


Chapter 34

Women in Leadership: Envisaging the Role of Women Leaders on Digital Inclusion for African Women

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Abstract

Statistics have revealed substantial growth in some African countries on women's parliamentary representation. Today, Africa represents one of the global leaders in this rank. This is a progressive and impressive stride on gender political empowerment in Africa. However, despite this progress, women and girls still belong to the marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Africa, with the selected few being liberated. Hence, there is a concern about the gender gap on digital inclusion on the continent. Drawing on existing literature, the study investigates how Africa's women leaders and diplomacy relates to other global players. It further examines international players' strategies to embrace global women's empowerment campaigns on digital inclusion, leadership, and governance. And lastly, present the lessons learned from the US, one of the international players on factors that influence trends, perspectives, and attitudes towards women's empowerment. The study suggests three countries' case studies in Africa (South Africa, Rwanda, and Nigeria) relating the countries with the US's case study. The aim is to present the challenges, opportunities, and constraints addressing gender equity within the public diplomacy sector. The findings pose significant policy directions in that each economy should ensure sustainable gender representation in diplomacy and proffer shared approaches that may be useful for the struggling economies in Africa.

Keywords: Africa, African Women Diplomatic Forum, Digital Inclusion, Women in Diplomacy

Introduction

Globalisation has led to general debates on women's empowerment and inequality in technology, government, science, amongst many institutional sectors. However, even though some have recorded progress, there is still a massive gap for women in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Significantly, the current global pandemic, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has revealed the persisting gender gap in technology and digitalisation.

Women's parliamentary representation has grown worldwide; aside from the landmark made by developed economies, Africa has interestingly made giant strides on women's representation as Rwanda took the global lead in 2019 with a percentage of 62%. The United Nations attest to 143 countries successfully imbibing gender equality and women's empowerment into their legislation. This led to the UN commission on women's status, emphasising the importance of empowering women and girls for full equal participation and leadership in the economy to promote sustainable development. To achieve this, diplomacy is recognised as one of the essential keys of governance to strengthen, promote, and protect the national interest, fortifying relations with other states. Many pieces of literature have been written on diplomacy and international politics as a discipline, but minor works on women in diplomacy's participation and successes on international diplomacy, foreign policy, and digital policies in the country.

The study explored a qualitative research study focusing on the African Women Diplomatic Forum (AWDF) role with their governments on gender digital inclusion. The forum aims to unify all-female diplomats for moral, social, and professional support and work with different stakeholders to promote gender-emancipated programmes in diplomatic service. In addition, the forum encourages partnerships and collaborations with African institutions relating to several issues on gender-emancipated programmes. All the countries fall within the African Women Diplomatic Forum.

The chapter intends to present women's diplomacy's role in ensuring gender digital inclusion within the public service and unravel the progress made. The report further conducted a comparative study between the US and three African countries (Rwanda, Nigeria, and South Africa), presenting the instruments and interventions used in addressing gender equality. The choice of countries is based on their unique association to the Women in Diplomacy Forum, which has a head office based in Canada. Attaining gender equality and women's empowerment has become a political and economic imperative needed for sustainable development.

Women leaders - diplomacy

Enforcing gender inclusion in diplomacy and mandating equal representation has become an innovative, fresh debate perspective amongst scholars. In addition, globalisation has evoked several interests in female diplomats and their roles in advancing digitalisation for their economies. Women's exclusion as a global trend has led to power structures reinforcing gender inequalities and establishing policies against discriminatory practices in several fields. Today, women in diplomacy's roles range from international relations on human rights, health, peace and security, education, science and technology and currently embraced digitalisation because of the global pandemic, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Rwanda is an exemplary African state that made national directives before 1994 to allow women to be ranked and be representatives of the country's diplomatic force. Despite the increase in women's representation in political decision-making on all structural levels (international, continental, and national), UN (United Nations) Women still predicts that gender equality will only be achieved in another 130 years (UN, 2021). As of 2021, only 21% of government ministers globally are women, and to date, only 14 countries out of the global 195 nations have 50% or more women representatives in parliament. As a result, the context of gender equality continues to be an essential debate for women's inclusion. Women must be incorporated into critical political institutions, and their participation as leaders in global governance cannot be understated. Mlambo et al. (2019) argue that promoting equal participation in political decision-making facilitates a true reflection of the societal system and enhances the legitimacy of the political processes democratically and responsively. Women diplomats are mandatory for full participation in global governance as representatives of foreign service officials' heads of multilateral institutions (International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Health Organization (WHO), amongst others). Their duties are to promote the transformation of critical policies on gender emancipation and direct the affairs of states and institutions in the successful implementation of global governance. Another argument is that women's total representation in diplomacy reforms the male-dominated nature of international relations (Townes et al., 2020). Most importantly, with the historic shift in global digitalisation, it is paramount for women in global affairs to guarantee that adequate policies ensure digital inclusion for women and girls in all sectors of the economy.

The digital age has identified the considerable gender gap in digital inclusion in most African states. This chapter presents women's diplomacy role in ensuring gender digital inclusion within the public service and

unravels the progress made so far. This was a comparative study to compare three African countries and the US's women diplomats.

Part of the arguments made on women diplomats' constraints was that most female ambassadors are usually posted to economically insignificant duty stations in South Asia and other parts of Africa. In contrast, male ambassadors are deployed for key global political posts such as Beijing, New York, Addis Ababa, France, London, Vienna, and Brussels, to mention a few. As a result, most women feel unappreciated and excluded from significant economic diplomacy policies.

The IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) (2021) submitted reports on a critical interview with women diplomats suggesting that women are often appointed to be deputies under male ambassadors' key duty stations for administrative work, supporting the men's several economic engagements. As a result, the African Union (AU) has initiated campaigns, strategies, and policies to include women leaders within the AU system and Regional Economic Communities (RECs). This initiative is also imbibed in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) 2018 to 2028. Since diplomatic appointments are made by presidents of each country based on their perceptions of their allegiance to the leader in question, most often, male heads are seen as better suitors for such positions. However, as mentioned above, women cannot be excluded from participating as global drivers.

Rwanda, regarded as one of the highest population densities in Africa, is located in East Africa with 13.78 million people. The history of genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 shattered the economy, leaving most women readjusting as heads of households and collaborating on economic recovery. As a result, the country recognised women as prominent leaders in economic recovery and development. This has become the most significant landmark in the country. Women were transformed from being mere victims of war to leading actors of economic recovery. Scholars have argued that Rwanda's success on gender equality and women's empowerment could be attributed to the strong political will present at the highest leadership level. The result made Rwanda to be ranked number 1 globally for female representation in parliament. The country has a 30% minimum quota for female representation in key decision-making stratum, has 64% women in parliament, 40% in the cabinet, 50% in provincial mayoral seats and the judiciary, 43.6% in the district advisory councils, and 32.2% of women in diplomacy.

South Africa, like Rwanda, has a more significant percentage of women population with a percentage rate of 51.3% women. After the colonial era, several policies have been implemented to address racial equalities, gender

inequalities and women's rights. Women's rights and gender empowerment were enshrined into the South African Constitution.

The Women Matter Africa report in 2016 attests that Africa has more women in parliament and cabinet globally. This notion was affirmed by Chidera et al.'s (2020) information on women in diplomacy, highlighting the results that Rwanda ranks first globally on women's representation in parliament. The credit for this growth may be attributed to targets set for a female model initiated by regional parliaments and political parties in the different countries. Table 55 summarises the countries' case studies used in this study.

Table 55: Women in National Parliaments. Statistical Archive

Global Rank	Country	Seats	Number of Women in Diplomacy	Percentage of Women
1	Rwanda	80 – Lower or Single House 26 – Upper House or Senate	49 – Lower House or Senate 10 – Upper House or Senate	61.3% – Lower House or Senate 38.5% – Upper House or Senate
10	South Africa	393 – Lower House or Senate 54 – Upper House or Senate	168 – Lower House or Senate 19 – Upper House or Senate	42.7% – Lower House or Senate 35.2% – Upper House or Senate
180	Nigeria	359 -- Lower House or Senate 109 – Upper House or Senate	20 – Lower House or Senate 7 – Upper House or Senate	5.6% – Lower House or Senate 6.4% – Upper House or Senate
77	USA	433 – Lower House or Senate 100 – Upper House or Senate	102 – Lower House or Senate 25 – Upper House or Senate	23.6% – Lower House or Senate 25.0% – Upper House or Senate

Source: Adapted from the IPU (2019b): *Women in National Parliaments*. Statistical Archive.

From Table 55, Rwanda tops the ranks, followed in 10th place by South Africa; the US was ranked 77th and Nigeria was the last African country on the list. The result shows that gender parity is a global issue, and even the developed economies can learn from the developing world on ensuring gender equity. However, despite being the most populous country on the continent, Nigeria still has low women's representation in parliament and diplomacy. Irrespective of the increase in women in parliament or diplomacy, the gender digital divide -the gap between those who have access to technology, the Internet and digital literacy training and those who do not - is a different story angle. The gender gap in African states is too prominent and reflects several challenges in need of urgent policy redress.

Women's under-representation as a leading factor for digital divide

The gender digital divide is a concept that represents women's inequality and inaccessibility to digital technologies such as smartphones, computers, and the Internet. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) report attests that men remain 21% more likely to be online than women, amounting to a 52% gender gap in the world's least-developed countries. In addition, women have often been confined and discouraged from accessing full Internet support because of online violence, trolling and cyber-bullying (ITU, 2020).

Digital access has become an essential context in the global economy because of the present COVID-19 pandemic. All states, institutions and stakeholders have collaborated to ensure that policies and initiatives are set in place for digital accessibility, especially during the lockdown period in 2020. However, the gender digital divide was prominent in most African countries, predominantly rural areas, despite all these efforts. For example, in Nigeria, the report presented by Digital 2021: Nigeria report (Kemp & Childers, 2021) highlighted more than 108.75 million Internet users (50.01%) in a populated country of 208.8 million. The percentage is expected to grow to at least 143.26 million users by 2026 as the world translates into the digital age. In addition, the Internet penetration in Nigeria reached 51.44% of the population and is set to increase to 59.92% in 2026. In terms of mobile Internet users, Nigeria has 187.9 million (90%) of its population owning mobile phones but there are only 102 million mobile Internet users in Nigeria. Nigeria is popular with the wide mobile phone Internet usage and described as a 'mobile-first market' where online tools and usage development went straight to mobile Internet usage via the inexpensive smartphones rather than the regular wide-ranging desktop and PC adoption. Nigeria was ranked top of the list of countries with mobile tariffs and ranked 26th out of the 65 global markets for Internet freedom. The government also occupies the 4th position of Internet freedom in Africa; however, it still has strong libel laws confining citizens from fully expressing their freedom. The social media scarcity in Nigeria is 15.8%, amounting to 33 million people. Even though the number of people in Nigeria using social media increased to 22% early this year, the average social media user in West Africa still stands at 16% of the population in the continent. Table 56 presents the total population, Internet, and mobile users in each country's case study.

Table 56: Percentage of Population, Internet Users and Mobile Users.

Country	Population	Female Population	Male Population	Internet Users	Mobile Users
US	332 million	50.5%	49.5%	90%	108%
Rwanda	13.11 million	50.8%	49.2%	31.4%	73.9%
Nigeria	208.8 million	49.3%	50.7%	50%	90%
South Africa	59.67 million	50.7%	49.3%	64%	168.5%

Source – Author’s composition. Adapted from Kemp (2021).

The findings portray the data from the case studies in the paper. The US, as a developed economy, despite having a considerable population, has successfully initiated digital access to its people. The total figure for Internet users in the US is 90%, and mobile users are 108%. South Africa ranks first of the African countries, from the table presented; as per the Digital 2021: South Africa report, 64% of the population are Internet users and 168% mobile users. Aside from being the most populous country on the continent, Nigeria only has 50% of its population with digital access. Rwanda is yet to reach an average percentage of 50%. Despite the success of gender parity, only 31.4% of Rwanda’s population has digital access and 73.3% are mobile users. As Table 56 presents, the gender gap for Internet users was too broad as men had a higher percentage than women.

Many factors have been highlighted as challenges confining gender access. The first challenge is the poverty rate that limits the poor and the marginalised from owning mobile phones and purchasing mobile data. These are critical issues emerging in African countries. Secondly, Africa lacks sufficient data on gender inclusion, making it difficult to ascertain the full extent of the gender digital divide in Africa. Statistics have reflected that African women are 14% less likely to own mobile phones and 34% less likely to own smartphones that can connect to the Internet. Internet accessibility is essential across all sectors and individual life. For instance, many people rely on the Internet to access government, health, and education services. When Internet access becomes indispensable to everyday life, individuals without access are isolated socially, economically, and politically (Turianksyi, 2020).

Furthermore, the under-representation of women in critical decision-making on policies affecting women’s digital access are also vital issues promoting the digital divide. Women continue to be absent key players on policies affecting gender emancipation issues which affect most African economies. Figure 22 presents the gender digital divide.

GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

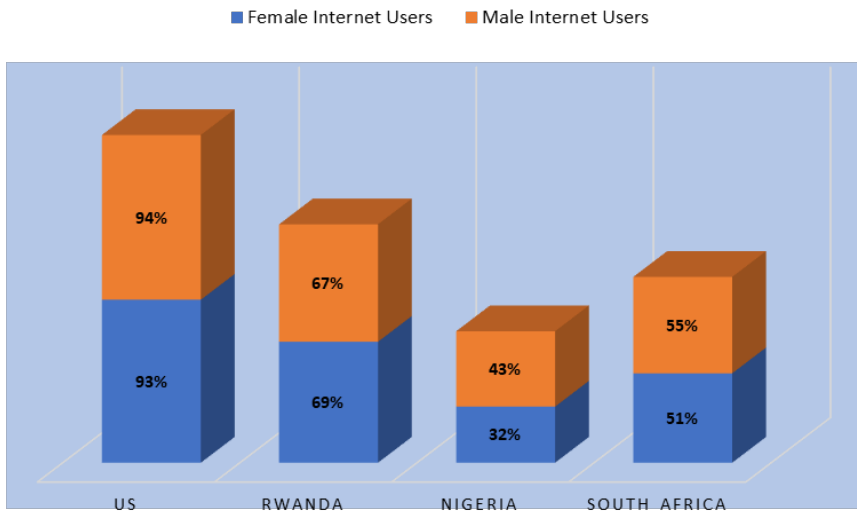


Figure 23: Gender Digital Divide. Source: Adopted from Lardies et al. (2019).

Figure 23 shows a substantial digital gap between African countries and developed economies. The US has implemented adequate measures for digital inclusion in the country. Rwanda tops the list on the gender digital divide, and the government has 67% active male Internet users and 69% active female Internet users out of the 31.4% Internet populace in the country. South Africa ranks second on the African case studies on 55% male active Internet users and 69% active female Internet users from the 64% populace who are active Internet users. Nigeria ranks in the last position, with 43% active male Internet users and 32% active female Internet users from the 50% populace who have access to the Internet. The analysis projects a redress on digital inclusion policies for easy access to all African states and societies. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to plague the economy. Most African countries struggle to adjust to this significant digital age where access to all sectors and walks of life depend on digitalisation.

Discussion

In the case of the US, gender equality and the advancement of women and girls are the core foundation on which the country's three pillars of foreign policy rests - diplomacy, development, and defence (ITU, 2021). The three pillars are embedded in the 'President's National Security Strategy', 'the Presidential Policy Directive on Global Development', and the '2010 and

2015 US Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Reviews (QDDR)' (ITU, 2021). The US has always been top-notch on technology and innovation. The Office of Women's Issues (2017) stated that 21st-century diplomacy depends on "science, innovative technology, and access to an open, interoperable, consistent and reliable Internet." However, the gender digital divide in the US also threatens social, political, and economic progress. The US has successfully achieved gender parity on digital inclusion, as presented in Figure 23. Enforcing gender equality and women's empowerment are essential tools for a democratic society and building resilience. Gender parity also supports an open and accountable government that fosters regional and international peace and security and aims to end extreme poverty. In addition, it addresses gender equality, and women's empowerment initiatives assist in growing a vibrant economy which also addresses educational and healthcare systems within society (ITU, 2021). While the African continent has recently started addressing digital inclusion because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has been intensifying its efforts to facilitate digital inclusion since 2000. The former US Secretary of Commerce, Norman Mineta, stated that:

"No more talk about the 'digital divide'; I want us to start talking about how we can go from a digital divide to digital Inclusion" (Rohde, 2000).

The report submitted in 2000 in the US tagged a theme on 'Towards a Digital Inclusion'. Twenty-two years down the line, significant progress has been made to bring more and more citizens into the new digital economy. In addition, the country has tried to include the black Americans and the Hispanics, who initially had a digital gap to access data. The objective for digital inclusion was to create economic and social progress for all Americans as the Internet becomes the key for learning and communication. As reflected in Figure 23, this is an objective that has reached almost the top global rank with 94% men included and 93% women included for digital access.

Rwanda is dedicated to building an inclusive digital economy like its American counterpart. This objective serves as a core economic development for the Rwandan government. Accordingly, the country has encouraged and facilitated initiatives that promote rapid digital transformation and has embraced the digital economy as a force for accelerated growth, effective service delivery, and providing further work opportunities for Rwandans, especially the younger populace.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fast-tracked the necessity for digitisation. As a result, the government has sought alliances with several partners to keep up with the global trends. Paula Ingabire, the Rwandan Minister of ICT and Innovation, in a current interview, stated that:

“Data-driven policymaking is fundamental to our digital transformation journey”, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we’ve seen digital payments grow more than tenfold. It’s these gains that we want to build on and unlock further growth and adoption of digital payments”.

The minister stated that the government would require mobile data insights that will initiate cashless policy outcomes to achieve this. The needed mobile data insights would also unlock barriers and proffer solutions to adopting digital payment channels, tracking digital responses and their impact on the proposed interventions that drive the cashless agenda.

This was affirmed by Rica Rwigamba, Ghana Country Head at the Mastercard Foundation, in an interview given with digital leapfrogging in Africa:

“Unlocking significant, long-lasting efficiencies in financial inclusion and productivity for young men and women will help to increase their access to employment opportunities and entrepreneurship. Therefore, we must support the sustainability of that transition as well as other innovative interventions in the digital space”.

In an interview with Doubell Chamberlain, Managing Director and Founder of *Cenfri*, an organisation that partnered with *71point4* (a South African-based industry working with Rwandan agencies on mobile data and policy insights), an interview was given with digital leapfrogging in Africa, also stated that:

“We are excited to be embarking on this journey to leverage [mobile] data to build towards a flourishing and inclusive digital economy. Over the last five years, our work in Rwanda as part of the insight2impact (i2i) programme highlighted the power of [mobile] data to advance financial-sector development and improve economic and financial inclusion. This partnership presents an opportunity to build on our learnings and achieve real impact together over the coming years,” said Doubell Chamberlain, Managing Director and Founder of *Cenfri*.

The initiative between *Cenfri* and *71point4* aims to support the Rwandan government in realising its vision through a three-pronged approach: the first intends to make mobile data and trend analysis easily accessible. The second wants to keep several applications of mobile data to policy actions. The last strategy encourages the public sector to utilise data-driven approaches. Finally, the programme aims to provide accessible mobile data to local entrepreneurs and start-ups to facilitate new business strategic ideas.

Small-medium entrepreneurs require mobile data to access information for innovation limited within Rwanda entrepreneurs' public domain; hence the initiative aims to address this. Furthermore, the affiliation intends to address other sectors in Rwanda's economy, such as the agricultural and trade sectors, amongst many. The project will work closely with other regulatory bodies such as the National Bank of Rwanda and the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority to facilitate easy mobile data access to achieve a cashless national economy.

All the initiatives mentioned above collaborated with Ambassador Valentine Rugwabiza's statement, which she said in an interview with the Africa Review in the UN, New York. According to her, "women inclusion ranks above all other priorities, concerns, and perspectives", for her:

"Inclusion must be from inception on government initiatives and programs. Gender equality and women empowerment continue to be important issues in achieving gender inclusion. For example, Rwanda has consistently remained amongst the 'HeForShe' campaign (a UN campaign on gender equality). Also, Rwanda, co-chaired with the Permanent Representative of Qatar, a program on "Group of Friends on Gender Parity", brought together more than 150 countries on gender emancipating issues. My aim as a diplomat is to ensure that gender parity is limited to the UN Secretariat senior-level positions and cut across all sectors, especially the middle management levels, for proper integration and equity.

The ambassador also made a notion on the context of digital inclusion; according to her:

"Rwanda is often referred to as the 'digital country' of which digital inclusion continues to be a priority within the country".

The country has strived to ensure that policies and strategies promote digital inclusion for all in society. Hence 'inclusion', 'sustainability', and 'resilience' are the main issues for sustainable development (Musau, 2021).

For its part, Nigeria's women diplomats and women leaders have also strived to suggest and influence policies that promote digital inclusion. In collaboration with the Minister of Communication and Digital Economy, Dr Isa Pantami, the leaders established four new economy projects across each province to promote digital inclusion in the country. The four new projects include: the National Policy on Virtual Engagements in the Federal Public Institutions; Emergency Communication Centre, Akure, Ondo State; the Digital Economy Centre, Federal University Gashua, Yobe State; the Digital Economy Centre, Delta State University Abraka, Delta State; and

the Digital Economy Centre, Government Secondary School, Rigasa (main) Kaduna State.

The minister affirms that these projects, which ranked 10th in its batch, were commissioned to accelerate its digital economy. According to him:

“The projects are outcomes of a carefully thought-out and executed plan which is efficient for promoting the sustainable growth of the digital economy.”

The aim is to ensure the rapid development of Nigeria’s digital economy towards a digital Nigeria. The projects fall in line with Nigeria’s Constitution and the Federal Government’s key objectives: improving security, reducing corruption, and expanding the economy.

According to the minister, the National Policy for Virtual Engagements in the Federal Public Institutions, developed in collaboration with the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation and approved by the Federal Executive Council, aims to make provisions for the significant transition from physical meetings to online meetings, the sequel to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in the public service rules.

The National Policy for Virtual Engagements in Federal Public Institutions was developed to institutionalise frameworks and standards within ministries, departments and agencies of government as well as government-owned companies using virtual engagement as an administrative procedure in service.

“The effective implementation will tremendously improve service delivery and reduce the cost of governance as overhead cost elements such as avoidable local and foreign tour/travel for training and capacity building meetings will be reduced. It will also cut down expenditure on hosting and servicing of meetings,” he said.

He further called on all government heads, stakeholders, and citizenry to familiarise themselves with the policy’s provisions and ensure full compliance. In an interview at the NITDA’s Digital Economy Centre (DEC), The minister further emphasised that:

“The four projects are all solar-powered IT centres equipped with computers, Internet access and tools aimed at enhancing skills development, bridging the digital divide and promoting innovative digital solutions that would address challenges facing the country, adding it supports economic

growth by ensuring digital inclusion for the underserved/unserved communities and supports capacity-building efforts” (Isaac, 2021).

According to him, the emergency communications centre (ECC) arranged by the Nigerian Communications Commission aims to ensure an effective emergency response that caters for the needs of the people and attaining the Departments’ objectives to establish at least one ECC in each state of the federation, including the FCT Abuja (Isaac, 2021). The ITU report (2021) affirms that women represent the more minor part of the population accessing digitalisation. Factors such as lack of education, gender biases and socio-cultural norms, lack of technical skills in the ICT (information and communication technology) sector and unaffordability has plagued and hindered many women from being included. And, as highlighted in Figure 23, women diplomats and women in parliament are limited in Nigeria’s legislative framework, making it difficult for women leaders to be involved in strategic decisions affecting women within the country. In addition, women are still confined because of the patriarchal belief that women should be involved in household issues rather than socio-economic issues. However, Nigerian women global icon leaders such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Director of the World Trade Organization) have shown the right path that women can be achievers and be successful both at home and in any career. Women in the rural regions of Nigeria, as against the urban dwellers, are highly disadvantaged in terms of access to digitalisation. This assertion supports the reports given by USAID (2013), which highlighted the notion that Internet usage in an urban settlement is higher with good network coverage and service quality, which is readily affordable by urban dwellers since there is higher income and education.

In South Africa, the women leaders, in collaboration with President Cyril Ramaphosa, have strived to influence and adopt strategies that facilitate the country’s digital policies readiness, yet the digital divide persists. The spokesperson from the Department of Women, Youth and Disabilities (2020) stated that:

“The South African government is ready to take a tremendous quantum leap into the future, and in so doing, to ensure that technological advances benefit all citizens and not just the selected few in the society”.

The country aims to have advanced technological innovation that supports the growth and development of the economy. To achieve this, President Cyril Ramaphosa set up a presidential commission of digital stakeholders to provide the government with an integrated national response strategy and

continuous reports which addresses the Fourth Industrial Revolution in all economic structures (Ramaphosa, 2020).

In addition, the South African government intends to establish initiatives that advance the scientific and technological sector in the country. The President stated that the government is ready:

“to ensure that citizens are mentally conscious of technological change. The primary aim is to develop a technological innovation system that revolutionises all sectors of the economy, including the manufacturing and industrial processes. Adopting the right specialised approach will advance science, technology, and innovation and provide more strategies to provide food, water, and security for humanity’s sustainable growth and survival” (Ramaphosa, 2020).

Lessons from the US on digital inclusion

According to the NTIA in the US, digital inclusion represents a social programme allowing people accessibility to ICT, computing, and information technology, an essential economic imperative in all communities. Great cities can only be robust if they provide digitalisation, innovation, and a streamlined supply chain that enables opportunities for its populace and industries or organisations. Most importantly, investment in technology broadband planning has increased several benefits in the educational, healthcare, agriculture, transportation sectors, and individual life quality.

The US NTIA is mandated to oversee the policy and economic initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels. The office further conducts structure planning, programme integration, library modernisation and performance measurement. The primary aim is to streamline regulation and create incentives for broadband infrastructure investment. In addition, the office implemented five key trends driving broadband access and digital inclusion in the United States:

- Planning Initiatives for Digital Inclusion – All states and several coalitions within the country collaborated to create city-wide, regional, and state-wide broadband, including planning programmes on digital inclusion. Examples are Chicago and Philadelphia cities that merged to form city-wide digital inclusion coalitions. As a result, almost every city, town, and state engage with this vision. Furthermore, the Kansas City Coalition for Digital Inclusion has established initiatives to ensure that each household in the metropolitan region has access to the Internet, have the resources or equipment needed to access the Internet and possesses the skills required to access the Internet. Charlotte (North

Carolina) further developed a Digital Inclusion Playbook that shares actionable strategies which improve digital access and skills. The NTIA's role is to work with different states and communities on several digital inclusion planning strategies and aids.

- The second initiative was the issue of programme integration. The NTIA, together with Federal agencies realises the importance of merging broadband access and digital literacy to achieve digital inclusion. As a result, the federal agencies include broadband and digital inclusion as eligible expenses in government programmes and funding streams. In addition, several state initiatives were implemented to help residents connect and access Internet facilities. For example, Charlotte made an inclusive digital alliance that allows the city, county, public schools systems, libraries and other non-profit organisations to decrease the gender digital divide from 19% to 9% by 2026. They intend to achieve this through technology, digital literacy and providing an opportunity for the residents.
- The third initiative was Library Modernisation – The United States has successfully invested in establishing a robust network of libraries. The country has 9,000 public libraries with 17,000 library outlets, enough for almost one in every community, which offers free computer access and digital literacy training for the community members. The libraries further provide 3D printing and Wi-Fi hotspots, allowing patrons to connect to the Internet using wireless services. The lesson learnt from US libraries is that libraries are community hubs for digital access, research, and content creation.
- The fourth initiative is Performance Measurement – The NTIA also initiated measuring programme performance through data collection and research. This is performed by conducting surveys on geography and income for Internet accessibility. In addition, US states and localities continue to plan and complete new surveys to map the broadband adoption state-wide for planning state broadband.
- The fifth initiative is Leveraging of Assets – Despite the country initiating broadband-based Internet to most regions and states, some rural states still lack access to broadband service. However, the US Government has intensified efforts to bridge the broadband gap. For example, the government issued an executive order to allocate federal infrastructure supporting rural broadband deployment. In addition, the state and local governments have collaborated to streamline permits, leverage assets and build effective partnerships with stakeholders and telecommunications companies.

The US approach highlights an essential strategy for African countries. To close the digital divide and facilitate digital inclusion, objectives and plans should be well articulated, with influential professionals and total funding to accelerate access. Embracing this approach enables communities to initiate and attract the necessary expertise for sharing, learning, and integrating digital aid programmes at all structural levels (local, regional, and state levels). Local libraries, community-based centres, and educational institutions serve as digital expertise and access hubs. Many communities use performance measurement and data collection to evaluate their effectiveness and Internet service delivery to the localities. The last point is that most communities take advantage of the regional and federal assets to attract broadband infrastructure investment.

Conclusion

Gender digital exclusion persists in Africa. Even though women in diplomacy and women leaders have initiated different efforts and strategies to influence gender digital parity, the gender digital divide remains problematic. In Africa, women in diplomacy act more as mere assistants and mere representatives with no power to implement gender-emancipating decisions or policies. Challenges such as literacy, lack of technical skills, unaffordability, cyberbullying, and socio-cultural norms are constraints causing digital exclusion. Despite the US, (against which the study conducted a comparison) having low women's representation both in diplomacy and parliament, the country has achieved gender parity on digital inclusion. The majority of its population (both male and female) are digitalised. This is an essential lesson for African countries. The study concludes that women's position in diplomacy or parliamentary should not deter any country from catering to its citizenry's needs, especially the female population. The US ensures equal rights for all genders, and no one is discriminated against.

African countries need to reach the stage where patriarchy is set apart, and women's needs are taken into consideration irrespective of how many leaders are involved. Dialogue and collaboration should be placed with local communities to ensure all poor and marginalised women are catered for and assisted. The governments need to implement policy interventions that address gender disparity and enhance safe and affordable digital tools. Advancing digital technologies allows women to earn additional income, increase employment opportunities, and access knowledge and information. Furthermore, schools should encourage more girls to participate in ICT modules and gain more skills, especially encouraging more female models in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

Aside from the younger generation, adult education on Internet access is crucial for the older population who fall behind in the current digital era. In addition, there should be flexible opportunities for adults to upgrade their skills in several institutions, organisations, and government sectors.

Many African countries are following gender equality initiatives and awaiting the policies underway in G20¹ economies, but more needs to be accomplished. African countries need to learn how to coordinate amongst different industries, scale-up, learn from successful and unsuccessful programmes, and build on lessons learned to ensure digital inclusion in their economies. An important notion is that the structural root causes of the gender digital divide should be addressed and redressed to narrow the gender gap. The study concludes that there are limited data on digital inclusion in African countries. Studies comparing the actual figure and issues on the ground are limited. Suitable action will be constrained until enough evidence-based policies, including identified priorities, monitor critical activities. Women in diplomacy and heads of institutions of global governance must intensify their efforts to promote women's inclusion in parliament and cabinet spaces. It is essential to ensure female diplomats are engaged in knowledge production spaces rather than having a mere increased number of women diplomats with no power to influence policies.

In the same vein, developed economies need to set an example for gender parity in government and diplomatic positions. It is not enough to have fewer female figures ascending to positions in international organisations or parliaments whilst men continue to make up most critical players in global politics.

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1 The G20 or Group of 20 is an intergovernmental forum comprising 19 sovereign countries, the European Union, and the African Union. It works to address major issues related to the global economy, such as international financial stability, climate change mitigation and sustainable development

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