



**Commission on the Status of Women  
Fifty-ninth session**

**Changing social norms to achieve gender equality: expectations and opportunities**

**PANEL DISCUSSION**

**Innovative Approaches Using ICT Including Social Media to Overcome Discriminatory Gender Norms and Stereotypes**

**by**

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## **1. Introduction**

Growing up as a woman in Cameroon I witnessed and experienced first-hand many forms of torture women have to endure to fit into our societies: forced and early marriages, widowhood rituals, rape, intimate partner violence, lack of job opportunities, and even the practice of breast ironing which involves the flattening of young girls breasts with stones and shells to prevent her from attracting unwanted attention from men.

However, I have also experienced first-hand the power of ICTs to change these attitudes and behaviors against women and I will share some examples that I have seen by working with global online networks such as World Pulse and others.

Overcoming such stereotypes is an uphill challenge because such practices are shielded in fear and silence. It is usually hard for women to muster the courage to stand up against such practices. As a widow how dare you say no to widowhood rituals when threats of death or insanity are promised if you commit an error in the course of performing the rites. How does a young girl challenge her mother's attempt to flatten her chest when she is told that she will become a dwarf if she denies the practice.

To attain gender equality, these setbacks to women's participation in public life must be dismantled. Over the years I have come to believe that Information Communication Technology is a powerful weapon in permeating the most hidden communities and exposing well-guarded harmful secrets. Thanks to the power of the internet women have achieved speedy empowerment and have mustered the courage to raise their voices against different abominable acts.

## **2. Advocacy efforts and mechanisms**

The ICT has to an extent helped to demolish the structural system of silence, which had the potency to mask atrocious ordeals faced by women in hidden places of the world.

Once you light a lamp you cannot conceal its beams even if you keep it at the back of the room. So is it with the internet and women.

Take, for example, my friend Oju, from Eastern Nigeria, told me that women are not allowed to speak during important meetings in her community. If the meeting is holding in a home, the only chance women have of appearing in the scene is if there is food to be served after which they are expected to retire to the back yard. It reminded me of the fact that the same thing obtains in my community. Every time there is a major decision to be made, the men often concert amongst themselves in the absence of women. Oju told me that since she discovered Facebook, her worries have reduced. When she feels the pressure of expressing herself over an important issue, she simply updates her status on Facebook with her thoughts and sometimes this provokes hot debates thereby setting the agenda for certain topics that she cares about to be discussed.

Over the years, I have seen many more examples such as this on the global online women's network called World Pulse, of which I am a member. World Pulse is a powerful online community of women allies worldwide who speak out and build solutions to today's biggest challenges. It empowers women leaders on the ground by advancing their digital skills and leadership to mobilize around the world and create real social transformation. Today, tens of thousands of women from 190 nations are using WorldPulse.com to start movements and pressure global leaders to take a stand on the issues affecting their lives impacting over 2 million lives. The mission of World Pulse is to accelerate the global changes women seek by using digital communication to unite and amplify women's voices, solutions and impact worldwide.

On World Pulse you would find several women leaders addressing different issues in their community and gaining global support through the use of ICTs. For example, Neema Namadamou of the Democratic Republic of Congo was able to persuade the White House to send a special convoy to Congo by building a movement of hundreds of women Congolese leaders on world Pulse called "Hero Women" and then gathering 100,000 signatures online. Today she has set up two women only Cyber Cafes in the heart of Congo, which is in Bukavu and Itombwe. Today Neema is a global voice for peace influencing the lives of thousands of women, thanks to the power of the internet and social media.

Stella Paul in India uses her solution oriented reporting to help free sex workers from harassment by introducing them to a mobile phone application which alerts the police if they are in danger.

Beatrice Acheing Nas is providing education to hundreds of girls in her community by connecting them with mentors/sponsors over the internet. Her initiative was born through World Pulse. Olutosin Adebawale of Nigeria has impacted the lives of thousands of women in her community through her economic empowerment program dubbed Turn Thrash into Treasure. She is a massive user of Social Media and has gained a lot of confidence and support in her leadership through World Pulse.

The story of breast ironing in Cameroon is a perfect example of how ICT and modern communication Technology can pave the way for women's empowerment. Breast ironing involves mothers using hot objects to press pound and massage the breasts of teenage girls in an attempt to slow the onset of puberty. The motive is to combat teenage pregnancy and rape. According to GTZ and the United Nations Population Fund, 1 in 4 girls in Cameroon is a victim of the practice. This age long practice has received very minute media coverage in the country. It is a top secret between mothers and girls. As a journalist I reported a few times about the practice on local media but I only succeeded to get sufficient attention when I reported online on World Pulse. Through World Pulse the story got huge international media attention and I mustered the courage to start a campaign in my community which spread like wild fire. In just one year we were able to reach over 20,000 women. Using social media such as Facebook and Twitter World Pulse was able to amplify my voice and gave me confidence in my leadership potentials. My speaking skills were harnessed and today I am reaching out to thousands of other women and girls in my community offering them training in leadership, citizen journalism and economic

empowerment. I would not be doing this presentation today if not for the power of Modern Communication Technology.

Any of you in this room can connect directly with the women I just mentioned and thousands of others, to hear their stories and speak out, just a click away by going to World Pulse.com.

### **3. Challenges and Conclusions**

Access to the internet is however not a given to women in most parts of the world. A recent study by Dalberg in partnership with Intel dubbed **Women and the Web** reveals that more than 200 million fewer women in developing countries have access to the internet than men. The internet Gender gap is very wide in areas where there are lots of discrimination against women.

There are several factors that impede women's presence online. In developing countries, most households cannot afford internet connectivity at home. For women to access the internet they have to go to cyber cafes which are sometimes far away from where they live. In Cameroon and Nigeria for example cyber cafes are often crowded with internet fraudsters, causing safety issues for women. The emergence of smart phones has helped to increase women's accessibility to the internet. Although a good number of women who are unable to afford smart phones still have to make use of cyber cafes. A lot still needs to be done to increase the number of these women.

Digital illiteracy is also an impediment to women's presence online. Many women in third world countries do not know how to use the computer, this makes it impossible for them to use the internet. To combat this problem some organizations are organizing special digital literacy programs for women. An example of such a program is the Mama Shuja or the Hero Women of Congo run by Neema Namadamou in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Women are taught how to use the computer and are introduced to websites like World Pulse where they are encouraged to network with women from different parts of the world and share their stories.

The world has for years been deprived of the chance to benefit from the wisdom of local women who due to cultural constraints, could not be heard even in their local communities.

It is very interesting to notice how easy it has become to bring relegated women to the forefronts of global discussions through the use of ICTs and social media. The internet is a free space where women can voice their opinions without being bullied into silence. In yesteryears, it took a lot of efforts sometimes warranting physical displacement to know the challenges faced by women in remote parts of the world. Today we can access rich and very insightful information just a click away.

Information and communication Technology has become a vital tool in the development of every community globally. More women are now equipped with the opportunity of connecting with people out of their local communities and are provided with forums to make their voices heard.

According to Jensine Larsen, Founder of World Pulse, “Being connected, heard and externally validated within a global community provides women the courage and support they need to become change agents at home”. Women may have been relegated at the backyards for years but the time has come when wisdom and opportunity will collide at the backyards ushering an unstoppable wind of change.