

## FEMINIST PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNET:

# ACCESS

Principle on Access

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# PRINCIPLE ON ACCESS



“A feminist internet starts with enabling more women and queer persons to enjoy universal, acceptable, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful and equal access to the internet.”

## ABOUT THE FEMINIST PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNET (FPIS)

The Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPIs) are a number of principles that articulate an evolving set of concerns in relation to the internet and human rights, with a special focus on how gender and sexuality are located in diverse communities' experiences of the internet. They were drafted over a series of feminist gatherings. The first of these was called "Imagine a Feminist Internet", and took place in Malaysia in April 2014. The meeting was organised by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and brought together 50 activists and advocates working in the fields of sexual rights, women's rights and gender equality, violence against women/gender-based violence, and digital rights. The meeting was designed as an adapted open space where topics were identified, prioritised and discussed collectively.

A group of volunteers from the meeting drafted version 1.0 of the FPIs. This was subsequently brought to different workshops and events, local and global, and then to a second "Imagine a Feminist Internet" meeting in July 2015, where a new group of 40 activists discussed, elaborated on and revised the FPIs. The new version was published on the feminist internet website in August 2016, where anyone can expand the principles by contributing resources, commenting, or offering localised translations.

Currently there are 17 principles, organised into five clusters: Access, Movements, Economy, Expression and Embodiment. A new cluster on Care and the Environment is planned for 2022. Together, they aim to provide a framework for movements working to advance gender justice and human rights, to articulate and explore issues related to technology through a feminist lens.

For more information on FPI-related events, click [here](#).

For Frequently Asked Questions, click [here](#).

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## WHAT IS ACCESS ABOUT?

Access is not just about being online. Access is about the inclusion and meaningful participation of all women and gender-diverse people in the digital space and decision making at all levels of use, design, management and governance of digital technologies. Access to the internet is not merely about more internet cables and greater technological infrastructures, though that is part of the struggle. A feminist perspective on access allows us to consider the gendered impact of exclusion and access, thinking about “access” intersectionally and holistically, and “access” as a domain of power in any society.

For many years, governments and the private sector have seen internet access and development of digital skills for women and girls as the main solution to the gender digital divide. Such an understanding of access is necessary, but it is not enough. It is imperative to recognise and address the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have deepened the access gap and also make it difficult to eradicate. Structurally marginalised communities are the ones that are most affected by the lack of access and meaningful connectivity. If women and people of diverse sexualities, from all contexts, backgrounds and locations, have access to the internet but are not included in the use, design, management and governance of digital technologies, meaningful access to the internet will not be achieved.

Therefore, to have universal, acceptable, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful and equal access to the internet, the gender digital divide needs to be addressed and the historically unequal power relations between men and women must be recognised.



## WHO GETS ACCESS?

Women, girls and gender-diverse people are often excluded from accessing the internet and participating online, in many ways. The gender digital gap intersects with other gaps and inequalities that women and gender-diverse people face in the social, labour, health, economic and political spheres. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), of the estimated 2.7 billion people unconnected in 2022, the majority were women and girls: 62% of men are using the internet, compared with 57% of women.<sup>1</sup> The gender gap in this figure might not seem deep. Nonetheless, the main problem of how access is being measured is that it only reflects the mere act of having access to the internet. It does not reflect other divides, such as accessibility, availability, affordability, quality of service and digital skills, among others.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this figure is affected by pervasive social systems which undervalue, or devalue, the lives of girls and women, by gender-based violence, discrimination, and other forms of exclusion faced by girls and women in many societies. The ability of women and people of diverse genders and sexualities to gain meaningful internet access is influenced by factors including location, economic power, age, gender, racial or ethnic origin, social and cultural norms, and education, among others.

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1. <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>

2. Muller, C., & de Vasconcelos Aguiar, J. P. (2022, 3 March). What Is the Digital Divide? *Internet Society*. <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2022/03/what-is-the-digital-divide>

Use of the internet is gendered, and girls, young people, women and gender-diverse persons may be more reliant on the internet. For example, women may be reliant on the internet for earning income or pursuing an education, for expressing themselves, for accessing information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, for seeking out services that enhance their safety, for exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in contexts where sexual and gender diversity is criminalised and/or stigmatised.

Various actors regulate and control access at a number of levels, thereby intentionally and/or unintentionally upholding patriarchal and other power structures: through controlling technological infrastructure and design, through the regulation of online public space through corporate policy, through state law or through imposing social and cultural norms. Young people, especially young women, girls and young sexually and gender-diverse persons, are particularly at risk for having their access to the internet and to information and communications technology (ICT) devices, such as smartphones, restricted and controlled as a result of moral panics.<sup>3</sup> In some contexts, girls have to use smartphones secretly, and often have other family members, including brothers, controlling their access.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Rao, N., & Lingam, L. (2021). Smartphones, youth and moral panics: Exploring print and online media narratives in India. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(1), 128-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920922262>.

4. Thiagarajan, K. (2020, 8 March). Smartphones are taboo for some girls in India; that's bad news for their future. *KUOW*. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/smartphones-are-taboo-for-some-girls-in-india-that-s-bad-news-for-their-future>

Access is also controlled and restricted through gender-based violence<sup>5</sup> and harassment. Family, community, political actors, state actors, and a host of other actors can limit women's, girls' and gender-diverse persons' access to the internet through committing gender-based violence, in a bid to push them off the internet, and/or out of public life. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in her 2018 report about online violence against women from a human rights perspective, shared:

Acts of online violence may force women to retreat from the Internet. Research indicates that 28 per cent of women who had suffered ICT-based violence intentionally reduced their presence online.<sup>6</sup>

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5. See the FPI on Violence: <https://feministinternet.org/en/principle/violence>

6. Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences at the thirty-eighth session of the Human Rights Council (2018), on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective (A/HRC/38/47). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1641160>



## WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF RESTRICTING ACCESS?

The digital divide has been shown to exacerbate other inequalities, such as access to health care, employment and education.<sup>7</sup> That means the gender digital divide is not just an access gap; it is a democratic deficit that thwarts meaningful participation of women, girls and many other marginalised persons in the emerging digital paradigm, and curtails the exercise of fundamental human rights.

According to the ITU, there are four main issues when talking about the gender digital divide:

- 1) a gap in access to and use of the internet
- 2) a gap in digital skills and the use of digital tools
- 3) a participation gap in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields
- 4) a gap in leadership in public decision-making spaces in technology and entrepreneurship in the technology sector.<sup>8</sup>

The ongoing structural exclusion of women, girls and other marginalised persons from STEM fields can be seen both as a symptom of the gender digital divide, as well as in turn causing greater exclusion from STEM fields (including law and policy surrounding STEM), as few women, girls and other marginalised

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7. Muller, C., & de Vasconcelos Aguiar, J. P. (2022, 3 March). Op. cit.

8. <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>

persons enter decision-making spaces and science fields where technologies are invented and designed. For example, the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report of 2022, with data from 155 countries, notes that only 24% of leadership roles in technology are filled by women, with the ICT industry being an industry in which the gender gap is most prevalent. The World Economic Forum has also reported that only 22% of artificial intelligence professionals are women.<sup>9</sup> This is not only problematic in the context of gender parity, but also because it means that technology, which always reflects the values and biases of its developers, will further entrench harmful gender norms and stereotypes

Feminists have theorised that access should enable autonomy and agency, and be attentive to privacy and freedom of expression, association and assembly.<sup>10</sup> The digital divide – of which gender is one dimension – has been understood to have at least five contributing factors: affordability, availability, quality of service, relevance, and additional divides, such as access to internet equipment and security.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Cairns, A. (2019, 18 January). Why AI is failing the next generation of women. *World Economic Forum*. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/ai-artificial-intelligence-failing-next-generation-women-bias/>

10. Ranganathan, N. (2017). *A Handy Guide to Decide How Safe That Safety App Will Really Keep You*. Internet Democracy Project. <https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/safety-app> and Kovacs, A. (2017). *Reading Surveillance through a Gendered Lens: Some Theory*. Internet Democracy Project. <https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/theory>

11. Muller, C., & de Vasconcelos Aguiar, J. P. (2022, 3 March). Op. cit.



## WHAT ARE MOVEMENTS DOING?

Feminist movements and digital rights activists have been mounting advocacy campaigns to impact law and policy around the governance of ICTs and online spaces. These campaigns have focused on complicating the notion of “access” through applying an intersectional, rights-based framework, and taking the conversation further than merely the infrastructural level. However, some communities have also moved to build “community networks”, where “access” is grappled with through democratic, participatory processes and community-built and maintained infrastructure not reliant on state or corporate-provided internet connectivity. A number of organisations working at the intersection of gender, human rights and technology stress that it is essential for states and private actors to support and complement alternative solutions, such as community networks, which propose a different logic to traditional infrastructures by bringing feminist perspectives and feminist governance modes and models that are based on the full realisation of human rights and environmental justice.<sup>12</sup>

Community networks seek to create community-managed connectivity systems which bring more communities online for whom “access” has historically been an issue. The term encompasses a range of solutions created by diverse communities, both rural and non-rural, and in some cases, led by women.

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12. APC et al. (2023). *Joint submission to the Global Digital Compact on gender*. Association for Progressive Communications. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/gdc\\_joint\\_submission\\_on\\_gender\\_final.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/gdc_joint_submission_on_gender_final.pdf)



## WHAT SHOULD STATES AND PRIVATE ACTORS DO?

States need to approach the issue of access through a more intersectional and holistic perspective, taking time to listen to the needs and demands of women, girls, sexually and gender-diverse persons, young people, and other excluded communities, and make sure that internet-based technologies are a tool for exercising rights, not eroding rights.

States should repeal laws and end practices that enable the restriction and curtailment of internet access, including by engaging in internet shutdowns and communication blackouts. If state actors engage in these practices, outside of the law, there should be meaningful processes of accountability to ensure they cannot happen again.

States should also enact accountability for the restriction of expression, association and assembly online, and work with technology corporations to implement democratic and participatory processes towards the governance of public online space.

States should impose restrictions on technology corporations' practices of undermining human rights and democracy in favour of profit, and enact oversight mechanisms with public participation and leadership.

States need to continuously invest more in better infrastructures in order to bring affordable and accessible internet access to all communities, while working with, investing in and learning from community networks.

Private actors, such as tech corporations, need to enact more policies towards transparent decision making, and open up decision-making processes for greater democratic governance and more diverse, public participation. They should be attentive to the data on the state of rights and democracy, and the role of their technologies in diminishing these, and take urgent steps to course-correct, including by being open to accountability processes.

Tech corporations need to be more responsive to the demands and needs of women, girls, gender-diverse persons, persons with disabilities and other excluded communities, and create more space for these communities to participate in as well as lead change efforts.

Both states and private corporations need to be more attentive to providing access that enhances the human rights to privacy, confidentiality, security and safety.

## IS ACCESS PROTECTED BY INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS AND STANDARDS?

Yes, there are international human rights norms and standards that refer to access and internet connectivity and its impact and importance for the lives of women and girls. These are:

- The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)
- The outcome documents of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)
- The 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) reports and resolutions
- The Commission on the Status of Women

We have compiled [a listing of selected annotations](#) concerning access from international and regional agreements and statements to support you in your policy advocacy endeavours.



## WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

Joint submission to the Global Digital Compact on gender  
(APC and others)

<https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/joint-submission-global-digital-compact-gender>

#KeepItOn update: Who is shutting down the internet?  
(Access Now)

<https://www.accessnow.org/who-is-shutting-down-the-internet-in-2021/>

African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms

<https://africaninternetrights.org/sites/default/files/African-Declaration-English-FINAL.pdf>

Bottom-up Connectivity Strategies: Community-led  
small-scale telecommunication infrastructure networks  
in the global South (APC)

<https://www.apc.org/en/node/35445>



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