

## **OUTCOME STATEMENT ON ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS ON ADDRESSING BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN'S DIGITAL RIGHTS IN SOMALIA**

**October 25, 2021**

Somalia has more than 2 million Internet users and the cheapest Internet in Africa. As the internet becomes an increasingly important part of human existence and a critical space for marginalized people to make their voices heard, a pandemic of online gender-based violence emerged, turning the lifeline of the internet into a hostile space for women and girls in Somalia, according to a survey conducted in February 2020. Young women who are studying at higher educational institutions are primary victims due to their extended use of internet and social media platforms for educational purposes. Survey shows that 49% of the young women face continues online harassments including blackmailing, non-consensual access and distribution of personal information, impersonation, defamation, threats, sexist abuse, intimidation, hacking of personal account, recording without consent, identity theft, sexual harassment or cyber stalking.

With support of Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), Women in Media Initiative Somalia (WIMISOM) organized two roundtable discussions held in Garowe on July 10, 2021 and August 4, 2021 to brainstorm and evaluate the challenges facing women in their quest for digital rights as well as assess the threats and lack of digital freedom faced by women in different fields to further raise awareness about their digital rights issues and push for policy and practice reforms that contribute to the development of a safe and empowering online environment for women and girls. This is followed by a zoom meeting held on October 19, 2021 to share the results of the roundtable discussions held in Garowe and Mogadishu and also to adopt proposed policy and practice reforms.

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Participants from the following relevant institutions were invited to the discussions: -

- a. The leading governmental institutions mandated for addressing gender inequality and development of women and girls rights in Somalia such as Ministries of Human Rights and Women Affairs of Federal Government of Somalia and its Member States of Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland and South West.
  - b. The leading institutions responsible for development of Information, Technology and Communication (ICT). Ministries of Technology and Telecommunication of Federal Government of Somalia and its Member States of Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland and South West.
  - c. The leading Ministries of Education such as Federal Ministry of Education and Puntland Ministry of Education & Higher Education.
  - d. Representatives from the legislatives of Puntland & Hirshabelle states.
  - e. The leading non-governmental organizations or civil society members involved in promotion of women's rights such as Puntland Independent Human Rights Defender, Women's Rights Networks of Mogadishu, Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland and South West States.
  - f. The popular technical organizations dedicated for promotion of digital rights in Somalia such Digital Shelter, Bareedo Platform, Somali STEM, T-Hub, Hanaqaad Hub, Weyrah Digital Technologies Institute, SOSTEC Technologies.
  - g. The leading Internet and telecommunication providers in the country such as Golis Telecom, Hormuud Telecom, Somtel, Somnet & Amtel.
  - h. The leading education institutions or ICT education provides in the country such as University of Bosaso, East Africa University, Puntland State University and Jazeera University
  - i. The media organizations such as Somali Women Journalists Rights Association - SOWJRA, Puntland State Television & Radio, Somali National Television, Universal TV.
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In these important roundtable discussions, participants highlighted the existing challenges and shared experiences, stories and studies contributing to the matter as well as how this poses a risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality in Somalia if not addressed immediately. They have also made the below mentioned suggestions for policy and practice reforms which are deemed and adopted to contribute to the development of a safe and empowering online environment for women and girls to achieve effective and inclusive use of technology.

### **Existing legal frameworks:**

1. Somalia is a part and signatory of the following global and regional declarations: -
    - ✓ UN Declaration on promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet 2016
    - ✓ African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms
  2. Somalia adopted the following policies and strategies which are related to the country's Information, Communication and Technology (ICT):-
    - ✓ National Communications Act 2017
    - ✓ National ICT Policy & Strategy 2019 - 2024
    - ✓ Puntland Telecommunication Law 2021
    - ✓ Communiqué of the National ICT Consultation Conference held in Mogadishu on 6-8 May 2017
  3. Both UN and African Declarations affirm: -
    - ✓ ***Principles 10*** - *The rights of all people, without discrimination of any kind, to use the Internet as a vehicle for the exercise and enjoyment of their human rights, and for participation in social and cultural life, should be respected and protected.*
    - ✓ ***Principles 13*** - *To help ensure the elimination of all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender, women and men should have equal access to learn about, define, access, use and shape the Internet. Efforts to increase access should therefore recognize and redress existing gender inequalities, including women's*
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*under-representation in decision-making roles, especially in Internet governance.*

**Key Issues:**

1. Mobile money scams are getting a toll these days taking advantage of the growing mobile money market in Somalia according to a survey conducted in March 2021.
  2. Scams doubled during COVID-19 and one of the three largest mobile money operators recorded more than **16,000** mobile money scams in a month, some believe the figure to be far greater than this and that the trend is twice higher than before the COVID-19 emergency started.
  3. Impersonation of public figures, humanitarian agencies, targeting busy or business people with fake money transfer notifications. **55%** of the mobile money victims were women, particularly digitally illiterate women in business.
  4. Several reports shows that women in Somalia lack the skills needed to use digital technologies and to participate in their design and production. They make up **9%** of ICT graduates and even few women who managed to graduate despite hardships face stereotypes and discrimination in accessing the scarce job opportunities. They make up **0.5%** of ICT workforce of the country, and hardly to see a female recruited to the ICT positions.
  5. ICT is yet to be introduced in schools in Somalia for exception of Puntland and Somaliland states where ICT is taught in secondary schools only, but not in primary schools or even intermediate levels.
  6. The number of women and girls using the Internet in Somalia is not that far lower than men, but a pandemic of online gender-based violence emerged, turning the lifeline of the internet into a hostile space for women and girls in Somalia according to a survey conducted in 2020.
  7. Online gender-based violence exists just as destructive as offline violence. Women are the main targets of online violence, especially women with voices, like female journalists and politicians.
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8. Threats of sharing non-consensual intimate images is something every woman in the Internet has to see these days. Something that normalized and even if the threat is a fake, victims still believe it because they witnessed devastating consequences this had on Safiyo Tusmo, Cayuuni Qurux or other women.
  9. Some horrific cases of innocent women and girls whose accounts were hacked or private photos published without consent are not odd but an explicit expression of the deeply rooted gender inequalities in our society.
  10. Young women do not often speak about their online experiences and additionally, online violence is not perceived as a serious form of violence compared to offline violence in the country.
  11. Women and girls are losing **trust** in technology and Internet and **42%** respondents of a survey said they knew a woman who had taken a break from the social media after being harassed online or have seen related cases.
  12. Language barrier and low digital skills is also another forefront challenge and **73%** of female respondents said they do not know how to prevent it or have little understanding of the kind of protection or guidelines that the social media platform offers against the abuser.
  13. Another Data recorded indicates that **90%** of the parents worry girls more than boys. In some instances, they even link their concern to the growing offline sexual violence against women and girls in Somalia.
  14. The awareness rising about using secure and safe Internet is not common in Somalia and there is no legal protections that deals with online problems. The technology or secure use of Internet is not taught children at home and school.
  15. This is often overlooked in policy discussions and women also do not often speak about online violence and are often left alone with their experience, driving unfortunate repercussions for their economic, education and technology growth.
  16. The Sexual Offences Bills enacted by Puntland & Somaliland deal with only offline violence and crimes and failed to also recognize online crimes.
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17. There is no specific policies or strategies in place empowering a safe online environment for women and girls to achieve effective and inclusive use of technology for socio-economic and political development in Somalia.

### **Suggested Solutions & Recommendations:**

1. Digital technologies have the potential to contribute positively to protecting women's rights and to their economic, social and political empowerment and development. Internet can be a critical enabler of human rights, and the gender divide leaves women who are without meaningful internet access less equipped to exercise their human rights and participate in the country's growing digital economy.
  2. The women's digital barriers should be addressed otherwise, this poses a risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality in Somalia where women and girls bear an unequal brunt of hardships.
  3. Women's human rights that are protected offline should also be protected online, and policy and legislative measures to eradicate online violence against women must aim at creating an enabling environment for achieving gender equality through the use of information and communications technology (ICT), including the protection of women's rights to freedom of expression, to privacy, to have access to information shared through ICT, and in particular to live a life free from violence.
  4. Collaboration between the private ICT Industry and Government is vital in promoting women's digital rights and building inclusive digital growth for socio-economic and political development in Somalia.
  5. Strengthening and investment in women and girls' studies and careers in ICTs, STEM, digital literacy and life skills to increase their' meaningful access and use of ICT to address digital gap.
  6. More researches, studies and discussions on women's digital rights need to be increased and carried out continuously to achieve effective and inclusive use of technology for socio-economic and political development in Somalia.
  7. Technology is increasingly playing a role in the quality of education and more importantly how learning is done. ICT need to be taught children from the primary
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education to increase digital literacy as well as how to use the devices to access various materials. Technology in education can provide opportunities where none existed. But, the special needs of girls should be taken into account as well as existence of unequal access of technology and resources.

8. Universities or higher education institutions have to offer partial or full tuition fee waivers for girls. Or allocate certain seats of their annual scholarships for the girls to bring more women to the ICT studies and this can greatly contribute to addressing digital gender gap.
  9. Development of policies, procedures and strategies that contribute to the development of a safe and empowering online environment for women and girls. Amendment and inclusion of the issue of online violence/crimes in the GBV policies and Puntland Sexual Offences Bill and also consideration of such issues in the draft Federal Sexual Offences Law and those to be formulated by Galmudug, South West, Hirshabelle and Jubaland in the future.
  10. Women should not fear of speaking about online violence experiences but rather should aware of that sharing such stories and experiences will safe others from experiencing same problem and also will awake public's attention toward this matter.
  11. The Internet Service Providers (ISPs), media and also women in media should take a leading role in awareness rising against online violence as well as ethical use of technology to increase public knowledge and attention.
  12. Digital/Mobile money operators should undertake continued public awareness raising and teaching public about the scams and how and where they can report to.
  13. Targeted digital security training and assistance for women at risk of digital insecurity e.g. women journalists, women politicians.
  14. Increased employment of women in ICT and trust in their potentials taking an example of some successful women in ICT e.g. Sahra Ibi of SOSTEC. Women can take up the growing online jobs and women are good at digital jobs although they can sit long hours and good at producing of decorative applications .
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15. Commemoration of International Girls in ICT Day in every fourth Thursday in April to join the world campaign to empower and encourage girls and young women to take up studies and careers in ICTs.

### **Commitments;**

1. In the National ICT Policy & Strategy 2019-2024, Federal Ministry of Telecommunications and Technology vows to drive inclusive development of women and marginalized groups in the process of leveraging the potential benefits of the information and communications revolution in Somalia.
  2. Puntland Ministry of Information and Telecommunications vows greater focus on development of technology and is now under process of developing an ICT policy where the issue of women's digital rights will be a priority.
  3. Federal Ministry of Education is committed to digitalizing education, instructed ICT to be taught in schools starting from this school year and also established a dedicated unit under the ministry to lead such initiatives.
  4. Puntland Ministry of Education is in process of digitalizing education and recently together with UNICEF, launched Learning Passport, a digital remote learning platform where children can access educational content both online and offline from their homes. This is will be going to revolutionize education, reaching out more children and be bridging the gaps in learning and teaching which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
  5. Puntland Ministry of Women Development & Family Affairs vows to review the current Puntland Sexual Offences Bill to also take in the online gender-based violence to secure the rights of women and girls both offline and online.
  6. Weirah Digital Technologies Institute is going to organize Somali Digital Forum where women's digital challenges will be part of the discussions to find sustainable solution for digital gender gap.
  7. T-Hub promised to offer targeted skills for women and girls as well as greater development of digital skills in the country. T-Hub recently unveiled series of
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podcasts named “T-radio Podcast” intended to encouraging women and girls in ICT studies.

**Conclusion:**

The violence against women and girls both offline and online is a huge threat to progress on gender equality in Somalia. The awareness rising about using secure and safe Internet is not common in Somalia and this is often overlooked in policy discussions and women also do not often speak about online violence and are often left alone with their experience, driving unfortunate repercussions for their economic, education and technology growth. This poses a risk of perpetuating existing patterns of gender inequality in Somalia where women and girls bear an unequal brunt of hardships, and unless we make sure the Internet is a safe place for women and girls. That’s why it’s urgent that government, private sector and civil society need to work closely toward creating an enabling environment for achieving gender equality through the use of information and communications technology (ICT), including the protection of women’s rights to freedom of expression, to privacy, to have access to information shared through ICT, and in particular to live a life free from violence.

All participants appreciated the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and Women in Media Initiative Somalia (WIMISOM) for organizing these rare and important discussions and requested continuation of such forums to further achievement of a safe and empowering online environment for women and girls in Somalia.

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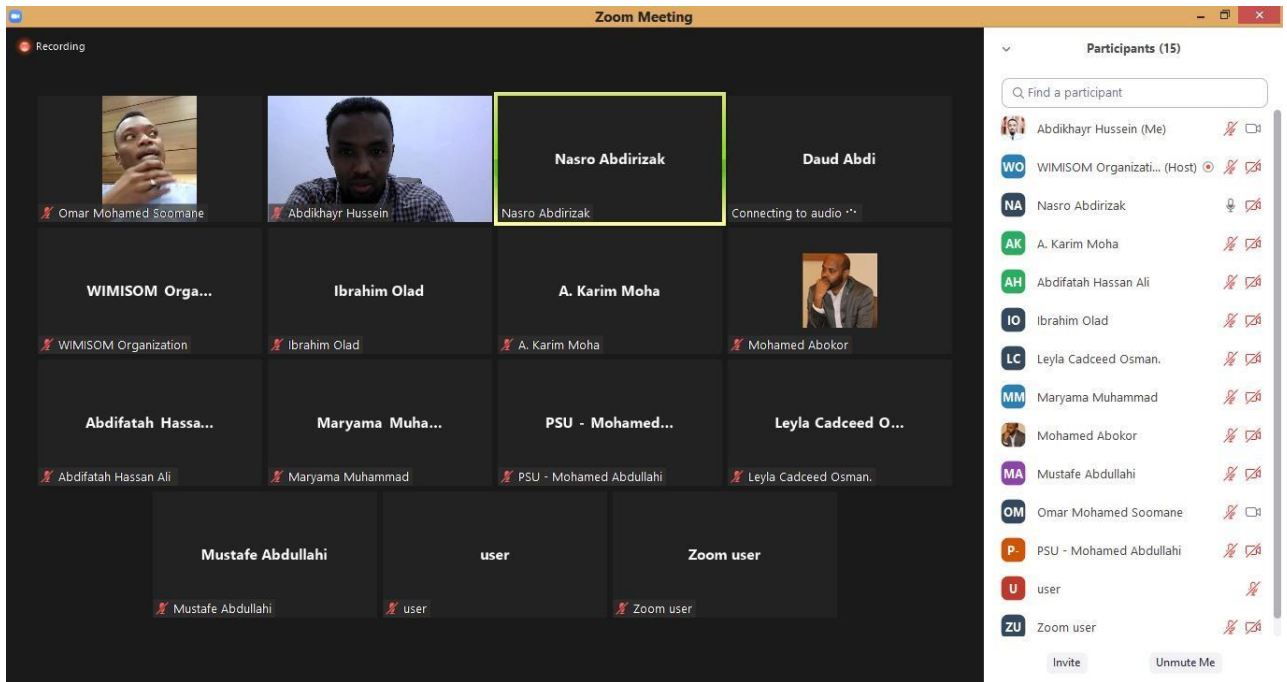


***Roundtable Discussion in Garowe held on July 10, 2021***





***Roundtable Discussion in Mogadishu held on August 4, 2021***



**Zoom advocacy meeting held on October 19, 2021**

