Making Women's Voices Heard from Beijing to Post-2015 in Social Media

Side event at the 59th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

17 March 2015, 10-11.15am

UN Headquarters, New York

Summary

On 17 March 2015, the OECD Development Centre and UN Women's EmpowerWomen.org co-organised a side event on "Making women's voices heard from Beijing to post-2015 in social media". The event, held during the 59th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), was supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development.

The event focused on two critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action: women in power and decision-making (strategic objectives G.1. and G.2.) and women and the media (strategic objectives J.1. and J.2.).

The discussion focused on the impact that social media and technology can have on women's empowerment and their increased participation in decision-making processes. The discussion featured some key trends: women's voices are increasingly being heard thanks to social media as they use Twitter and online platforms for activism around gender equality and women's empowerment; and the digital divide between women and men is narrowing.

This discussion was led by five panellists: **Anna Falth**, Manager of EmpowerWomen.org, UN Women; **Liz Ford**, Deputy Editor, Guardian's Global development website; **Mollie Vandor**, Product Manager, Twitter; **Keshet Bachan**, Girl expert, Plan International; and **Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls**, Coordinator, femLINKpacific. **Estelle Loiseau**, Gender Programme Officer, OECD Development Centre, moderated the discussion.

In her opening remarks, Estelle Loiseau highlighted the mixed progress and remaining barriers to fully achieve the vision of the 1995 gender equality agenda. In numbers: a 2010 study by the GSMA Development Fund and the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women revealed that a woman is 21% less likely than a man to own a mobile phone; according to the Global Media Monitoring

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Project 2010 report, women's presence as news subjects in print, radio and television has only increased to 24% in 2010 from 17% in 1995. Ms. Loiseau mentioned that social media brings new opportunities to increase women's voice and enhance the visibility of women's issues, as it can challenge established stereotypes and help accelerate progress towards equal participation.

Similarly, there has been an explosion of blogs and online collaborative platforms that have emerged as a way to organise for gender activists since 1995. Estelle Loiseau introduced Wikigender[1] – an online platform launched by the OECD Development Centre in 2008 and open to anyone for contributions on gender equality and women's rights issues. The platform has around 3,000 editors , close to 2,000 articles and on average 40,000 unique monthly visitors. Since 2010, Wikigender runs online discussions and reaches new audiences on a wide range of issues, including climate change, violence against women, adolescent girls, unpaid care work and data gaps on gender equality. To address the language issue, a Wikigender in French will be launched in 2015 to complement the existing English version.

EmpowerWomen.org's Manager, Anna Falth, explained how Empower Women is promoting online and social media engagement among women throughout the world. Ms. Falth explained the link between Empower Women's online and offline activities in helping to voice women's opinions, experiences and successes through a variety of activities. For example, Empower Women features its members' stories and celebrates one story per day on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. She detailed on how women's online voices can inspire action offline among its more than 5,000 members, 133 champions and over 150,000 users in over 190 countries. She discussed strategic objectives and presented the mobile-learning platform iLEARN and its roll out strategy to millions of women with regular feature phones. She invited all participants to join the I am (wo)man Campaign and share a photo/video story. Ms. Falth highlighted the importance of amplifying women's successes through social media, but also to consider traditional media, such as radio, as a key channel of information to unconnected women in rural areas.

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[1] Wikigender is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway, the Austrian Development Agency, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, the Organisation internationale de la francophonie and the French Development Agency.

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Liz Ford from the Guardian addressed how a large media organisation s can help bring women's voices to the forefront. Ms. Ford outlined several ways in which this could happen - through storytelling, blogs, op-eds, videos, crowdsourcing, 'facewalls' and other interactive projects.[2] "Once people in the global south – including journalists from those areas who really understand the context – start telling their stories, we all benefit." She explained how the Guardian'Global Development website launched a page on women's rights and gender equality. "We wanted the site to help build an online community where issues can be discussed, and crucially where women had a platform to talk." Moreover, she explained the challenges that the Guardian Development website encounters, such as engaging with some of the most marginalised women, publishing in English only and dealing with online trolls[3] (i.e. posting inappropriate content). She mentioned that while social media can be a place of 'negative thinking', more women should speak up and have their voices heard to crowd out these online trolls.

Mollie Vandor from Twitter discussed successful women's rights moments on the popular social media platform. "I definitely think there is a moment happening right now, where we are reaching a tipping point." Ms. Vandor mentioned that hashtags like #EqualPay and #AskHerMore dominated at the Oscars. Conversations about feminism on Twitter have increased by 300% over the last 3 years. She highlighted the need for more social media discussions on women's rights. "It is easy to dismiss these social media moments as just "talk", but I really believe that the more we talk about what gender equality means and why it is important, the more that conversation picks up volume and the harder it is to ignore."

Keshet Bachan from Plan International discussed the need for technology to be used in order to enhance transparency in debates on women's rights. "We must also consider the ways in which social media has allowed young feminists and gender equality activists to make their voices heard, where once only the 'specialist' was allowed to speak." She emphasised the challenges of discrimination – of "girls shying away from computers" – but the promising news that both the digital divide and the gap between online and offline activism are narrowing.

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[2] Crowdsourcing refers to the process of obtaining ideas or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, especially from an online community; facewalls are online pages displaying pictures of people's faces and presenting their stories.
[3] An online troll refers to a person who sows discord on the Internet by starting arguments or by posting inappropriate or provocative content.

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The last speaker, FemLINKPACIFIC's Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls, discussed the effectiveness of radio for advancing women's rights. She believes that global campaigns should be linked with local initiatives and goals so more female voices can be heard worldwide. "We need to collectively transform ICT policies," Bhagwan-Rolls said.

The questions and answers session was very animated. Participants further highlighted the issue of access to the technology for women to be able to participate, especially in rural areas with no electricity. Traditional means of communication such as solar-charged radio was mentioned as an alternative. Another problem raised was the need to take into account the diversity of languages, as many women are left out of key debates due to the fact that the information is only available in English. Participants also stressed the need for social media messages to be translated into policies and further discussed the importance of offline as well as online activism.

See also:

- **Wikigender Online discussion** "Advancing Women's Rights through Social Media": http://wikigender.org/index.php/Online_Discussion:_Advancing_women's_rights_through_social_media (11-20 February 2015)
- **Live Twitter Q&A** "Making women's voices heard from Beijing to Post-2015 in social media": https://storify.com/OECD_Centre/live-twitter (12 March 2015)
- **Live webcast** of the event: https://youtu.be/dxFfydapKoQ
- **OECD Development Centre Issues paper** "Can social media effectively include women's voices in decision-making processes?": http://oecd.org/dev/development-gender/social%20media-issuesPaper.pdf (March 2015)

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