Child through the Child Rights Act, which has yet to be endorsed by some states in Nigeria. The progress of the efforts of UNICEF and civil society entities to promote the process needs to be monitored.

The bills that are now being considered by the legislature will also be closely monitored: the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill and the Violence Against Persons Bill.

The use of ICTs to express public outrage in the child bride case is similar to the initiation of the nationwide Occupy Nigeria movement of 2012 – a movement that started with a tweet. The implication of the use of social media for galvanising public

opinion is not lost on the Nigerian government, and it is now making efforts to limit citizens' access to information on the internet. This challenge provides the opportunity for another action step: sustained and coordinated action by civil society to monitor and evaluate the government's bill, titled "An Act to Provide for the Interception, Development and Protection of Communications Networks and Facilities for Public Interest and other related matters", and the push for endorsement of a national surveillance programme that has both serious financial and civil rights implications. This can be pursued by forging closer networking with ICT journalists and relevant civil society organisations, such as the Paradigm Initiative,²¹ to ensure public oversight and discussions to monitor how these initiatives might infringe on the right to free communication. ■

²¹ Paradigm Initiative (2013) *Nigeria: Making a case for enduring internet freedom*, PIN Policy Brief No. 1. pinigeria.org/download/pinbrief001.pdf